

V.S.Naipaul- An Enigma of a Literary Phenomenon: An Evaluation

Prologue

V.S. Naipaul (VSN, hereafter) is by all accounts a literary giant of our time as evidenced by his Nobel prize, the Booker prize and numerous other coveted awards¹. He remains an enigma despite his contributions to the literary world since late 1950s, but even after his path breaking novel “A House for Mr. Biswas” in 1961. His talent is enormous as seen in the breadth of his work, its depth, the different layers of meaning he conveys and his ability to dissect any social situation in different parts of the world, delicately and with surgical precision. He is a celebrated literary stylist who spares no pains to write well-balanced and remarkably clear sentences and select words that resonate with and engage the reader from the first sentence². In this regard his peers are Orwell, Conrad and Maugham. His literary hero is Marcel Proust, whom he quoted at length in his Nobel Lecture in 2001; the lecture was not about style but on the act of writing. Proust and VSN among others call it a mystical process, in that they do not know what they will end up writing. Thus VSN says “I am the sum of my books”. The person does not matter at all- where he is born, his ethnic origin, the language he uses, his virtues and vices. VSN’s writings are clearly devoid of these origins and attributes. It seems to this essayist, he transcends all manner of identifications and definitions. And, that is the remarkable thing about his writing.

He is not liked by many in the literary world and specially by newspapers that regularly review literary works. Others are in the opposite camp, who respect, and love his work. These includes the New York Review of Books, the Times Literary Supplement in the UK and Commentary. He is an anathema to the political world and those advocates who cut slack for third world leaders. While he has not directly disparaged any politician to this reviewer’s knowledge (at least in print), his distaste for pretense and grandiosity of politicians is seen in his work. He has once written that he wants to be unassailable without any fear or favor to any view-establishment or otherwise. Yet his detractors call him an apologist for colonialists.

¹ In 2001, Naipaul was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. He has won numerous other literary prizes, including the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize (1958), the Somerset Maugham Award (1960), the Hawthorn den Prize (1964), the W.H. Smith Literary Award (1968), the Booker Prize (1971), the Jerusalem Prize (1983) and the David Cohen Prize for a lifetime's achievement in British Literature (1993)

² Derek Walcott a fellow Caribbean literary figure and Nobel Prize winning poet wrote “Naipaul’s sentences are short, like the streets in Port of Spain” in his Nobel Lecture, “The Antilles”

Edward Said, Derek Walcott and Salman Rushdie among others call him a “colonial messenger boy” and worse.

He has had two well-known biographers. Paul Theroux, the leading novelist and travel writer, once befriended and was helped by VSN to become a writer, did a devastating biography – ‘Sir Vidya’s Shadow: A Friendship across Five Continents’ (1998). It exposed VSN’s many known and hidden faults- being cheap, mistreating his first wife and classmate at Oxford- Patricia Hale. Patrick French who did an authorized biography ‘The World is What it Is’ (2008) of VSN, won the prize for the best biography for that year, is also critical of VSN, with respect to his arrogance, take- no- prisoner approach to interviewers and contempt for many of his literary contemporaries^{3,4}. But French separates the man from his work and is effusive of VSN’s literary talent. Incidentally, VSN did not change a word in the draft version of the biography, exposing warts and all, when it was offered for comment. VSN got into hot water at a literal event in 2012 saying that there have been no great female literary figures-their many writings were dismissed as cheap sentimentalist novels. He trashed Jane Austen, among others in one clean sweep⁵.

In what follows I raise issues for discussion on VSN’s contribution in four categories and provide a commentary on each : (a) historical and social context (b) major themes and style (c) his place among other literary figures and (d) the sum of his books. A list of his works is found at the end of this essay.

(a) Historical and Social Context

VSN wrote in the post-colonial historical context. But many others have done that too, particularly those from former colonial territories of the third world. The issue then is how does he deal with the common experience compared to his contemporaries ?

³A music critic once described Richard Wagner as a terrible man who exploited women, took their money and treated them like chattel. But he also noted that none of his critics are remembered while Wagner remains a musical phenomenon, 140 years after his death, whose works are played and celebrated in many parts of the world.

