

NOBEL PRIZE

# Naipul's cruel and demeaning laughter

The sense of discomfort that Naipaul creates is evoked by the image of the colonised laughing along with the colonisers at his own people, says **Firdous Azim**

I remember the first V.S. Naipaul novels that I had read *Suffrage at Elvira* or *A House for Mr Biswas*. I laughed as I was meant to, but beyond the sparkling humour I felt uncomfortable, as though the joke was on me. And that is the feeling that persists with V.S. Naipaul's writings - a feeling of discomfort. My favourite novel by him is *A Bend in the River*, with one of the most brilliant opening passages that one can hope to come across in English writing. In a few paragraphs, the reader is taken into the physical and social world of the novel. An unflinching eye for evocative detail is what makes the prose so expressive and so telling. But as I went through the novel, the bleakness of the political scene, and the bleakness of that one affair that the protagonist has brings back that uncomfortable feeling. Especially in the portrayal of the affair, there is a sharp sexism and coldness that creates a sense of great unease.

And that is the feeling that I am left with about the writer winning the Nobel Prize for literature this year. Surely the prize is long overdue for this brilliant practitioner of English prose, but I am left wondering about

the timing of this award - this year 2001. A Caribbean by birth, and Indian in origin, V.S. Naipaul has spent the greater part of his life in England. He is emblematic of the post-colonial writer, uncertain of origins and belonging to different worlds. The search for home is expressed through his writings, and his explorations in India have evoked perhaps a very genuine and honest expression of disappointment. *In An Area of Darkness*, where surprisingly he found the Shiv Sena worthy of praise.

Discomfort as a literary device has been used in many ways to defamiliarise and hence draw attention to what has been elided over by dominant ideologies. This is the method of alienation that Brecht uses in his plays. But the sense of discomfort that Naipaul creates is evoked by the image of the colonised laughing along with the colonisers at his own people. It is a cruel but at the same time a demeaning laughter.

It is his writings on Islam that have brought the most criticism. Why should he write about peoples and a faith about which he knows so little and for which he can express

only disdain and contempt. His 'researches' into the area in *Among the Believers* (and I have not read *Beyond Belief*) are sketchy indeed, and express a cold disdain and distance from the subject under scrutiny. The most (in)famous critic of Islam is Salman Rushdie, but Rushdie's satirical eye is born out of an engagement and an iconoclasm that comes out of being involved. There is no coldness and distance in that satirical rendition, and makes for wonderful reading indeed! Whereas with Naipaul's writings on Islam, the question of the purpose of his writing springs up all the time - is this an effort to denigrate the antagonist in the contemporary 'clash of civilisations'? There is no effort at the method of alienation that Brecht uses in his plays, and it does read like a denigration and a putting down.

The conferring of the prize on V.S. Naipaul may act as a further boost to Indian or what has come to be known (mistakenly, I think) as 'post-colonial' writings in English. To go back to an old-fashioned nineteenth-century view of looking at novels as a communication between reader and writer as a fashioning of community - I really wonder about the community that

V.S. Naipaul is addressing. Peripatetic and floating, the cold eye that it casts over its subjects hardly has the effect of drawing the reader into a sense of society and community. And neither does it make the audience sit up and look at issues afresh and draw the contours of a new society and community.



Firdous Azim is a professor of English at University of Dhaka. Her areas of special interest are post-colonialism and feminism. She is the author of a book entitled *The Colonial Rise of the Novel* (1993) which looks at the way that literary forms and political considerations of domination and control mesh together.

BOOK REVIEW

# Transcending tongues, translating poetry: A labour of love and friendship

*Love & Other Poems* by the Bangladeshi poet Aminur Rahman, which has been edited & translated by the Indian poet Sudeep Sen (London: Ark Arts, 2001), is a fine example of creative engagement of two poets that is born out of friendship. It is also a testimony to the fact that so much can be quietly and positively achieved in the sphere of cross-border Indo-Bangla political relationship through literature, ideas, and culture

ZIAUL KARIM

**L**OVE & Other Poems is a result of two poet-friends getting together regularly to discuss their works and in the process discovering each other's poetry, their inherent cadence, rhythm, and sensibility. The interactive poetic journey began with Aminur Rahman translating Sudeep Sen's English poems into Bangla -- *Ekti Khali Chithi* or *A Blank Letter* -- that was published by the Indian High Commission in Dhaka to immense critical acclaim. Now a year or so later, it has culminated in Sudeep translating Aminur's Bangla poems into English.

