

SIR VIDIA'S DARKEST SHADOW: V.S. Naipaul (1934-2018)

The first and only time I saw him, Sir Vidia looked frail. Face like a mask, pudgy fingers suspiciously handling the microphone, and eyebrows firmly chiseled in place, he looked as though he had been dragged to school on a day he would have rather stayed home in bed. That day, Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul was at Makerere University, replaying the character he had played four decades earlier, as misanthrope in residence. The Naipaul event was immediately after lunch on a late March afternoon. The sun was beaming down directly over the equator and I remember the hall being hot with precipitation.

It's a decade now since that March 2008 afternoon. Looking back, it seems that V.S. Naipaul, sitting there in Makerere University's Main Hall, looked like a piece of wood carving. Like one of those giant Chinese wood reliefs, there was his grand magnificence. The brilliance of his finish was outstanding. And this magnificence, this brilliance, was all the more magnified because he was forever on the verge of becoming, tantalising the audience with the possibility that this rendering might come alive.

Arrested in 2D by a physique in distress, Naipaul's dyspeptic mien marked the entire afternoon. He kept sinking into his chair, till at the end of the event we could only see his head and shoulders. Perhaps he had come expecting a hostile audience. Perhaps it was the heat and the stuffy air. Maybe he had been unwell. Maybe it was the sight of us, a room full of black people.

A farcical afternoon. Exhibit A: What was Naipaul doing in Makerere? Who comes to Makerere anymore? Even ten years before that, when I had been a student there, we had not thought we could rate a writer, even a third-rate one. And here was a Nobel laureate, Sir Vidia, in person.

Had he come to mock us - again? But seated there in plain sight, Mr. Naipaul looked done with mockery. He had mocked Trinidad. He had mocked India. He had mocked Africa. He had found Ugandans disgusting. He had been the founding CEO and majority shareholder of the flourishing global literary corporation of jibing sneers.

That was back in the day when he looked chipper, when Makerere – the university – had been of enough value to make a killing out of mocking. By 2008, Makerere (“Maka Ray Ray” as Naipaul reportedly pronounced it) was too far gone for anybody to be interested in mockery or disdain. By 2008, the mocking of black people for profit had been tarnished for a while, which meant that the days of Naipaul’s unqualified standing as a brilliant truth teller were behind him. “Controversial” had replaced “brilliant”, “controversial” being what you call an oaf you are too fond of to let go despite mounting evidence of his oafishness. Even in its time, “brilliant” had been used by certain British right-wing media in a way that you felt meant Naipaul gave the n****rs what they deserved.

We, the few hundreds of us, and Naipaul, who we had all come to stare at, could not have been more mismatched. Right there you could understand why the first time round in the 1960s, Mr. Naipaul had been unenthused about actually having to live in Makerere.

We, as no doubt our fathers’ generation had been then, were not very impressive specimens. Too black for our own good, we were too frayed around the racial edges. We squatted at the university, unable to fit in with the masonry and the woodwork, which had been cut for Europeans. Unaware of the value of glass windows and flush toilets, we had run down a once famous university. We came from the bush to line up for maize meal and boiled beans in dining halls built for three-course meals with salad dressing.

There was everything imperfect about us. We had not invented the wheel. We had never manufactured steam locomotives. We still imported, rather than made, paper, which meant that we were still attempting to beat out novels on drums. Yes, we still did that, make drums, and still beat them. Civilisation was wasted on us. And outside the hall, footpaths crisscrossed the once immaculate green lawns laid out in the 1930s and 1940s by Oxbridge visionaries. Six decades after Prof. C.S. Turner transformed the technical school founded in 1922 into a university, tribalism had long become the most important criterion for staff appointments.

Naipaul’s coming hence, four decades since he had last been, could have been for any number of reasons. Self-flagellation would not have been the least of possibilities. Material for a new book? Why? He was a brilliant writer. Could he not have invented some sordid tales about us from England, where they had been inventing marvelous things (and steam engines) for centuries?

His was a complexity of prose, rather than of ideas, so why the effort? If he was gathering material for a book, why fly so far when he was already in his 70s?