⁴ The Title of the Patrick French biography comes from the first line of VSN’s book “ A Bend in the River : An Islamic Journey (1981)”

⁵ "I read a piece of writing and within a paragraph or two I know whether it is by a woman or not," Naipaul, , said during a chat at the Royal Geographic Society in London. "I think [it's] unequal to me." He singled out the beloved English wit, ironist, and ethicist Jane Austen. "[I] couldn't possibly share her sentimental ambitions," he said, "her sentimental sense of the world."

First, we note that he did not find the removal of the colonial yoke itself a liberating experience. He left Trinidad and Tobago in 1950 while the country became an independent state in 1962 and a republic in 1976. His own country's history did not seem to have a great meaning to him since he did not live there after leaving for Oxford at seventeen.

Second, in his own make up he did not feel that he belonged anywhere. He is the perpetual outsider and was even one when he was a youngster in Chaguanas, (a North Western part of Trinidad where most of the people of Indian origin live) . His forefathers received their 'independence' from being indentured workers five year after they arrived in Trinidad and Tobago in the late 1880s. Each family was given 5 acres to cultivate and earn its living, and could continue to work in the sugar plantations, while being landowners. Some members of the family worked in the sugar plantations, others worked the land they received from the British company they were hired by mainly in Uttar Pradesh. (This is an interesting contrast to estate labor that was brought to Sri Lanka with no attempt to give them 'independence' in the form of land ownership and an alternative to working in estates) . So in this sense. Naipaul did not find fault with the plantation owners for this aspect of colonial history as indentured labor was well-treated by the "colonialists"⁶.

Third , he wanted to get out of Trinidad and Tobago as early as possible and studied hard to get a Government scholarship. And, later he referred to his country of origin, with somewhere little short of disdain. He has a similar attitude towards Oxford, where he had a difficult time due to alienation and loneliness leading to a nervous breakdown. But he never disparaged Britain and thought the rural area he lived in Wiltshire, in a cottage bought from a manor house, an idyllic place. But he sold it off, after seventeen years. So he did not belong to any place group or nation, and did not seem to want to .

Finally , when he went to seek his roots in India, he did not encounter a society and polity that he liked. This is seen in his first work on India " An Area of Darkness" (1964). He was disappointed with India, the land of his forefathers; in most of its aspects at the time. He thought Indian politicians were low life. He hated even more Indian "holy men" whom he

⁶ One might appreciate the contrast that estate labor was immediately disenfranchised when Sri Lanka became independent. And, today, despite rising income levels of all groups estate populations have seen their real incomes fall and no appreciable improvements in standard measures of welfare.

thought were fakes. He was dismayed, --by the "plundering philistinism" of the educated Indian; by the quality typified in the cult of Maharishi, "who escapes into mushy abstraction that avoids issues and challenges of everyday life in a very poor country " ; by the famine in Bihar, seen as part of an "infinite timelessness," a tragedy that the people have become incapable of sensing. Only in 1971, when the majority of Indians voted no longer on caste or party issues "but out of their common distress and need," was when VSN perceptibly cheered. But later in "India: A Wounded Civilization" (1977), his attitude became more understanding of Indian history and culture. In his last book on India "India: Million Mutinies Now" (1990), he was very positive on India and anticipated the coming prosperity which he foresaw as the result of increasing democracy. Even so, it is in contrast to other writers of the colonial experience of Orwell, Rushdie and Said. They lambasted colonial masters and attributed all their post – independence problems to their former rulers.

(b) Major Themes and Style

VSN is the ultimate outsider, looking in, with eagle eyes, at societies and situations. His subjects are common people. He can get into different countries, societies and unravel their inner relationships, common traits and the sum up their attitudes towards others, within their own societies and identify emerging trends and issues. Many of his works are revealing and even prescient.

In "Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey" (1981) on his travels in Iran, Indonesia, Malaysia and Pakistan, he anticipated the coming resurrection of Islamic ambitions and reach. By looking at these non-Arabic states, he saw that separating Arab culture from the religion leads to less violent ambition. But he does hold the opinion that Islam as a religion has been a brake against modernity with consequences for freedom of women to pursue their own ambitions. His other travel writings, including three on India, the Caribbean ("The Loss of El Dorado" (1969), Argentina and Trinidad ("The Return of Eva Peron and the Killings in Trinidad" (1980) , Mauritius ("Over Crowded Baracoon and other Articles" (1972) and United States , "A Turn in the South " (1989) are equally revealing and times the best analysis done on the country by an outsider.

