

NOBEL PRIZE

The enigma of V. S. Naipaul

Naipaul is a very great writer not in his travel writing and studies of other cultures and races but in his novels and his autobiographical writings, says Fakrul Alam

THE first V. S. Naipaul book that I read was *An Area of Darkness* (1964). This was a book about Naipaul's yearlong visit to India and my friend Kaiser Haq, an early Naipaul enthusiast, had recommended the book highly and had lent me his copy. The book fascinated me: the narrative was gripping, the descriptions vivid, the prose eloquent. Following Naipaul as he moved across India, covering Bombay, Kashmir, Kolkata, and other parts of India, including his ancestral home in U. P., made for compelling reading. Here was a man searching for his roots, surveying India from the unique perspective of a not quite outsider, a cosmopolitan Caribbean now resident in England, but of Indian origin trying to fathom out the intricacies of our world. But the book repulsed me too. How could he be so negative about the way we live in the subcontinent, so hypercritical about our people and culture, so cynical and irritating about almost every aspect of our existence? There was a good deal of truth about his observations about Indian life, but it was not the whole truth, and yet he seemed to be writing as if he was absolutely clear-eyed and honest in his reporting.

One paragraph that I read then, almost thirty years ago is still vivid in my memory. Reading it again now, I still feel its sting and capacity to amuse, provoke, and even exasperate me. Here I can only reproduce it in a short extract:

Indians defecate everywhere. They defecate, mostly beside the railway tracks. But they also defecate on the beaches; they defecate on the river banks; they defecate on the streets; they never look for cover. Muslims, with their tradition of purdah, can at times be secretive. But this is a religious act of self-denial, for it is said that the peasant, Muslim or Hindu, suffers from claustrophobia if he has to use an enclosed latrine (70).

Naipaul then goes on to offer an explanation of the phenomenon: "the truth is that Indians do not see these squatters and might even, with complete sincerity deny they exist: a collective blindness arising

out of the Indian fear of pollution and the resulting conviction that Indians are the cleanest people in the world" (70, his italics). Surely, there is an attempt to shock here, and to pass off a partial truth (yes, some Indians do tend to defecate publicly) into the whole truth. But the religious explanation seems to be completely bogus; and the great powers of observation and the careful structuring of the sentences are wasted because of the generalizations that they lead to. After all, there is much more involved here than claustrophobia; the conclusion arrived at is facile and hardly worthy of the mind that has produced such effective descriptions of many aspects of Indian life! I remember communicating my dismay to Kaiser after having finished *An Area of Darkness*. His response was to direct me to Nissim Ezekiel's review of the work reprinted in the 1974 Penguin anthology *Indian Writing in English* where he said I would find a corroboration of my views. Ezekiel, one of the leading Indian writers in English and someone who would eventually win the Sahitya Akademi award and the Padma Shri, is scathing in his review of the Caribbean-Indian writer's book. Ezekiel appreciates Naipaul's "special gift for the telling detail and the penetrating observation based on it". He is even willing to concede Naipaul's many "condemnatory argument," although they are "fiercely expressed" But Ezekiel points out that Naipaul is trying to pass off a subjective, even "self-righteous", viewpoint as objective reporting. Indeed, the Indian writer insinuates that the West Indian one was carrying his own hell with him in depicting the shortcomings of India and Indians. Moreover, he indicates that Naipaul is arrogant about his ability to see things and simplistic precisely when he comes up with his complicated explanations of why, among other things, somenot allIndians defecate in public places. With great precision, Ezekiel locates Naipaul's problems as a reporter of India: the great novelist's penchant for "reckless generalization, his grotesque exaggeration, his nagging, irritable" personality (89), his inadequate sampling which is the basis of his sweeping conclusion, and his *a priori* assumptions based on his innumerable prejudices. This, then, was a central enigma about Naipaul: how could such a gifted writer be so murky in his reporting?

What Ezekiel says about an *Area of Darkness* is also largely true of a lot of the travel writing Naipaul did subsequently. Books such as *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977), *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (1981); and *Beyond Belief* (2001) all show flashes of brilliance and reveal a master of narrative and shrewd delineator of people and setting, but these are gifts of the writer of fiction. In his travel writing and exposes of India and Islam Naipaul constantly overstates, overgeneralizes and quite often misrepresents and even distorts what he comes across. As Edward Said has observed, after reading his books on Islam the question that occurs to a reader of Naipaul's Islamic journeys is "how could a man of such intelligence and gifts as V. S. Naipaul write so stupid and boring a book". It also appears to me that there is a great deal of truth in Said's view that Naipaul deliberately plays into the minds of western readers in perpetuating stereotypes about Islam.

