



reflection

Naipaul and Chaudhuri: Naipaul's slip is showing

By Ashok Patnaik

IN his recent offering to the Royal Society of Literature, VS Naipaul heaped a mountain of slanders against late Nirad C. Chaudhuri. The latter was termed as "old fool, ... pretender" etc. The obituary, as we so read by Naipaul, transformed him into instant Saliere. Unsurprisingly, the piece was replete with accusations, distortions, obloquies and sophistries, which were literally marked by raw lies. It was also a brazen display of a profligate obituarist, who hardly mind trampling in the dust, snap fingers and dance in cannibalistic exultations.

When Nirad Chander Chaudhuri was well alive spiritedly till he completed his hundredth birthday, there was not a single scholar, Western or Indian, who had the temerity to question his vast erudition. Perhaps they knew better than anybody else could, that he would dwarf them to the standard of school kids. Nevertheless, it is not to say he has no critics. But then, no body had stooped to the nadir with such opprobrious terms as Naipaul.

The Trinidad-born-Indian author leaves the reader in shock and disbelief when he writes: "Nirad Chaudhuri wrote one good and unexpected book *The Autobiography of An Unknown Indian* ... Why it ought to be one good and unexpected, book, Naipaul desisted from further discussing about the book. Let me take it from where he had left. Sir John Squire, the acclaimed literary giant who read and favourably recommended the manuscript to Macmillan & Co, London wrote a personal letter to his Indian friend Sir CR Reddi, a great scholar and one of the foremost educationists of the pre-independent India on December 5, 1950 i.e. before the book went into print. He wrote: "... he is a sage; he is familiar with all arts of the world as he is with religions and philosophies. His English is so good that one is tempted to think that he must have had a translator, but a translator as good as that could have never bothered about translations but

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have written English books on his own. This unknown Indian hovers our globe and sadly scrutinizes the fluctuating fortunes not merely of India, with her succession of invaders, but of all mankind ... if this book comes out as I hope it will it may put India into an uproar. But it will certainly enlighten all historically minded; he might possibly, if necessary, find a refuge in England where in spite of all we have lost we are still allowed to think." Nirad Babu knew nothing about all these until Ms Mini Krishnan, who heads the Macmillan (Madras), had sent a copy of the letter to the writer in 1991.

Later, when the book was published on September 8, 1951 Sir Squire wrote a full-page appreciation piece in *The Illustrated London News* on November 3, 1951 in which he had this to remark: "Literature in English about India is voluminous. There are travel books; there are countless books about politics by Englishmen and Indians; there have been, in the recent times, many translations of Indian poems and novels. But I can't think of anything published in England which covers the same ground as the earlier portion of Mr Chaudhuri's book." Mr Naipaul, it is for certain that you are totally ignorant of all these and if at all you had digested the Unknown Indian, you are only jealous of Chaudhuri's unfathomable erudition.

When *The Continent of Circe*, was first published on October 28, 1965, it was VS Naipaul who contributed a lengthy article entitled "The Last Of the

Aryans" in the *Encounter* (January 1966) in which he made a handsome observation. "It is as a display of personality that ... it must be read. It is most passionate when one suspects it is most personal." He went on to describe *The Continent* as "one great book (Italics mine) to have come out of Indo-English encounter".

Paradoxically, the same Naipaul, 33 years later penned with a tone and diction that is not only casuistical and disingenuous but sets a very damaging precedent. It has become imperative to ask whether we should believe Naipaul on big things when he is so often wrong and untrustworthy and wrongheaded. Sitting in his Knightsbridge apartment, the author it seems is preparing recipes for both the dead and alive. Naipaul is a modern Roquentin (a character in Jean Paul Sartre's *Nausea*) who prefers celebrating himself saying: "I am here, I savour myself, I feel the old taste of blood and rusty water which is my own taste. I am my taste. I exist. That is what existence is: drinking yourself without being thirsty."