For instance in the “Loss of El Dorado” VSN reviewed Caribbean history starting from the Spanish excursions into Latin America and reveals a letter written by the King of Spain that gives the origin of the name “Chagunas”, a name of a tribe of American Indians who fought the Spaniards. The king’s letter (written in 1621) orders the captain who led the armies to destroy the tribe and not leave anyone behind, a goal that was achieved and today there are no traces of these tribes in the Trinidad and Tobago. They probably escaped using the Orinoco river into the deep jungles of Venezuela, from where they had come originally. The Chagunas tribe from Venezuela came to Trinidad and Tobago worship a particular plant or rock in the country. So VSN’s research led to the unraveling of a mystery that had evaded historians for four and a half centuries. But the main villain in the book is Sir Walter Raleigh , whom VSN has exposed as a classic conman. He took a fake piece of “false gold” to England and made a claim that there were mountains of gold in South America and raised funds to go on another expedition based on the false promise. In the event, he got caught to the British Admiralty and had to spend more than a few years in the Tower of London. VSN exposed and wrote extensively about this sixteenth century canard.

In “Over Crowded Barracoon and Other Articles ” VSN examined the situation in Mauritius in the 1960s. He has a parallel vision of the island which is also a sugar cane grower and has a multi-ethnic makeup. There, this reviewer found that VSN had a better vision than the Nobel Prize winning economist James Meade who uncharacteristically extrapolated population trends to paint a pessimistic scenario for the future of Mauritius⁷. Mauritius grew by 5.4 per year in in real terms for over 20 years since 1980 and beyond. VSN not being a trained economist but a critical and free thinker who takes into account not only economics , but also history , culture, ethnic politics, gave a more optimistic scenario that proved to be right. Mauritius was one of the few countries to have quadrupled its GDP per capita in two decades.

⁷“ Heavy population pressure must inevitably reduce real income per head below what it might otherwise be. That surely is bad enough in a community that is full of political conflict. But if in addition, in the absence of other remedies, it must lead either to unemployment (exacerbating the scramble for jobs between Indians and Creoles) or to even greater inequalities (stocking up still more the envy felt by the Indian and Creole underdog for the Franco-Mauritian top dog), the outlook for peaceful development is poor”). Meade, James E., et al., (1961) *The Economics and Social Structure of Mauritius—Report to the Government of Mauritius*, London: Methuen.

In the “Turn in the South”, VSN tackled racism in the American South. He was able to speak and engage both steaming racism of some Southerners and very hopeful and dedicated blacks as well as whites who had a more optimistic view of the future of race relations in the United States. VSN’s interviews and conversations with all manner of persons from religious leaders to local political leaders to common folks enabled him to paint a vivid and a most interesting picture rarely achieved in a book on race. Reminding oneself that VSN wrote this book in 1989 and the US elected a black President in 2008 and re-elected President Obama in 2012, tells reams about his ability to get to the core of issues giving a transcendental quality to his analysis. Of course, there were many steps that had to take place for this outcome such as the Supreme Court decision, *Brown vs. the Board of Education* in 1954, ending “separate but equal” argument for providing different schools for black and white children, the leadership of Rev. Martin Luther King and the realization by the ruling class that the only way to reach the Jeffersonian ideals was to remove all barriers to race.