Ezekiel's comments about Naipaul's rendition of India and what Said has observed about his depiction of Islam (and what Walcott has written about his representations of the West Indies and Achebe of his portraits of Africa) appear to me to be tough-minded but accurate assessments of the writer. To put it somewhat differently, Naipaul's greatness does not reside in these books, although all of them have their moments of brilliance. Surely, works which seem to harbor deep-rooted prejudices against nations and religions and books which at times appears to be deficient in humanity should not be considered for the highest literary honor. This is why the following part of the Nobel citation about *Beyond Belief* strikes

me as essentially wrong: "His travel books allow witnesses to testify at every turn, not least in his powerful descriptions of the eastern regions of the Islamic world...The author's acuity finds expression in the acuity of his ear" Surely, Said is right about

his achievement as a novelist. The two novels by Naipaul that it singles out, *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) and *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) are masterpieces of 20th century fiction, and for these works alone Naipaul deserved the Nobel



V.S. Naipaul: A singular writer

Naipaul's lack of objectivity and antipathy to Islam and the Nobel Prize Committee wrong!

Nevertheless, I was happy to hear that Naipaul was awarded the Nobel prize this year. If the Nobel Prize Committee was wrong in appreciating the writer's "acuity" in his latest book on Islam, it is undoubtedly right in its assessment

Prize many years ago. And surely, the citation accompanying the award, distinguishing him "for having united perceptive narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compels us to see the presence of suppressed lives", and is easily applicable to these two novels. The suppressed life that *A House for Mr. Biswas* focuses on brilliantly

is Mohun Biswas, a Trinidadian Brahmin who struggles to be himself despite the multiple pressures overwhelming him. The pressures come from his origins in a minority community in the West Indies, from the constraints imposed on him by his own people, the domineering family that he marries into, and the necessity to find a vocation, and a house of his own. Modeled on Naipaul's journalist-father's progress through life, and autobiographical in the relationship it depicts between Mr. Biswas and his son Anand, *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a humane and wise book, serious and comic at the same time. Throughout the narrative, Mr. Biswas appeals to us as a victim, an eccentric, as well as an almost tragic hero. Mohun Biswas's journey to selfhood and a career that will give him the satisfaction that he craves and is worthy of his intelligence, and his modest achievement in transforming himself from a loser to someone who is able at least to leave a legacy of freedom for his son as well as create a space for himself is admirable. Moreover, the writing is brilliant; here, as elsewhere, Naipaul distinguishes himself as a master of English prose in addition to staking a claim for himself in the great tradition of fiction in English.

Like *An Area of Darkness*, I had found *A House for Mr. Biswas* to be compelling reading, even though I had been ultimately put off by the tone of the former work and had been continuously impressed by the latter one. I found *The Enigma of Arrival*, however, to be a difficult book, but one that repaid the demands that it had made on me. I read it while working on an essay on Nirad Chaudhuri's search for a home once he had made the move away from Bengal, first from Kishoregang and then from Kolkata. Though on the surface these two writers had little in common, it appeared to me that they shared a great deal in their move to England, their diasporic consciousness, and their endless search for roots. Both of them are also intensely literary. Moreover, both of them were of "the

resident alien" category of people. Chaudhuri had settled in England, but was forever drawn to the Bengal he had left behind, even when he seemed to be repulsed by it. Naipaul had "arrived" in England, but his was an "enigmatic arrival" and he was destined to wander the world endlessly and to India in particular to search for the home he never had or would have never liked to have. Chaudhuri had settled in Oxford so that he could be as close as possible to the "timeless England" he had loved since his boyhood reading of Shakespeare and that he felt had fertilized Bengali literature; Naipaul had settled in a suburban house where he too could be close to the "ancient heart of England" and the English tradition to which he appeared to have affiliated himself in his writings. In other words, while these two writers had made England their home, they were not drawn to the contemporary world that they lived in, although both had found repose in Britain for their minds and the bodies.

