

SIR VS NAIPAUL- LIFE AND WORKS

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Introduction

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad "V.S." Naipaul, (born 17 August 1932) is an Indo-Trinidadian-British writer known for his novels focusing on the legacy of the British Empire's colonialism. He has also written works of non-fiction, such as travel writing and essays.

In 2001, Naipaul was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. He has been awarded numerous other literary prizes, including the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize (1958), the Somerset Maugham Award (1960), the Hawthornden Prize (1964), the WH 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).

J. M. Coetzee, writing in *The New York Review of Books* in 2001, described Naipaul as "a master of modern English prose". In 2008, *The Times* ranked Naipaul seventh on their list of "the 50 greatest British writers since 1945".

Born in Trinidad in 1932, the descendant of indentured laborers shipped from India, this dispossessed child of the Raj has come on a long and marvelous journey. His upbringing familiarized him with every sort of deprivation, material and cultural. A scholarship to Oxford brought him to England. Nothing sustained him afterwards except the

determination, often close to despair, to become a writer. Against all likelihood, a spirit of pure comedy flows through his early books.

Victimhood might have been his central theme, granted his background. Not at all, that same determination to be a writer also liberated him from self-pity. Each one of us, his books declare, can choose to be a free individual. It is a matter of will and choice, and above all intellect. Critics have sometimes argued that people - in the Third World especially - are trapped in their culture and history without possibility of choice, and can only be free if others make them so. To them, V.S. Naipaul's vision that they have to take responsibility for themselves can seem like some sort of First World privilege, and a conservative philosophy at that.

Quite the contrary, the absolute rejection of victimhood is necessary if we are to meet as we must on an equal footing, and it is no exaggeration to say that he has shifted public opinion towards this understanding as no other writer has done. Courage and persistence were required to hold a belief quite so unfashionable in recent years, but it is this belief that has made Naipaul the universal writer and humanist that he is.

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In himself, Naipaul is a private man, who lives in the country in order to have the solitude for thinking and writing. Everything that has ever happened to him is pigeonholed with exactitude in his memory. Formidably well-read, he can quote books he read years ago, and all the conversations he has had. Melancholy grips him at the spectacle of "the steady grinding down of the old world" as he put it, and he might complain to an interviewer that he is living in a "plebeian culture that celebrates itself."

Other writers born abroad have settled in England and enriched its literature, but there has never been one like Naipaul. His personal story is moving; his achievement extraordinary. There is a great moral to his life's work, that the human comedy will come out all right because, when all is said and done, intellect is more powerful than vicissitude and wickedness.

Naipaul has written about slavery, revolution, guerrillas, corrupt politicians, the poor and the oppressed, interpreting the rages so deeply rooted in our societies. Long before others, he began to report on the irrational frenzy of these past two decades by religion in the Islamic world from Iran to Indonesia and Pakistan.

His first three books are comic portraits of Trinidadian society. *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) won the Mail on Sunday/John Llewellyn Rhys Prize in 1958 and was adapted as a film with a screenplay by Caryl Phillips in 2001. *Miguel Street* (1959), a collection of short stories, won a Somerset Maugham Award. His acclaimed novel *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), is based on his father's life in Trinidad. His first novel set in England, *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963), won the Hawthorn den Prize.

Subsequent novels developed more political themes and he began to write about colonial and post-colonial societies in the process of decolonization. These novels include *The Mimic Men* (1967), winner of the 1968 WH Smith Literary Award, *In a Free State* (1971), which won the Booker Prize for Fiction,

Guerrillas (1975) and *A Bend in the River* (1979), set in Africa. *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) is a personal account of his life in England. *A Way in the World* (1994), is a formally experimental narrative that combines fiction and non-fiction in a historical portrait of the Caribbean. *Half a Life* was published in 2001 and 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. *Magic Seeds* (2004) continues his story.

V. S. Naipaul is also the author of a number of works of non-fiction including three books about India: *An Area of Darkness* (1964), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977), *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990), and two books about Islamic societies, *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (1981) and *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions* (1998). 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), and has published two collections of essays, *The Overcrowded Barracoon and Other Articles* (1972) and *The Return of Eva Peron* (1980). *The Writer and the World: Essays*, was published in 2002. *Literary Occasions* (2004), is a further collection of essays. His latest book is *A Writer's People: Ways of Looking and Feeling* (2007). V. S. Naipaul was knighted in 1989. He was awarded the David Cohen British Literature Prize by the Arts Council of England in 1993 and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001. He holds honorary doctorates from Cambridge University and Columbia University in New York, and honorary degrees from the universities of Cambridge, London and Oxford. He lives in Wiltshire, England.

References

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