With respect to VSN’s style of writing many have acclaimed its direct, simple and leisurely quality. In VSN’s own words : “ This idea about the way to handle words and the feeling for words is something I had to learn after getting rid of academic style of school and university. I also had to learn how to organize material, and there is a smaller assemblage ; the paragraphs, the links, the preparation of what is coming after-very, very involved. Then the tensions that narrative prose must have, occasionally , perhaps, the rhetoric. I find it very tiring, taxing art, but it is the one that I do”⁸. His writings are easy to read but their meanings are subtle and layered. He engages the reader with the first pass, and gets him or her to await the next sentence hoping it would be good at the first. And, it always is. He takes great pains to write those magical sentences. He starts with white foolscaps and fill them with his writing , deliberating on each word, sentence and paragraph. He is known to read each sentence loud to catch its cadences and the music behind his words. Then he re-reads each page to correct the language, appropriateness of each word and its relationship to the precise meaning he wants to convey. His language is vivid as it is appropriate for the subject matter. His writing has a Hemingway-quality for its directness; ability get rid of unnecessary words or imagery. Then he copies the corrected version by hand, using a fountain pen of high quality. He revises again

⁸ Bernard Levin (1983). His interview of VSN. ‘V.S.Naipaul: A perpetual Voyager’, *The Listener*, June 16-17.

and again before he goes to the typewriter and lately of course to the personal computer. But he always writes his drafts by hand⁹. And, as great writers do, he had an editor both at the stage of the publisher and the final proofing. Patricia Hale, his first wife was his unofficial editor. It is revealing, that he never acknowledged her help in print¹⁰. Probably she did not want it to be acknowledged either. VSN moved with the high *literati* of Britain including, Lady Antonia Fraser, Harold Pinter, Kingsley Amis, and others . He admired their work and styles and was probably influenced by them. But VSN always wanted to be his own man. He admires Proust (who wouldn't ?) and as mentioned above, wanted to be judged by the same standard.

(c) His Place Among other Literary Figures

It is difficult to define VSN's cohort group. One way to limit the inquiry is to ask about his contemporaries noting that he is compared to Orwell, Conrad, Maugham among others who are not his contemporaries but those few of decades before him, starting with 1961, when he published " The House for Mr. Biswas". He also has few traits that remind one of Hemingway, Borges (the Argentinian writer of magical prose and poems) and R.K. Narayan . The last mentioned particularly for the subject matter, specially his work that deals with family relations and situations as one finds in 'The House for Mr. Biswas', 'Miguel Street and the Mystic Masseur' . He admired Conrad, Orwell and Narayan but not Hemingway. He found that Hemingway hardly looked beyond the Paris café he wrote in. Of course in style, this reviewer believes that Hemingway has great style and crystal clear prose, but he did not tackle the difficult and layered subject matter of VSN, especially in his non-fiction.

VSN stands apart from other writers of the time, the names mentioned above, Said, Walcott and Rushdie as well as others who have received literary acclamation such as Gabriel Garcia Marques, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Octavio Paz, Orhan Pamuk, Naguib Mafous . These are VSN's contemporaries and fellow Nobel laureates in literature (except Said and Rushie) ,

⁹ Once I heard the Israeli writer, Amos Oz say that he does not use a computer or word processor because he wants to have the sensuality of the feeling of his hand on the paper !

¹⁰ Paul Theroux in "Sir Vidya's Shadow" reveals the relationship between VSN and his first wife.

from Latin America , Turkey and Egypt and are his equals. On the other hand, VSN is a unique figure he did not tread the path of his contemporaries in few senses. He is his own man, writing not in opposition to the colonial world but within it, in that he sees both the good and the bad of that experience. For example, VSN believes that India was damaged ("A Wounded Civilization") by colonization by the British. At the same time he is unforgiving of its leadership with the exception of Mohandas Gandhi who he admires. He dismisses, Indian "holy men" and tin-pot politicians. Most other of his contemporaries trashed the colonialists with the possible exception of R.K. Narayan whose work was limited to his close environs. Those like Rushdie (his master work 'Midnight's Children') thrashed the British, the American and the European establishments ¹¹. He was a darling of the Intellectual Left but had to live under the protection of the very people whom he disparaged after the famous "fatwa" issued by Ayatollah Khomeini¹². Gabriel Garcia Marquez is very critical of his Northern neighbor being a Communist and produced brilliant literary works (E.g. "Hundred Years of Solitude" his best known work) earning him a Nobel Prize earlier than VSN. Mario Vargas Llosa is closer to VSN on the subject matter and his stylistic writing, more like a Latin American Hemingway ('Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter'). But VSN looked much deeper than Hemingway and his language does not have Hemmingway's lyrical quality but the subject matter he deals with, especially in non-fiction writing has greater depth. Naguib Mafous is closer than others to VSN about the family stories he writes but they are confined to Egypt. Similarly, Orhan Pamuk's writings are confined to Turkey, as far as this reviewer knows. His most famous work is "Istanbul" that paints an intriguing portrait of social relations and power in the city.