However, Naipaul had a much more complicated vision of himself than had Chaudhuri of being an outsider in Britain. For example, he concludes that his presence in the landscape is a sign that England was being reshaped by a contemporary diaspora. As the Nobel Committee's citation notes: what Naipaul is registering through his exploration of England is "the placid collapse of the old ruling culture and the demise of European neighborhoods". Chaudhuri, on the other hand, refuses to see himself in relation to contemporary England in any way, dismissing it outright except for its welfare state trappings that he finds useful.

I should also add that I have no doubt that Naipaul is a much greater writer than Chaudhuri and that the comparison between the two cannot be pushed too far. Not only is Naipaul's range of interest much wider, and not only has he mastered all the major forms of English prosenovels, travel writing, history, autobiography, and the occasional

essayhe is also much more of a voyager into his own self in books such as *The Enigma of Arrival* and *Finding the Centre* (1984) than Chaudhuri was capable of being. Indeed, although *The Enigma of Arrival* is officially designated as a novel, it is really about Naipaul's impulse to locate himself in space and time as a phenomenon of 20th century, postimperial history.

Naipaul, then, is a very great writer not in his travel writing and studies of other cultures and races but in his novels and his autobiographical writings. He has earned his Nobel Prize through this works for there is much to admire in his fiction and self-explorations. But the Naipaul who presents himself as a conservative, fastidious, and truth-telling traveler is a less than agreeable and believable person. Why such an extraordinarily gifted writer could be so jaundiced in these works is, to me, the ultimate enigma posed by Naipaul, and it is something that continues to bother me even as I attempt to conclude my reflections on the Nobel Award that he has so richly deserved.

Fakrul Alam is professor of English at The University of Dhaka. Author of *Daniel Defoe: Colonial Propagandist* (University of Dhaka Publications, 1989), *Bharati Mukherjee* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), and *Jibanananda Das: Selected Poems* (Dhaka: University Press Ltd. 1998), he has also published essays on English and American, Literature and South Asian writing in English at home and abroad.



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Honking in jubilation

Naipaul's writing was a form of auto-psychoanalysis through which he was trying to come to grips with his complex cultural inheritance, says Kaiser Haq

I had long hoped that VS Naipaul would win the Nobel. When it went to Derek Walcott in 1992 – an unexcusable choice – I thought it unlikely that I would live to see it go to another writer of Caribbean origin. And so when a friend got me on my mobile as I was driving home later in the evening of 11th October and said Naipaul had just become the latest (100th it so happens) Nobel laureate, I felt like honking in jubilation. Only a win by RK Narayan (supposing he hadn't died) could have made me any happier.

I discovered Naipaul's work quite fortuitously. In 1966 my father returned from a year's British Council sponsored sojourn in London with several book club editions packed into his trunk. Two of them were readable but forgettable thrillers. One was *Full Tilt* by Dervla Murphy, a travel writer of some repute. The fourth, a "Book of the Month" selection, was Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness*. The photograph on the back flap of the dust jacket showed the author in his prime, but the now-famous grimace was already in place. A cigarette casually held between two fingers (this was long before he switched to snuff) sent up tendrils of smoke. Later it would remind me of Mallarmé who used to puff on a cigarette at his Tuesday evening salons – "to put up a screen between the world and myself."

I devoured the book and have reread it several times since, and never without a large measure of pleasure. I loved the scalpel-sharp prose, the pointed observations. The charge of unfairness, snobbery and prejudice levelled against it do not carry much weight with me, even though I can agree with every point made by Nissim Ezekiel in his essay "Naipaul's India and Mine," perhaps the most thorough and best-written critique of the text. Ezekiel's shortcoming lies in not realizing that Naipaul's writing was a form of auto-psychoanalysis through which he was trying to come to grips with his complex cultural inheritance.

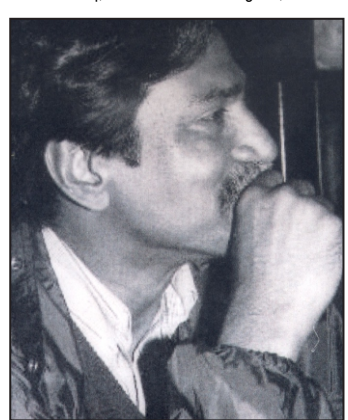
An Area of Darkness was merely the product of the initial analytical session, so to speak. There have since been two more books on India, and several essays. The second book, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, is recording a visit during the Emergency, is the briefest and bleakest the third India: a Million Mutinies, is the longest and most generous. I do not see any opposition between Naipaul's current view of India and his earlier view; one has evolved out of the other, and concomitantly Naipaul has come to terms with a larger area

of his own psyche. Much of what seems harsh in *An Area of Darkness* is self-laceration, and coexists with the humane and affectionate portrayal of people and places in the section "A Doll's House on Dal Lake," which to me is an ironic idyll. Significantly, near the end of Naipaul's last book on India he visits the same places and the same people, the mercurial Aziz, the stolid Mr Butt, Aziz's son Nazir has a foreign pen friend, a girl, and may well visit her one day. His world is bigger than his father's, holding out more possibilities.