The poems that feature in 'The Sculpture' section dwell on how a lover constructs his beloved's image in his mind. The title poem of this section is a wonderfully imaginative description of how a lover sculpts the shape of his lover from "the mist's dense cape." He gradually discovers that the "same hands, / the same lips, the same eyes / I find them with such ease/Your torso floats on that river; / I shall conquer its flow".

The penultimate poem of *Love & Other Poems*, 'Solitary Dependence', begins with: "Very little, can hurt me these days, / my grief's address lives on forever". This grieving voice makes a continuous effort to understand and recognize

mind." What Aminur Rahman has achieved in his poems is to give us a series of tender and sensitive verses about the drama of loving, about the complex emotions evoked by being in love, and about the mood associated with love and rejection.

The editor and translator, Sudeep Sen, born of Bengali parents knows Bengali very well, and is a very accomplished English-language poet. But still he emphasizes the importance of a collaborative effort, "I think the best translations occur when two poets get together who have their own language areas of expertise. In this case, we had an added blessing in that we knew each other's primary language of writing as well. So, while

personal opinion, a creative (and true) translator does not become the dominant voice in the translations. And good translation ought to read as poems that were originally written in that target language, whatever that language may be. Now I know that this is an ideal scenario. But a lot can be done to a poem in this wonderful crossing of tongues, especially if one were to do justice to the original work. If the translator becomes a sort of invisible magical wand and transfers the overt language of the poem from the 'source language' to the 'target language', but retains every other aspect of the original poem's cadence, texture, rhythm, and meaning -- then I think the translation is both valid and

# A student's guide to V.S. Naipaul

Naipaul in my imagination was one from his own fiction: the picture of a young boy standing alone outside a hut in a bleak and empty landscape, says **Radha Chakravarty**

**A**S we weave our way through Dhaka traffic, the voice on the car radio announces the winner of this year's Nobel Prize for literature V. S. Naipaul. The effect is electrifying. Surprise gives way to satisfaction: this "Trinidad-born British writer" is tied to us by his Indian ancestry. I relish the thought. He's one of us, the second Indian to win the Nobel Prize after Rabindranath Tagore. My heart flies out to my students back home in India, the class that has been studying *A House for Mr. Biswas* as a prescribed college text. I imagine their excitement, phone lines buzzing with their shared triumph their very own VSN has won the Nobel Prize!

Their very own VSN. That sets me wondering. Those students of mine are girls, not yet twenty, reading for a degree in English literature at a women's college in Delhi. They are young, bright, sensitive and full of questions. The Naipaul they read, love, hate, wrestle with and feel they know so well... is he the same Naipaul now lauded by the Swedish Academy "for having united perceptible narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories"? Not quite. Somehow, I can't imagine my girls mouthing those weighty words, or at least, not spontaneously. (Now, of course, things have changed forever. The words of the Academy citation will be enshrined in study-aids and guide books, to be memorized and regurgitated by countless batches of examinees looking for a way in the academic world.) It's not for suppressed histories that my students turn to Naipaul, but for fiction, inventiveness, and pages of writing brimful of life.

Not that these young readers are uncritical. They find Naipaul's language hard to get used to at first, though by now they have learned to enjoy the special feel of a style in which the average word, by the writer's own admission, is four letters long. They are less than comfortable with Naipaul's female characters. As women, they display a special sensitivity to his treatment of relationships between the sexes. His handling of religious issues leaves them distinctly uneasy. (Early in our reading of the prescribed novel, much of our class discussion centres around the importance accorded to Mr. Biswas's inauspicious sneeze. Could Naipaul really be so superstitious? Should we count him among the believers, or is he a heretic beyond belief? The class is evenly divided. We end up arguing about the validity of weekly astrological predictions in newspapers. The lesson teaches us more about ourselves and our own biases, but leaves us no wiser about Naipaul.)