Of Scholar Extraordinary: The Life of Friedrich Max Muller, Naipaul disdainfully discards Chaudhuri of having "no scholarly equipment to handle the subject". Among scores of biographies that were written on Muller, Chaudhuri's was not only considered as a definitive contribution but a valuable addendum to comprehend the times of Max Muller in its entirety. This was remarkably observed by the acclaimed

historian Hugh Trevor-Roper while commenting on the book in *The Sunday Times*, London. He wrote: "[Muller] could not have fallen into better hands ... As an outsider [Dr Chaudhuri] can look with detachment on the European scene. But he looks on it sympathetically ... I am amazed at the sureness and subtlety with which he handles the movement of European thought ... I have only touched on the riches of this fascinating work, which is far more than a biography; for it is a study in psychology, in the intellectual history of an age, and in the meeting of two distinct cultures. It is invariably thoughtful and thought provoking. It is also beautifully written." Naipaul is by no means a great historian as Trevor-Roper, and therefore may not be in a position to assimilate Chaudhuri's Gibbonian survey, and judge the book as it stands.

Naipaul, the Gascon writes "I wrestled 'very hard with judges' to give Chaudhuri the Duff Cooper Prize (1966) and now wails that he hardly had an idea that the prize would make its recipient settle down in England for good. Naipaul arguably the brightest disciple from the school of sophist can no better mislead his readers. He is wrong again on this count too. More than Mr Chaudhuri, it was Mrs Chaudhuri who always wanted her husband to inhabit in England and become a full time writer than be an occasional contributor to various newspapers and news magazines. Besides his son Professor DN Chaudhuri

told me in late 1996 that his father "never wanted to settle in England. It was only in 1980 that he finally decided not to return India". Nirad Babu, of course, was invited by Lord Weidenfeld to England to write a book on Hinduism in 1970; it was certainly not the Duff Cooper Award as claimed by Mr Naipaul that made him decide to stay for the rest of his life at Oxford.

But then, it is no fault of Mr Naipaul and his ungentlemanly obt submission which was characterized by sheer ineffectiveness which mirrors more of his personality than of his exterior projection. There is a subtle distinction between Chaudhuri and Naipaul, which separates them fundamentally, intellectually as well as temperamentally.

Chaudhuri was out and out a Victorian classicist, an aesthete. He not only believed and preached but also practised the strict morals of life. If India has not found favourable in his books, it was because what he witnessed was the decline and putrefaction of our glorious tradition by foreign elements. What he was concerned with was not the area of darkness or with the wounded civilisation or say million mutants as such but with the elementary functioning agent which is all set to wipe out the very existence from the face of the planet. "There is reason to believe," wrote Mannoni, "that in a non-civilised individual it is not easy to distinguish the persona from the inner-personality. Only civilisation makes it possible to distinguish between them." Naipaul is

no authority on civilisations; Chaudhuri is.

Naipaul is not a moralist by any stretch of imagination. He can visit prostitutes, suspect his protegee Paul Theroux of having illicit relation with his late wife Patricia and can marry Nadira, a divorcee 24 years younger his age. One cannot imagine of Chaudhuri indulging in such acts of impropriety.

Naipaul's "lack of compassion and hostility towards post-colonial Third World societies" are brought into light by Edward Said and Salman Rushdie. Little wonder, today he is being spurned by the entire African continent because there is also life beyond Naipaul's bleak vision.

Surprisingly, in 1997 Naipaul confessed his unqualified ken about India: "What I hadn't understand in 1962 (his first visit to India) or had taken too much for granted, was the extent to which the country was being remade. India was set on a new kind of intellectual life; it was given new ideas about its history and civilisation." It is precisely this incomplete and incoherent of Naipaul's knowledge on India and its constituents that made his opinions metamorphose every now and then.

Naipaul wanted to become a writer. For him writing is a profession. Not so for Chaudhuri. He was instinctively drawn into this fold. For him writing is a vocation. Unless, one has unambiguous understanding and its implications of these two terms, it would be difficult to distinguish Chaudhuri from Naipaul.

Finally, the alive accuses the dead of setting himself up as a clown in Oxford. But the alive has never placed himself before the mirror because Naipaul would find a villain standing before him. If Mr Naipaul has any culture, he would apologise for his cheap remarks on Mr. Chaudhuri.

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monologue

Long Day's Journey Into Twilight: Some Thoughts on Osmani Uddyan

By Rebecca Haque

AND, now, we have won the battle, they are, like a thief in the night, conspiring to usurp our rightful inheritance by planning to (mis)appropriate a large portion of the verdant lawns of Osmani Uddyan to build a foul and pernicious Hawker's Market I scream in righteous indignation. How dare they do this to me, to every Bangali, to my children of my beloved land? Despoil, desecrate, deforest! Not it shall not, repeat, not be so. If I have any power and voice and say in the matter. And, God be praised, I do, too!