Naipaul has also been criticized for his slighting comments on the region of his birth, the Caribbean. In this he has been like the late Nirad Chaudhuri. Here it is important to maintain a distinction between his comments in his own person, and his fictional works set in the Caribbean. Of the latter, all but one are among the most delightful comic novels and stories in contemporary literature e.g., "Miquel Street," "The Mystic Masseur," "Mr Biswas."

As for Naipaul's criticism of the Muslim world, which has put many backs up, much of it is no different from what intelligent Muslims say, at least among themselves. Besides, Naipaul readily acknowledges that not all that long ago the Muslim world represented the "universal civilisation" of the time.

All this is not to say that Naipaul is not provocative. If he wasn't he wouldn't be half as interesting. But more than the charges usually laid at his door I am more concerned about an aspect of his style. For some time now he has been trying to write in what he calls a "brambly," style. The result has not always been felicitous, in *A Way in the World* for instance, or *Beyond Belief*. But then, what they lack is more than made up for in his recent masterpiece, *An Enigma of Arrival*. Kaiser Haq, Professor of English, Dhaka



University, and a poet and translator. His latest collection *The Logopoeic Reviewers Song* is shortly forthcoming from UPL and Aark Arts.

V. S. Naipaul: Hindu revivalist?

V. S. Naipaul is revealing himself more and more as a born-again Hindu revivalist. This is the source of my disillusionment, my main gripe against him, says Shawkat Hussain

MY immediate response to the news of V. S. Naipaul getting the Nobel Prize for Literature was one of relief. Many of us had expecting this to happen for at least a decade. I was more relieved than happy to see the big prize—for which writers big and small pine for all their lives—finally going to a writer whose work I was familiar with, whom I have been reading for the last twenty-five years, and whose life and career I have been following with some interest.

Strangely enough, my response was not one of elation. From being an eager, admiring reader (in the 1970s and 1980s) I realized that I had become a less admiring, less tolerant, and more critical reader. One week before the Nobel Prize was announced I came across Naipaul's latest book, *Half a Life* in a bookstore in Hyderabad, leafed through the book for a few seconds, and impulsively bought another book written by a much lesser writer, Upamanyu Chatterjee's *The*

Mammaries of the Welfare State. I didn't know then that Paul Theroux had panned Naipaul's book as "clumsy, unbelievable, badly written, willful and weird." I had my own reasons. I was a little surprised by my own choice but realized that I was betraying a certain disillusionment.

The first Naipaul book that I read was *A House for Mr Biswas*. As a student of English Literature, my discovery of an "Indian" writer who wrote so marvelously was tremendously exhilarating. That he wrote from and about the post-colonial condition was something I became aware of later. In fact, Naipaul wrote about the post-colonial condition before the term became fashionable, before post-coloniality had been theorized. One after another, I started reading his novels, not necessarily in the order of their publications. *A House for Mr Biswas* was followed by the clutch of novels based on the West Indies—*Miguel Street*, *The Suffrage of Elvira* and all the others. I think I have actually

read all his fiction except *The Enigma of Arrival* and the last one which I now think I should have bought. Now, over forty years after his first novel was published, V. S. Naipaul is revealing himself more and more as a born-again Hindu revivalist. This is the source of my disillusionment, my main gripe against him.

What you see and how you see depends upon where you stand. My favourite Naipaul novel is *A Bend in the River*, a novel that Chinua Achebe dismissed as "pompous rubbish" because Naipaul was writing about Africa from the outside and not writing for Africans. For the last twenty years, since the publication of *Among the Believers* (1981) and recently with *Beyond Belief* (1998), Naipaul has been trying to understand Islam as it is practiced in primarily non-Arab countries like Pakistan, Indonesia and Iran. For a man who is elsewhere so urbane, so funny, so stylish (in his English), so intelligent, so unsentimental, his understanding of Islam appears to

be incredibly narrow and blinkered. It is the vision of a man who has finally found his "center" in a pure form of Hinduism. Naipaul stands and sees from a position that I now find very uncomfortable. There is sweet irony in this, considering that he recently married a Muslim woman from Pakistan.