A major cause of anxiety, of course, remains Naipaul's less than flattering depictions of the cultures of the subcontinent. No reader from this region could fail to detect the areas of darkness that cloud his vision. To Edward Said, for example, Naipaul represents "a marked man as a purveyor of stereotypes and disgust for the world that produced him." But that doesn't quite capture the response of my pupils to the sharp satirical voice of *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Caste hierarchies, superstition, the risks of an arranged marriage, the hazards of life in a Hindu joint family, growing consumerism, fierce competition between parents of children taking school examinations... the setting

may be Trinidad in the first half of the twentieth century, but to my students in twenty-first century Delhi, much of the scenario is instantly familiar. The recognition may be unsettling, but with the odd wry grimace or giggle, the girls in my class acknowledge its accuracy. (A comment, perhaps, on their capacity for honest self-criticism, or on the postcolonial critic's frequent lack of it?)

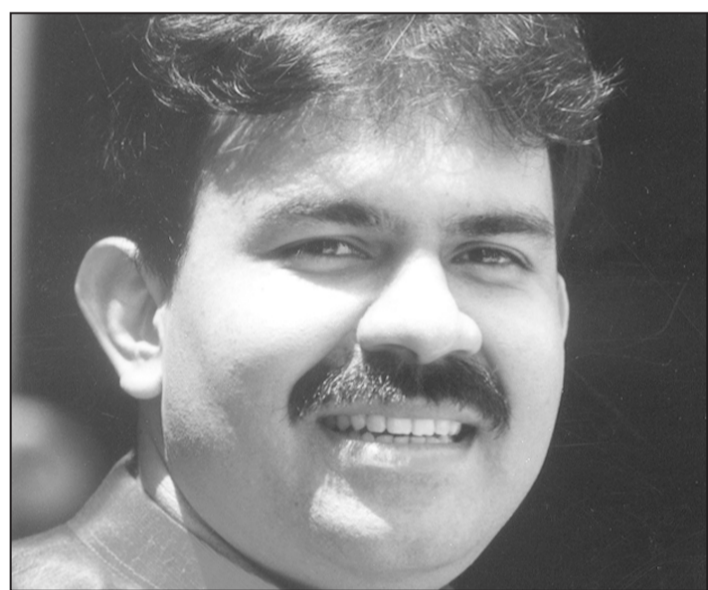
Naipaul's consistent refusal to wear rose-tinted glasses has earned him many enemies. A million critical and personal mutinies are currently brewing against him in response to the Nobel Prize announcement (an ill-timed event perhaps in the context of the September 11 catastrophe). But then, Naipaul is no stranger to controversy, the very element he thrives in. His purported "repulsion towards Negroes" has drawn the wrath of Derek Walcott, his alleged attacks on "converted" Islamic nations have outraged members of the Muslim community, and his perceived betrayal has alienated his one-time disciple and friend Paul Theroux, who castigates his latest book, *Half a Life*, as "badly written, willful and weird." I suspect though, that in each of these Naipaulian *avatars* the direct young gaze of my students would detect only half a truth, a caricatured half-face with the other half tantalizingly hidden from view. For the half-face revealed to us is more often than not a mask, the embittered oracular voice the ventriloquism of a practiced performer.

Which brings me to the question of "suppressed histories" in Naipaul's work. When I was a young reader, the abiding image of Naipaul in my imagination was one from his own fiction: the picture of a young

boy standing alone outside a hut in a bleak and empty landscape. An enigma waiting to arrive. A shell of bitterness to hide a lasting loneliness, a deep sense of insecurity and unbelonging. Personal trauma and cultural alienation masquerading as public history.