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And us? Why did we turn up? We had never been enthralled by any of the things he had said about us. The admiration we had for his prose style outstripped our love for his books. But we had admired him because we wished that the people with power liked us as much as they liked him. We wanted his good luck (which can look like agreeing with him). Were we self-flagellating too? Could we not have simply read his comments from the safety of our houses? Or was some sado-masochist strain still alive within us?

The collision was utterly unavoidable, a true literary crash. A room filled with the undesirable, coming to an unwanted event to see an unpleasant guest. And that, more rather than less, summarises Naipaul's oeuvre. In this iteration, hostile questions from the audience: a university lecturer asking a clever question about Tagore, and Naipaul, sensing his Indian roots intruded upon, rapidly slaps it down. Poor chap, he had spent his life teaching V.S. Naipaul books, and had stayed awake all night choosing which question would be best for the event. Next, a Ugandan of Asian descent takes too long with the mic, speaking up too fondly, getting on Nadira's nerves and deserving what was coming his way; Lady Naipaul cuts him cold and says, next question?

If nothing else, this ping-pong moment was it. Naipaul was in town, game on. Right on cue, Lady Naipaul took charge. She had become the moderator, leaning forward all afternoon while Naipaul slunk back in his chair. The real moderator must have wondered if he had come to the wrong stage.

Naipaul murmured his responses. One thing he said still rings clear in my memory. He said "Africa came to me intuitively. It was not by searching."

And then the hall emptied. Naipaul shuffled out. The thick entourage that had brought him in taking him out.

Like everyone else present, my journey to that afternoon had begun long ago, albeit in my case, not far away from that hall. Two decades earlier, I had gone to secondary school at Makerere College School, tucked inside the university itself, and read my first Naipaul book there. On the morning of his visit, I had packed my copies of Naipaul's books, just like you do when you go to a speaking event and the author will be present, and afterwards you line up and confess your besotted heart, and the author, having to wear a droll, heard-it-all-before face, nonetheless signs the books with a flourish. I looked at my collection: a 1957 edition of *The Mystic Masseur* that I had procured from a flea market and the still fresh-smelling *Enigma of Arrival* reissued after the Nobel Prize of 2001. I recollected the contents of that, and of another book, *Sir Vidia's Shadow* (hatchet job on Naipaul by one-time disciple, the American writer, Paul Theroux).

I then remembered how the opening of *The Middle Passage* had alerted me to something alarming about Naipaul that only expanded in later books and became all you saw in him. Some things not even magnificent prose could conceal.

I left the books on the top of the workbench in my workshop and headed out for Makerere. Naipaul's wife Nadira and the university's literature department staff staged a praetorian guard around him, an impenetrable phalanx of reverence. Asking him to sign books was impossible. Naipaul looked like he would suffer a mental breakdown if an African spoke to him. By day's end, he looked like he needed to see a doctor. Still, he might have persevered and signed the books, and you would have had to throw them away later.

There was something terribly Naipaulish about the university that stuffy afternoon. Eighteen years before, at the age of 14, when my journey to that afternoon commenced, I had read my first Naipaul, *Miguel Street*, on Makerere hill at Makerere College School. The edition I read had a foreword by Laban Erapu that mentioned Naipaul's time in Uganda. I had assumed then that Naipaul was Ugandan.

Miguel Street - that sardonically cheerful primer, of which there had not been that many copies in the school - had exchanged hands many times among us kids and we talked much about it. It had been something of a staple. You had to *know* Miguel Street. Elias and the posse of Bogart et al, their comical putter, the mother with as many husbands as children. A sing-song toned collection of stories, curious names, absurd accents. *Miguel Street* was the book from a man

who had a twinkly view of life as a thing to be had to the full. We related to these tales. We laughed.

It was in this mind-frame that five years later, in 1995, I had picked up from the university library an old copy of *A House for Mr. Biswas*. I half-expected to find in this book the loveable characters from *Miguel Street*. Certain things were similar. Mohun went off to England, to study, as Elias had dreamt.