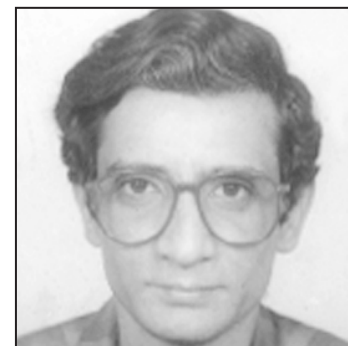
About two years back, I saw V.S. Naipaul in a television interview on Star TV. I sat up straight as soon as the program was announced. I had never before seen a living, talking image of the great writer who had such a secure place in my own personal pantheon of literary gods. When asked a question about the future of India, Naipaul said that the future of India was indeed very bleak, and the only way that the true soul of India could be revived was by reviving the Hindu soul of India. I was thunderstruck. And to think that Naipaul had married a Pakistani woman a couple of years back. Naipaul went on to say India was too full of Islamic monuments, mosques and minars and forts and many

different architectural structures built by Muslim conquerors over the centuries. Order, and India's past glory, could only be restored by obliterating all traces of Islamic influences in India today. That would surely mean the destruction of the Taj Mahal. There is no other conclusion possible from what Naipaul had said on television and written in *Beyond Belief*. One of my literary gods had dethroned himself.

Twice (after this experience) I started reading his *The Enigma of Arrival* and both occasions just couldn't go beyond the first forty pages. This "literary circumnavigator" who began his journey in Trinidad in the West Indies, who settled in England, travelled through Africa, Asia and South America, writes about himself in this autobiographical fiction, and I found this "melodious whine" utterly boring. If Naipaul does not have the time to read Salman Rushdie, and he has not read (as he claims) Paul Theroux's *Sir Vidia's Shadow* about their 30-year old friendship and

falling out, I feel no qualms about giving this masterpiece depicting the collapse of "old colonial ruling culture" a miss.

Certainly, V. S. Naipaul deserves the Nobel Prize for Literature. I am just not as thrilled as I would have been if he were not standing on the ideological ground that now seems to be his center. One cannot but wonder whether the timing of this prize has any significance.



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Rewarding the quintessential outsider

He is a unique literary phenomenon where the periphery looms large in the beginning only to disappear through neglect, even disdain later, says Hasnat Abdul Hye

ON hearing the announcement by the Nobel Prize Committee V. S. Naipaul said, "It is a great tribute to England, my home, and to India, home of my ancestors." The name of Trinidad, the island where he was born or Caribbean the archipelago to which it belongs, was conspicuous by its absence. It was not a verbal lapse or an accident but deliberate. The presence or absence of names of places embodies the dilemma that Naipaul continues to face both as an individual and as a writer. He is the quintessential rootless man, the outsider.

Born, brought up and educated in Trinidad Naipaul started his writing career in the country of his birth. From his first novel, *A Mystic Masseur* (1957) to his critically most acclaimed fourth, *A House For Mr. Biswas* (1961) Trinidad provides the background and the characters. By virtue of birth and long association the Caribbean was his natural habitat as a writer of fiction. But he turned his back to the region because of perceived cultural limitations and paradoxically looked towards the colonial centre. He had already learnt the language of the Metropolis, the standard English, in contrast to Creolised English, but unlike Caliban he had no intention to

use it against the colonial master. V. S. Naipaul's persona and his literary oeuvre cannot be understood simply by the colonial and post-colonial dichotomy. He is a unique literary phenomenon where the periphery looms large in the beginning only to disappear through neglect, even disdain later. But the irony is that though he has spent almost fifty years, off and on, in England using its language with aplomb, he has been unable to relate to and identify with the traditional values of the erstwhile colonial power.

