

REVIEW ESSAY

In Defense of V.S. Naipaul

Nora Khan

Few literary figures in recent memory excite such passionate invective as novelist Sir V.S. Naipaul. His public figure, his work, his personal life, all examined in tandem, tend to inspire a uniquely tortured rhetoric. He has been caricatured as a monster, and will never be a darling of the politically correct. Few other writers are judged as completely as a moral failure in the way Naipaul is, and this tendency is baffling. The insistence in popular imagination on Naipaul's "life choices" reveals a prurient, amateurish fascination with him as a celebrity. Joan Didion summed up this attitude: "It is hard not to note a certain turning in the air when V.S. Naipaul is mentioned, a hint of taint... One catches the construction 'brilliant but': brilliant but obsessive, brilliant but reductive..." Out of the murk of commentary that threatens to drown the author's fictional voices, one grudging admission rises without fail: Naipaul is a hugely talented writer. I'd suggest that last phrase be said simply, without a 'but' or an 'although' appended.

To wit, I've spoken with students who have never read Naipaul, but have heard of his reputation -- as a philanderer, as close-minded, as racist -- and have committed to never read his work. In Patrick French's recent authorized biography of Naipaul, *The World is What it Is*, we find that Naipaul is only ever forthright about his life. His frankness, his perceived lack of remorse, cause discomfort. Regardless, why anthologize Naipaul's perceived failings? What is the need to examine the writer before his work? I imagine these impulses are rooted in more than a (disingenuous) desire to admonish him for his infidelities.

Naipaul is, foremost, an ascetic writer, dedicated to seeing the world clearly and without sentimentality. He has often said, "good writers have always looked for truth," and beginning with *The Mystic Masseur* in 1957, he has insisted that he, as a writer, be held to and judged by his word. (It may be just this desire that laid him, eventually, open to attack.) In a decade where violence exists at a remove, Naipaul's constant dedication to "looking directly" is especially important. I approach his work as a literature student, as one looking to his craft for guidance. The poet and critic Robert Hass has noted that Naipaul "is the supreme writer of disenchantment". Indeed, his work rarely provides us with escape. Self-ideation is essential to Naipaul's thinking. The novel, he wrote, is what gives modern society the best sense of itself, its mission; when he encountered Argentina, he wrote the country hadn't yet a



photo: internet

"sense of itself." Naipaul had a clear conception of himself, according to French: "he depended on the idea of his own singularity." He carved out his own philosophy; he wanted to experience everything: the bad and the good.

I've often turned to his 1979 work, *A Bend in the River*, for intellectual succor. Salim comes as an Indian to a nameless town on a river in Africa; he remains anonymous as ideologies, regimes, pass through. The African students reach for an urbanity that their former colonial village life has not equipped them to understand. Naipaul has knowledge of this reality. Anyone familiar with African history can attest to the dictators, regimes, and countries depicted, trying to construct an exalted past. The panoply of injustice and suffering in the town are demonstrated in bare terms, without the comfort of anesthetics. This

is pure writing, and true. When Indar says, in his great monologue, that he doesn't want to be on the "wrong side", he is not expressing a desire to disavow his skin color but to confound the expectations that he serve his "origins," that he exalts what he does not feel can be exalted, that he be a Third World triumphalist. A famous Caribbean writer ventured that the only people who support Naipaul are "Western people, right-wing people," that Naipaul supports the West's "idea" of itself as superior. I must respectfully disagree. Such statements about "Western people" are hopelessly un-nuanced. Naipaul's scorn is for all who maintain destructive systems of delusion. One only needs to think of his caricature of the Afrophile in *Bend*, who flees to the U.S. laden with crates of African artifacts to form "the nucleus of a gallery of primitive art." Elsewhere he scorns the "revolutionaries who visit centres of revolution with return air tickets," who only "celebrate their own security." Naipaul is passionate to denounce hypocrisy - a serious moral project. In light of his work, the fact that his relationships with women invite the scrutiny reserved for, say, the Pope, seems absurd. He was married to Patricia Hale and kept a lover, Margaret; French describes how Hale never got a wedding ring, how Margaret was worn down by Naipaul's extended periods of inattention. These are complex women: hurt, intelligent, emotive. Anyone with a pulse is sympathetic to them. Yet Tolstoy, Melville, Dickens: all these novelists were enmeshed with long-suffering women who unfortunately endured unspeakable self-sacrifice in support of their husbands. This is not to say this type of sacrifice is acceptable or desirable. Sickness, perversion, marriage troubles, unhappiness: these are cornerstones of many an artist's personal life. Do we excuse Naipaul's cruelties because of his genius? Of course not; but only because we must recognize we are not in a position, or do not have the power, to excuse or to judge.