Back in the 1990s, with Empire still within striking cultural memory, we too had dreamt of going to English universities. We were starting off from the same place as Naipaul, his clutch of characters so recognisable to us, their sense of the future our own. You understood that fever in *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

What drove Naipaul's characters was what drove us. Empire had emptied its subject populations of their subjective selves and their metaphysical heritage, which had been replaced by England, Oxford, high tea, biscuit and crumpets, Piccadilly. An equal opportunity impoverisher, the British Empire had left penury and hurt in so many parts of the world that a book from any of these parts tended to speak to all parts. What a Sir Hathorn Hall committed in Aden, or Trinidad, he repeated in Uganda - serial murderers leaving tell-tale signatures of their deeds dotted along the grim, imperial trail.

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Empire had taught us to believe in the same things and we had come to believe in them. We dreamt of red letter boxes. Oh, but these lucky red letter boxes lived in London.

As I read deeper, I began to protest. *A House for Mister Biswas* got heavy. Some leaded weight pulled down the mirth of *Miguel Street* to darker places. Still you soldiered on, expecting some lift, a sliver of sunlight. Yes, you would always

remember Mrs. Tulsi. One day I thought I found her running a bakery in Kampala. And then I thought I met Mr. Biswas himself nursing big-time literary ambitions as a sourpuss editor in a newsroom.

The darkness in the novels was piling up, getting heavier, in that way readers know when the plot has advanced to that point where you size up the remaining pages and determine them too few for the story to work its way back to a different tenor.

I was young and not entirely appraised of what novels were capable of. As young readers tend to, I simply thought I had landed on the wrong novel. Another Naipaul might bring back that *Miguel Street* thing. In the meantime, *A House for Mr. Biswas* was teaching me just how serious novels could be. They could also detail stark-real ugliness. The novelist did not have to imagine, as a pot boiler author had to; he could simply observe. Mr. Naipaul made you see how it was possible to weld art into social reality. He made half a millennium of globalising history his material.

Naipaul could be called the Anti-Jane Austen. Miss Austen had examined the same history; you must see through her writing to know it is detailing crimes of history. But she had seen only the other side: the English manors, the indolence, the unbelievable wealth that the slave trade had made possible in the English countryside. She never questioned where the wealth of the characters in her novels came from. She never asked what those young men in need of a wife did when they went overseas. Naipaul laid out the exhibits.

The exhibits - the deformed progeny of Empire's victims, the craven, the dehumanised - were his material (a Naipaul word). He looked with the dispassionate temper of a forensics expert. These novels were not for escapist reading. It seemed to me that this was as serious as writing would ever get. Naipaul's craft made everybody else seem to be winging it, wanting it, sleight-of-hand bathos that quickly drained you of interest. Others write so their brilliance could be praised. Naipaul? His was meditation, a haloed temple of letters. He had convened a one-man caucus and solely written a constitution of *looking*. To have not seen the world as Naipaul had seen it was to have been guilty of sheer unconstitutional acts. The writer was chief justice, high priest.

There had been Graham Greene; but he could be unconvincing in the role, and he

tended to overdo the disgust. There had been Joseph Conrad, but he had tended towards sentimentality. Ernest Hemingway had haunted the same geography as Naipaul. Against what Naipaul had to say, the American was a mere flower girl. Hemmingway loved Kenya; he just never saw Africans (natives, savages) the entire time. Naipaul saw Africans; he was grimly aware of us.

At the age of 20, when I read *A House for Mr. Biswas*, I could not as yet tell what that thing was, what had made Naipaul's voice so stately, for I was sure that it was a stately voice. I had not found any of *Miguel Street* in it. Rather, I emerged from *A House for Mr. Biswas* overawed by grandeur. The plunge to pathos happened with the steadiness of a murderer strangling his victim. An unrelenting vision of dystopia.

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I was in my 20s when I got the full measure of Mr. Naipaul. By then, Uganda had begun to normalise; books were available once more and we had been liberated from borrowing dog-eared texts from friends and relatives. That was when I began to tell that the early books of Naipaul were fundamentally different from his later books, books of he wrote between his late 30s and into his 50s.