Shortly before I travelled to Dhaka this time, I asked my class to submit a written assignment on Naipaul. One girl came to me and confessed she hadn't done her work. "I'm not ready to write yet," she said. "I need to re-read my Naipaul. Maybe I missed something important." Eyeing her with the sceptical gaze of a teacher accustomed to lame excuses, I realized she was sincere, and genuinely distressed. I gave her more time. Her assignment is still awaited, but in the meantime, the Nobel Prize has happened, and for the readers of Naipaul, nothing will ever be the same again. Reading the Swedish Academy citation, I feel something of the same anxiety that my student had expressed. This Naipaul, the writer of "united perceptive narrative", "incorruptible scrutiny", "the annalist of the destinies of empires," is this the Naipaul that I have always known? The little boy in front of a hut, hiding in the larger-than-life costume of a dark comedian out to fool the world? Maybe I have missed something important. I think I need to re-read my Naipaul. My Naipaul.

Radha Chakravarty teaches English Literature at Gargi College, University of Delhi (India). She is currently working on a cross-cultural study of contemporary women writers. She is also translating the writings of Mahasweta Devi from Bangla into English.



A creative duo Aminur Rahman(L) and Sudeep Sen(R)

meeting a few years ago was entirely accidental. But the common bond was our love for poetry, especially English and Bengali poetry. So, that predictably led to a friendship whose eventual consequence led the collaborative translations -- something I have thoroughly enjoyed over the last couple of years," says Sudeep Sen, who is widely considered as one of the finest younger English-language poets in the international literary scene.

Aminur Rahman feels that a work of translation is just as difficult and demands just as much devotion as writing original work. "Writing a poem is as energy-demanding as translating a poem," says Rahman. A sensitive poet, Aminur's verse is well crafted and measured. He paints from a rich palette of imagination and constructs his poetry just like a potter's fingers that give shape to a lump of clay. Though his poetry does not deal with a wide variety of subjects, it discovers the multifarious aspects of love itself. His poems are very much what Geoffrey Grigson identifies as 'in-love poems' in his introduction to *The Faber Book of Love Poems* (1973). 'In-love' poems, Grigson explains, are poems about being 'in love', and about the drama of 'I and you.'

Every line of Aminur's poems spring from delicate in-love situations, and he treats the variety of in-love scenes with care and sensitivity. He stitches his metaphors, words, and phrases as intricately as a Persian carpet is woven. Short and crisp, exterior and interior landscape of Aminur's poetry echo the Imagist poets' economy of words and dexterity of word-choice.

The first poem in *Love & Other Poems* is titled 'Love: 1'. It is about the state when a lover feels that his life is aimless and a waste of time without being in love. The speaker in the poem realizes: "Without understanding/without giving/my heart is stiff..." In the second poem, 'Love: 2', he speaks of making a choice about one's imagined lover. In this volume, the poems have been arranged in two sections: 'Love & Life', and 'The Sculpture'.

**AMINUR RAHMAN'S POEMS**

LOVE : 1  
I am a lowly poet,  
a picture without colour  
lifeless.

After touching you, returns  
to my lips

But still it seems  
some of it is given and some not.  
Love still remains  
in your heart.

LOVE : 2  
With eyes closed  
I make a diamond-choice  
My heart is blissful  
Though everything is lost

LOVE : 3  
You love me quietly,  
why then the abruptness  
in you?

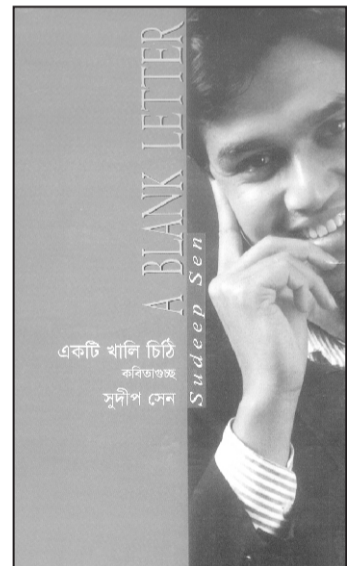
LOVE : 4  
with  
nightmares the  
one can days  
live reasonably. pass  
memories  
fail to  
last.