VSN has been compared to Conrad for his travel writing and with Chekov for his ability to describe people and situations with economy of words but not losing the texture and the "color" of the literature. VSN also admires Orwell, Nabokov and the Old Testament.

¹¹ For example " The Jaguar's Smile: A Nicaraguan Journey" (1987).

¹² This reviewer could not see the damage of caused to the Moslem cause by "Satanic Verses" . It had no literary merit and the banning and burning the book gave it very high sales.

(d) *The Sum of his Books*

In his Nobel lecture VSN asked us to judge him as the sum of his books and not the individual person. He gave the classic Proust answer that one cannot really explain the work of a person through the person, given that there always a mystic unknown and unknowable aspect of the creative process. So it is nothing but fair to look at the sum of his book to evaluate his contribution.

As to the volume, one can see he has seventeen works of fiction to his credit and nineteen works of non-fiction (see pages 11-13) in this essay. With respect to fiction, he is basically a novelist and a special one at that, in situating his fiction in faraway lands after his early work in Trinidad and Tobago. As a novelist, he is a master craftsman developing characters, placing them in complex and subtle roles and bringing insight and humor into their relationships. Even 'The House for Mr. Biswas', has humor in it when the head of Tulsis family matriarch emasculated her son in law, Mr. Biswas. It relates the tensions in the family when the power distribution is highly uneven. Her son-in-law joined the family as a sign painter and was "married off" because he wrote a small note to one of the daughters of the matriarch. So the House for Mr. Biswas is the elaboration of the power struggle of the dispossessed and the powerful matriarch who owns the grand house and conducts the family religious rituals, run the business and the lives of all family members. Mr. Biswas is a failed pundit and who lost power and the right to conduct rituals. And his act of defiance was to get away from the family and to move his own family away from the matriarchal dominance. He buys decrepit old houses he could afford and tried to rebuild them in contrast to the grand house of the Tulsis. The story is a real one. It is spelled out clearly and with humor, an admirable characteristic of VSN's work.

If the "The House for Mr. Biswas" was the only book VSN wrote he would still be recognized as a literary star and respected by other *literati*. But after the recognition, he carried on producing ever important literary works.

There is one important problem in evaluating VSN contribution to literature. The distinction made between fiction and non-fiction seems flawed. For, most of his autobiographical writing is classified as fiction, when it is not. This arises from VSN's strong desire to remain outside and he writes his autobiographical material in the third person. For

example, the three works classified as fiction “Finding the Centre (1984)”, “The Enigma of Arrival (1987)” and “A Way in the World (1994)” are autobiographical. His own story is presented in a complex and most interesting context. It is admirable literature without a doubt, but the core is not fiction. This might explain why these works are so well grounded, subtle and revealing of the character, even though VSN uses the ruse of fiction to hide behind them.

In “ The Middle Passage” (1962) , VSN begins a cycle of his “travel books”. They are hardly travel books in the usual sense of the word. They are so carefully created analyses of issues confronted by a place and not one that could be used for travel. It shows Conrad’s influence on him but , VSN makes these travel books do much more than travel guides. It is akin to an early manifestation of Orwell’s ‘ The Burmese Days’ (1934), first published in the US as he could not find a publisher in UK, of a book so critical of British colonial rule. In” Middle Passage” it seems that VSN found the proper voice to spin his stories. They are far from fiction. They are carefully crafted analytical stories of situations based on history culture, politics and personalities. His cycle on India, referred to the three books above, travels in Moslem countries, mysticism in Africa, ‘ The Masque of Africa’ (2010) are analysis of situations. Perhaps pure fiction can be found in the “Guerillas” (1975), even then it is based on events in the Caribbean in the 1970s with militant groups emerging related to the drug trade. The Caribbean had become a ground for tension and violence between Black Power leadership and white liberal rich. The story leads to violence and the rape of a native white woman in the island by Black power leader. To this reviewer “Guerillas” was the least satisfactory work he had read by VSN. It was as if written by someone else, for its gratuitous violence, less smooth language than usual- unbecoming of a Naipaul.