While other Commonwealth writers were engaged in building a national literature, Naipaul the outsider, simply reinvented himself as different. Though touted as the inheritor of Dickensian tradition he was unable to draw inspiration from the life of the people of the centre. As a result he experimented with forms, crossing the borders between fiction and non-fiction. Almost in desperation to survive as a writer he traveled and spent time in Africa and India in search of themes. In *A Bend in the River* (1979) written during his sojourn in Africa, Dickens gave way to Conrad but Mobutu in his pseudonym, "Big Man" is a pale shadow of Mr. Kurtz. It became obvious to many that though Naipaul was writing about

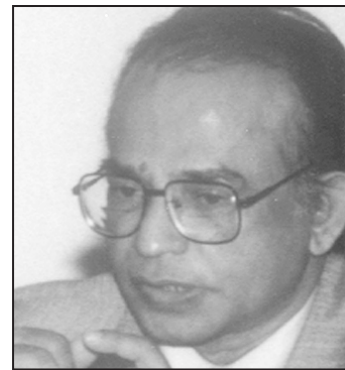
Africa he was not writing for Africans.

Naipaul undertook many travels abroad the most important of which was in India which he visited several times. During his first visit to India which resulted in *"India: An Area of Darkness"* (1964), he failed to discover the moral integrity of India and came back with memories of only disease and poverty. But after his later visits he started admiring India and accused the British Raj and the Islamic conquest for her underdevelopment. He carried his hate for Islam further when he visited countries like Indonesia and wrote *"Among the Believers"* (1981).

Alienation from roots has cost Naipaul the writer in many ways. One manifestation of this is his use of humour or satire directed at the folk culture of the Caribbean and also of India. By preferring an authoritative language for most of his narrators and by invoking the largely colonial view of the "folk" Naipaul indulges in exploitation of the crudely obvious contradictions between folk (e.g. Creole) and other languages, particularly standard English. This is in sharp contrast with the post-colonial tradition of varying uses of languages as a device to abrogate the centrality of the language of the colonial power. By continually allowing the narrator

to speak standard English Naipaul continues to privilege the centre over the periphery. Like another Anglophile, Nirad C. Choudhuri, Naipaul has been duly rewarded for his cultural and intellectual obsequiousness with a Knighthood. And now comes the Nobel Prize at a time when the world is awash with the words "clash of civilizations". The Nobel Prize committee of literature has a canny sense of timing!

Hasnat Abdul Hye studied economics at London



Schools of Economics and Cambridge University. After teaching Economics at Dhaka University, he joined civil service from which he retired recently. His publications include 22 novels, four collections of short stories, six travelogues and two books on essays. He received Bangla Academy Award (1977) and Ekusshay Padak (1995).

Glad that it happened

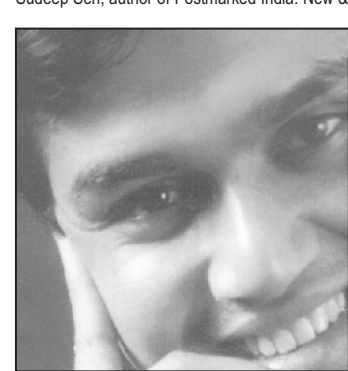
The popularity and critical acclaim Indian writing in English has enjoyed in the recent past will be further enhanced by this event, says Sudeep Sen

V. S. Naipaul's award of the '2001 Nobel Prize for Literature' elicits in me, a response at two distinct levels – personal and critical.

As a writer who straddles both India and Britain, I am, of course, delighted and overjoyed at someone winning the ultimate laureate-ship from a pan-Indian background. The popularity and critical acclaim Indian writing in English has enjoyed in the recent past will be further enhanced by this event, a fact that can only be good for us from this region.

On a critical level, I am not at all surprised – it was just a question of time. My only curiosity was – how long would the Swedish Academy take before deciding when to bestow the prize on Sir Vidia. I am glad that it has happened sooner, rather than later. I first encountered Naipaul's work as a young adult. *A House for Mr Biswas* was one of my prescribed undergraduate texts. Over the years I have followed his non-fiction quite keenly as well. I've seen how he has transformed as a person and how his stance on India has metamorphosed from an acerbic to a balanced one – to the point that he

now calls it his "ancestral home". Not just India I have travelled with him to various parts of the world through the fastidious textual narratives he has woven over a remarkable career. They are all at the same time lucid, opinionated, intelligent, and bears the unmistakable personal signature of VSN. As an avid reader, one is bound to be overjoyed at Naipaul winning the Nobel – and when that feeling happens to be extreme and overwhelming, then one also knows the strength and value of that emotion. Sudeep Sen, author of *Postmarked India: New &*



Selected Poems (HarperCollins)