LOVE : 5  
My heart's sky contains you, Nilima  
A star beyond the galaxy  
A lotus in the river  
Emerging as a new woman.

LOVE : 6  
Love flies away  
flies, flies to touch you

understood the nuances in Aminur Rahman's Bengali poems, I was very consciously translating them as an English-language poet using a contemporary idiom.

"And this above fact is very important", emphasises Sen. "We have seen time and time again, that translations made by poets largely equipped with one language and/or academic translators weighed down by jargon, often come up with prosaic stultified renditions of the origi-



Aminur Rahman's *Love & Other Poems*, and Sudeep Sen's *A Blank Letter* are available at 'Aranya', 60 Kemal Ataturk Avenue, Banani. Tel: 9882542

accurate, and hopefully enjoyable." Aminur Rahman's earlier translations of Kazuko Shirashi's Japanese poems have received critical acclaim. He thinks that creative engagements, like the one with Sudeep are immensely fruitful for him: "When two creative souls work together, what they are doing is inspiring each other. Working together also enhances team-spirit which I think is very positive for creative writers who otherwise tend to be quite solitary."

Author of *Postmarked India: New & Selected Poems* (HarperCollins) that was awarded the Hawthornden Fellowship (UK) and nominated for a Pushcart Prize (USA), Sudeep Sen who now divides his time between London, Dhaka and New Delhi. He finds his Dhaka sojourn very creative and fruitful, "I have already translated some Jibanananda Das and Shamsur Rahman, and edited the English translations of Hayat Sai's Bengali poems. In addition, I have just finished a huge 250-page long project titled *Modern English Poetry from Bangladesh*. This anthology, to be published by University Press Limited, will be the very first of its kind to appear in this country. It maps and presents poets of this country who write (or have written) English-language poetry, starting from the 1920s to the present times."

Experiencing *Love & Other Poems* is to feel the intensity evoked when one is in love. And in reading Aminur Rahman's delicately embroidered love poems, we discover a passionate poetic sensibility. This Ark Arts volume of poems bears its signature class design and its usual elegant production quality.

Furthermore, the Sudeep-Aminur collaboration is a fine example of creative engagement of two poets that is born out of friendship. It is also a testimony to the fact that so much can be quietly and positively achieved in the sphere of cross-border Indo-Bangla political relationship through the medium of literature, ideas, and culture.

Sudeep Sen echoes almost the same spirit when he says, "In my

experience, a creative (and true) translator does not become the dominant voice in the translations. And good translation ought to read as poems that were originally written in that target language, whatever that language may be. Now I know that this is an ideal scenario. But a lot can be done to a poem in this wonderful crossing of tongues, especially if one were to do justice to the original work. If the translator becomes a sort of invisible magical wand and transfers the overt language of the poem from the 'source language' to the 'target language', but retains every other aspect of the original poem's cadence, texture, rhythm, and meaning -- then I think the translation is both valid and

accurate, and hopefully enjoyable." Aminur Rahman's earlier translations of Kazuko Shirashi's Japanese poems have received critical acclaim. He thinks that creative engagements, like the one with Sudeep are immensely fruitful for him: "When two creative souls work together, what they are doing is inspiring each other. Working together also enhances team-spirit which I think is very positive for creative writers who otherwise tend to be quite solitary."

Author of *Postmarked India: New & Selected Poems* (HarperCollins) that was awarded the Hawthornden Fellowship (UK) and nominated for a Pushcart Prize (USA), Sudeep Sen who now divides his time between London, Dhaka and New Delhi. He finds his Dhaka sojourn very creative and fruitful, "I have already translated some Jibanananda Das and Shamsur Rahman, and edited the English translations of Hayat Sai's Bengali poems. In addition, I have just finished a huge 250-page long project titled *Modern English Poetry from Bangladesh*. This anthology, to be published by University Press Limited, will be the very first of its kind to appear in this country. It maps and presents poets of this country who write (or have written) English-language poetry, starting from the 1920s to the present times."