The overriding themes of the early books is escape from the colony. The barbs of later years were already there, the mockery, the casual racism; except back then Naipaul thought of them as jokes. The later books are about settling in, and once that project got underway, the books became about the world, its expansiveness. But also about sharpening. Mr. Naipaul begins to grind and file and sand his prose, the sharp defining of edges, the details focused on. His prose knows what to search for, with just the right emphasis, a few strokes that hint at a larger form without overstating. He was becoming a master craftsman.

The novels carry something extra, a certain uncheerful enjoyment even. Ralph Singh, the protagonist narrator of *The Mimic Men*, has that quality. *The Mimic*

Men signalled the arrival of the man who would later write *The Enigma of Arrival*.

And then there were the travel writings. *The Middle Passage* brings to life the Caribbean in ways you, as an outsider, are grateful to Mr. Naipaul for, even though you have a pile of indictments against him. Then in India, in *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul goes for broke. He writes with an urgency he has hitherto not displayed, nor will again. One feels, reading the travelogue, that Mr. Naipaul writes faster than he sees. He arrives in Bombay like a tightly-packed grenade, the ejector of a lifetime's hearing, reading, expecting, ready to go off. This book defined Naipaul like no other. In comparison, there is something processional about *The Middle Passage*, a processionalness you find in his Caribbean books, novels and travelogues. Explosions, of theme and prose, don't go off. But they contain the toxins and poisons that came out of Naipaul whenever he met black people.

Naipaul went out of his way, beyond necessity, in a Trumpian gratuitousness, to mock black people even when there was no discernible literary gain. He made no effort to engage with black people. He treated Indians with less contempt, but the derision was still there. It might look like he gave some thought to Ramnath the "steno" in *An Area of Darkness*, or to Jivan, but no. It is fascinating how decidedly uncurious Naipaul's brand of curiosity was.

His first book on India may have been his most connected (Naipaul was drawn to India), but it was written by a man trapped in a certain view of colonial peoples. Even from the depth of Africa, we could tell that Naipaul failed to see that India was a bigger place than his commentaries offered. Jivan's refusal to stop sleeping on the pavements despite having a job and owning a taxi is interpreted by Naipaul as India's foolhardy attachment to the Gita, Hinduism's religious text. To the rest of us, Jivan was displaying an imperviousness to colonialism's and capitalism's crass anti-metaphysics. For me, this vignette of Jivan was too two-dimensional. After all, by the 1960s, Naipaul's view of "conquered" peoples was already antiquated, even amongst the ranks of colonial anthropologists, who had a more nuanced view of colonised peoples.

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In Naipaul's world, we Africans are "Negroes" with "physique", "nursing racial injustice". There is always the hint of violence towards us when we appear in his books. In *The Mimic Men*, we show up at the British Council, garishly dressed up, the gold-rimmed spectacles Naipaul places on us are there so that they can clash against the darkness of our skins. We expect "sex" like a tribute, a right, because we are racially wronged. But that's in the diaspora. In Africa, in *A Free State* (so now we come to Uganda, although the reason Mr. Naipaul came to Uganda in the 1960s was so he could write *The Mimic Men*), we are deeply indolent, with our bush ways and our lazy eyes. We are a backdrop to Europeans lives, and often the backdrop to breaking European marriages.

Deep into his career, Mr. Naipaul, like Ganesh Ramsumair in *The Mystique Masseur*, adopted the identity of an Englishman with an Oxbridge accent that replaced his Caribbean intonation. Ganesh, the shape-shifting artist, remains an enigma in Naipaul's oeuvre. Who is he? What does he mean? What indeed do these middling characters in Naipaul mean? They people his writing entirely, the Jimmy's of *Guerrillas*, the characters upon whom instances are mounted? As if of necessity, the author is decidedly nasty to these sorts. They are *de rigueur* (à la Naipaul), angry, pretentious, dangerous, always without fail, dark-skinned. Naipaul is afraid of them. He is also violent towards them.