Dhaka is fast becoming a cess-pool, a toxic waste dump waiting to explode like a nuclear time-bomb. Do we, in all humanity and sanity really want that? We certainly do not want, do not need

What do we need, what does every sentient human being need? Just a little breathing space, fresh dew on the grass, a little open sky to gaze at the floating gauzy clouds or the myriad twinkling stars and moonlight on a clear Buddha's Purnima night when the world all around is bewitchingly transmuted into an enchanted fairyland garden.

another Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Do I want, do I want my children to live in a sane, serene, civilized society, or do we collapse on the brink of a schizoid and schizophrenic frenzy with concrete jungles and squalid suffocating tenement buildings and noxious lead petrol fumes and horrendous noise pollution and bizarre labyrinthine traffic jams clogging every conceivable street? Who shall answer me, I ask you, who? My democratic government is accountable to me, to every Bangali and must,

should, and I demand that they do, give me an answer to my question?

Did not Joyce Kilmer say, I have never seen a poem as beautiful as a tree? And when I flit between classes from the Arts Faculty to New Market to run necessary errands, I am transported to ecstasies everytime I look up and blink at the majesty and sheer translucent beauty of the spreading foliage of the massive five-hundred years old tree that stands just over the Martyr's Memorial opposite the Honourable

Vice-Chancellor's palatial residence. It is my special secret — I am completely and totally and desperately in love with this tree. It is my tree!

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Shakespeare has his precious retreat, his Forest of Arden, with Rosalind as Ganymede; arbor, arboreal, garden of Eden. We can have it too, right here, right now, with Osmani Uddyan!

Wordsworth has his sycamore and horizon enclosed enclosure in Tintern Abbey; safe, secure, uterine, deep in the womb of nature; secluded, joyous in the floating warm amniotic fluid of Mother Nature. We, too, can have it today, not tomorrow, right now, this instant, any day, and everyday, with our own Earth

Mother — Osmani Uddyan.

So, I say, today, now, sing with me, rejoice and celebrate the song of Nature and join hands in a circle of spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion and reciprocation, in a dance on and over the verdant verdure of Osmani Uddyan. Come! Sing!

The time is not for tears and lamentation, but rejoicing. After all, we are propelled forward into the New Millennium by the force of gravity and time and its momentum.

Remember Yeats and "The Second Coming"? Who knows? Perhaps the final Messiah will be born right here in Dhaka, conceived some night of an amorous couple under the blanket of glittering stars within the canopy of Osmani Uddyan.

poems

The way we are

by Nasimul Haque

1
We believe
1900
The World enters a modern era
We believed
1920
Non-violence is the weapon of the Strong, said Gandhi
We believed
1960's
Green Revolution: People will no longer starve
We believed
1970
This time, our struggle is for liberty and freedom, said Bangabandhu
We believed
1980's
Communism does not work
We believed
1990's
Only one earth: Just Save it
We believe

2
Faith
faith remains hidden in moral statements
afraid of teeming masses of mistrust
Our world has taken many leaps and strides
Nestled in an overgrowth of greed and lust



3
Stranger
Once upon a time there was
a Stranger
Global communication
Strangers no more

4
Uphill
Life begins when it begins
Death arrives always too early
Opportunity only knocks once
The rest is uphill

5
Hurry
Do you know the clock never stops ticking
There are no free lunches
There is a trade-off between right and wrong
If you can get away with it, stealing is a noble profession

And
dreams die hard
So hurry now

6
Alone
The sage said
to go some place
to meditate
alone but never lonely



now
you can be lonely
but can you be alone?

7
justice
(The kingdom of the living was holding court)
Plaintiffs crammed the room everywhere
The accused stood with a dazed blank stare
It was a simple case of self-conviction
mankind becomes a threat to all
and prepares for death by extinction

8
one world
Our planet ages rapidly today
like your meal in the microwave
eat or throw away
tomorrow never matters now

9
The way we are
Ordinary people are less ordinary than we think they are
They get up early and rush to their work
They earn it
They are far too good
Less ordinary ones live and let live
Us who regard to be
Extraordinary
Live and let die
We are what we are