Experiencing *Love & Other Poems* is to feel the intensity evoked when one is in love. And in reading Aminur Rahman's delicately embroidered love poems, we discover a passionate poetic sensibility. This Ark Arts volume of poems bears its signature class design and its usual elegant production quality.

Sudeep Sen echoes almost the same spirit when he says, "In my

Ziaul Karim edits literature and culture pages of The Daily Star

# The triumph of a post-colonial middlebrow

He makes his readers judge him with the same lack of intellect that he displays, says **Afsan Chaudhury**

**M**IGUEL Street was such a joy when first read. It presented universality within the small world of Trinidad Indians. A wry, funny book, full of surprises and wisdom of ordinary people, it enticed many to explore the next novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* where the street grew up. This is how V.S. Naipaul made a lovely entry into many lives but his exit will be a different affair. It will be so much like the colonials - present, past and imagined - on whom Naipaul has spent so much time writing, thinking and ultimately becoming. A self-declared rootless person he is identified primarily as upholding Western literary notion of the orient. A man who may not have officially embraced the West but at least rejected the Indies, India and all other curry and chapati cultures. It may be co-incidental that he was awarded the Nobel Prize in year when a large part of the Orient is feeling a bit under pressure by a global Western alliance.

many coincidences and too many better writers left unrecognized to think that the award was not a cultural signal to the rest outside the West. It was also kindly nod from the West for a near lifetime of middle-brow reinforcement of what is understood there as the East.

But this isn't an award for being anti-Islam. There are far finer brains to deserve that accolade. While Naipaul is an Islam basher he isn't anti-Muslim. At least he married one though one doesn't want to read any Freudian impulse in that. To be a serious critique of Islam would require a high degree of intellectual competence and even his best friends will not call VSN a serious thinker. He is a good hack who can expand his articles into books and has views that draw emotional reactions from readers of his own level. He is an Indian with an Wiltshire address which is enough to throw most Indians into what many would probably say, "post-colonial ecstasies." Indians love the Non-Resident variety especially the abusive variety. It confirms self views. They also buy books written by this breed, the *raj approved risi*. Naipaul's friends hate him so much that they write books on him. He is a good thing for publisher's to have. Nothing works better when one is

famous, hated and regularly visits the land where his books are sold.

For those of us who are fond of travel writing, his fondness for his own travel books and his claim to their life after death is disconcerting. When he says that the form itself is greater than the novel one becomes distinctly uneasy. But one thing is obvious. That he himself thinks poorly of his novels. Yet many if not most say that (see last issue of literary Star) his travel books aren't really that good at all.

Many of us find him opinionated and pedestrian, trying to be witty and ending up as a windbag. To write in the same category in which Bruce Chatwin did, one of the fine prose stylists in England and English isn't easy. Even Paul Theroux himself is stodgy in comparison to Chatwin. V.S. is a cantankerous geniocrat on the prowl with pots of money and introduction letters to dinner parties where he probably hopes to monopolize the conversation.

Most don't like his travel books because they are journals of wishy-washy half held prejudices. In the end, he sounds surprisingly small minded. He makes his readers judge him with the same lack of intellect that he displays. He forces them to his level.

Yet he is capable of great stuff such as "The Enigma of Arrival", probably his best painting. He stands at a distance from his subject and contemplates rather than pontificate. The beginning appears to be sparked off by the rejection of a novel (?) of the author by a publisher. The writer is almost sad, almost pensive. That sets the tone for a voyage, like the subject of the painting itself from which the title "enigma of arrival" is borrowed, the end of a voyage.

In this book he is an older writer who chases his own dreams and reflections of that dream instead of chasing matters he barely understands. He is bemused instead of a bigot, more amused than angry. He almost recovers his humanity. Perhaps, because its about roots, the self declared rootless man is more placid in this book. After all, it's not about rejection or retribution but acceptance by his neighbour.

Does his oeuvre deserve the Nobel Prize? That is an irrelevant debate but he will be discussed and V.S. Naipaul deserves that. He is worth a chat even if that's a dismissive one.

Afsan Chaudhury is a novelist, poet, documentary film maker and works for The Daily Star