Is understanding these mid-level characters key to understanding the politics of Naipaul? Why is Naipaul afraid of them? One clue, but no overall explainer, is that they have a politics. They are confronting Empire. They are the reverse of the Naipaul hero, if that is not an oxymoron. They are not enthusiastic about Oxbridge accents. They are not changing names from Ganesh Ramsumair to G. Ramsay Muir (a typical Naipaul joke of the earlier books). They are changing names from James to Haji or Ngugi.

But do we have a right to be brutal in our assessment of Mr. Naipaul? He was born at a time when Empire looked like extending and consolidating, rather than crushing. How deep did the psychology of that go? For him to have written as he did, to see the world through only one measure (Britain, Europe) - a measure in which other races failed to measure up, a measure in which being African ("bow

and arrow people”), Arab (“Mr. Woggy”) was failure in itself, speaks of something other than penetrative insight. To not allow for the validity of a different world is to have been immensely delimited. But might Mr. Naipaul have escaped it? Was it necessary for him to have been the writer and the man he was in order for him to see with clarity?

It would be simplistic to say that the need, indeed, the entire undertaking of having to fight for liberation, was too much for Naipaul. His position on the most important movement of the 20th century (independence from colonial rule) might be described as ambivalent, except, if you are ambivalent about freedom, then what exactly are your values?

It could be as simple as this: Mr. Naipaul was that all-too-typical, but special, victim of Empire, the favoured colonial subject. There was divide and rule – some colonised people were considered less savage than others, people who displayed almost-white qualities. These divisions marked the entire breadth of Empire, from the aristocrats of Buganda (convinced into collaboration by effusive British praise), to the Tutsi of Rwanda (whose position the Belgians tragically imperiled by calling them semi-white Africans), to the Singhala of Sri Lanka (treated more favourably than the black Tamils). In the Caribbean, the indentured Indian labourers were taken to the Atlantic, not as slaves, as the black Africans had been. It is very important to remember that. It was this thin substratum of Empire that tended to oppose liberation movements. They actively collaborated, often virulently, as in the case of Kenya, against fellow Africans, in the fight for independence.

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In Empire, this modicum of elevation from the bottom was very important and so when the British said you were not that dark, not that negroid, your status protected you against slavery and forced labour. This bred its own psychosis. We may want to describe Naipaul in elevated terms, but his own unease once in India (he finds the land of his forefathers too unhygienic) speaks of this. The elevated

elite in Empire knew that once they accepted the bribe of racial elevation, they would become accomplices. It was hence in their interest to perpetuate colonial rule, for once it ended, their position would become terribly exposed. The liberation fighters whom Naipaul mocks were a threat against the collaborator class.

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When the worst came, the bargain was to choose the racist humiliation because the patronising treatment at least guaranteed some goods. Mr. Naipaul's English reviewers perhaps understood this - a brown man acknowledging the hegemony, affirming that the Empire was appreciated by the middle races (hence at least intelligent) as civilisation. They praised his books at a time when they were fighting a losing battle against their black subjects.

You could understand the racism of Joseph Conrad. But Naipaul? The relationship of his narrators to Europeans is telling. It is always to prove how they are better than white people. There are the clueless young white people whom his narrators are proud to dominate intellectually. The white women in his books have to be degraded; the violence and contempt with which his characters treat them appears like the acting-out of suppressed rage. White people are his main audience and he must show them how he is neither Negroid nor Indian. These are the people who either granted or denied scholarships to the Eliases of *Miguel Street*.

It was thus easy to be bullied into calling V.S. Naipaul a brilliant writer. But you had to have occupied his very position - to have had an ambivalent position towards the colonial project - to have called him so. What you needed was just that much politic education to see that the 20th century was changed by the men and women despised in Mr. Naipaul's books. To understand the minds of those who imprisoned Nelson Mandela for 27 years, you have to absorb Naipaul. His was one of the attitudes that had to be defeated for people of colour to become free.

It was important for me to go through Mr. Naipaul's books after his death. But the realisation that I was reading him the last time in this involved manner, with the

heat with which I once did when the writing was not yet done, when he was still around, was hard.

Now Naipaul's forced racism - for it feels like that - does not really feel like that. Rather, it appears to be transactional right-wingery by a certain savvy type who knew there was a cash-paying audience that loved that sound.