All in all, VSN is a magnificent writer who has created great works of literature, that one can read over and over again-it feels fresh every time, like a Mozart sonata. Two quotations about VSN say it all:

“ To watch Naipaul think about what he is looking at (no matter what the vantage point) is to learn how exceptional writing is done. The rage is the drive, the mind is the talent, the sentences he taught himself to write, they are magic.... He brings to (non-fiction) an extraordinary capacity

to for making art out of lucid thought..... I can no longer imagine a world without Naipaul's writing" – Vivian Gornick, Los Angeles Times Book Review.

" When Naipaul is your guide, a place where you have never been and of which you know nothing becomes deeply etched in your mind..... He has genius for noticing, a genius for freezing the instant when meaning is born from the accidents of the everyday... Each sentence pounces on its meaning, neat as a cat." Hilary Mantel, The New York Review of Books.

Sarath Rajapatirana, Revised May 10 , 2013

V.S.Naipaul's Writing

Fiction

The Mystic Masseur – (1957)

The Suffrage of Elvira – (1958)

Miguel Street – (1959)

A House for Mr. Biswas – (1961)

Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion – (1963)

The Mimic Men – (1967)

A Flag on the Island – (1967)

In a Free State – (1971): Booker prize

Guerrillas – (1975)

A Bend in the River – (1979)

Finding the Centre – (1984)

The Enigma of Arrival – (1987)

A Way in the World – (1994)

Half a Life – (2001)

The Night Watchman's Occurrence Book: And Other Comic Inventions (Stories) – (2002)

Magic Seeds – (2004)

Non-fiction

The Middle Passage: Impressions of Five Societies – British, French and Dutch in the West Indies and South America (1962)

An Area of Darkness (1964)

The Loss of El Dorado – (1969)

The Overcrowded Barracoon and Other Articles (1972)

India: A Wounded Civilization (1977)

A Congo Diary (1980)
The Return of Eva Perón and the Killings in Trinidad (1980)
Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey (1981)
A Turn in the South (1989)
India: A Million Mutinies Now (1990)
Homeless by Choice (1992, with R. Jhabvala and Salman Rushdie)
Bombay (1994, with Raghbir Singh)
Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among the Converted Peoples (1998)
Between Father and Son: Family Letters (1999, edited by Gillon Aitken)
Reading & Writing: A Personal Account (2000)
The Writer and the World: Essays – (2002)
Literary Occasions: Essays (2003, by Pankaj Mishra)
A Writer's People: Ways of Looking and Feeling (2007)
The Masque of Africa: Glimpses of African Belief (2010)

Evaluations of Naipaul's work

Barnouw, Dagmar (2003) Naipaul's Strangers (Indiana University Press).
French, Patrick (2008) The World Is What It Is: The Authorized Biography of V. S. Naipaul (Random House)
Hammer, Robert ed. (1979) Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul (Heinemann).
Hughes, Peter (1988) V.S. Naipaul (Routledge).
Jarvis, Kelvin (1989) V.S. Naipaul: A Selective Bibliography with Annotations, 1957–1987 (Scarecrow).
Jussawalla, Feroza, ed. (1997) Conversations with V.S. Naipaul (University Press of Mississippi).
Kelly, Richard (1989) V.S. Naipaul (Continuum).
King, Bruce (2003) V.S. Naipaul, 2nd ed (Macmillan)
Kramer, Jane (13 April 1980) From the Third World, an assessment of Naipaul's work in the New York Times Book Review.
Nightingale, Peggy (1987) Journey through Darkness: The Writing of V.S. Naipaul (University of Queensland Press).

Said, Edward (1986) *Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World* (Salmagundi).

Theroux, Paul (1998) *Sir Vidia's Shadow: A Friendship across Five Continents* (Houghton Mifflin).

Theroux, Paul (1972). *V.S. Naipaul: An Introduction to His Work* (Deutsch).

Weiss, Timothy F (1992) *On the Margins: The Art of Exile in V.S. Naipaul* (University of Massachusetts Press).