Naipaul's belief in a new form of autonomy for the human is liberating. He is a writer who encourages us continually to question, to write about the world with the freedom of a person with no home, no country, no affiliations. His testimony, his witness, set the bar high for writers. V.S. Naipaul changed the way fiction is understood and written, without qualification. As he said so well, "the books have to look after themselves, and they will be around as long as people find that they are illuminating". His books will certainly look after themselves, taking on the personified life of text living on outside and apart from their author.

Nora Khan is a Bangladeshi-American writer living in New Haven, Connecticut.

An Afternoon at the Asia House: Part II

S I AHMED

Four simple chairs draw closer in a semi-circle on the dais and bodies seat themselves. The lead speaker, a patron of the Cultural Committee, focuses on Asia House's achievements, and gives special thanks to the United States Embassy for bringing Daniyal Mueenuddin to the UK! I wonder if Daniyal had been CIA-rendered, kidnapped, locked and unfed, inside a CIA-C-40 container to the UK. The US Embassy website exudes teen gush: "Sometimes this job totally rocks. This week we've taken Daniyal Mueenuddin from his day job..."

After a short introduction Tahmima Anam (her *A Golden Age* won the 2008 Commonwealth Overall Best First Book Award) is handed the mike. Daniyal, shod in trainers and shirttails hanging out of his jeans, reflects hard work, mixed heritage, and the slightly ginger-colored hair of rural Pakistan. He appears to be the Irish of Punjab, expressing himself clearly in an either/or manner ("I like to do this" or "I do not believe in this"). Small gestures had large meanings -- one sees why the short stories are brilliantly strung together in his *In Other Rooms, Other Worlds*.

Kamila Shamsie, seated between the two men, wears a dark Pakistani dress with a wide band of flowers at the neck contrasting with her fair looks. Cool, confident, the epitome of the South Asia convent-educated girl gifted with exceptional literary genes - her mother, Muneeza Shamsie, published the pioneering anthology of Pakistani English writing *A Dragonfly in the Sun*, while a great-aunt, Attia Hussain, penned *Sunlight on a Broken Column* in the 1930s. Kamila is supremely articulate, each reply honed to razor sharpness. Her novelistic ambit has expanded with each book: from the local (Karachi, in *The City by the Sea*, *Kartography*) to national (India, Pakistan and the Partition, *Salt and Saffron*), to the universal (*Burnt Shadows* starts with Nagasaki and ends at Guantanamo).

Nadeem Aslam is a humble, accommodating, engaging, self-absorbed and self-deprecating persona, mixing patience, persistence and a certain poetic stubbornness. To explore was the thing. Being wrong and being right could co-exist as long as art was the final judge. He searches for precise words (his book *Maps for Lost Lovers* took 11 years to write, as he rigorously revised every line, taking five years or so to get the opening chapter right -



out of the first 70 pages he wrote he retained only one sentence in the final book).

The questions, gently started by Tahmima, begin routinely enough, and then continue on to the "What do you think of the crises in Pakistan?" The common reply goes something like, "Yes, there is a crisis, there is corruption but the people are trying hard and we feel hopeful." Similarly, on questions of the country's image, the collective response is, "Where does the image come from? It comes from the Western media, while the same media carries reports that most people think America has the worst terrorism record and yet they like to think that Pakistan's condition is worse." Kamila is the most strident and the least apologetic -- like sunshine in England, apology is a word that would rarely cross her mind. I think they're ducking the issue: Its intelligence services have the dubious distinction of having never solved a single act of terrorism, from the assassination of Benazir to the Lahore attack on Sri Lanka cricketers (over 400 incidents in the past three years, according to agency reports -- all unsolved!)

So, why do they write in English? To Nadeem it is "the water of the pool that I swim in." To Daniyal it is the language he is comfortable in. For Kamila it is a complex inheritance, to be claimed in reverse by Pakistanis like her. Issues of Urdu translations come up, with all having failed to find good translators -- except for Nadeem's father, who's doing it for his son ("Will he do mine?" is asked by the others). Thus their books and voices remain within the world of their choice, but not of their upbringing.

9/11 is central to their work, especially Nadeem and Kamila's. It has been inspired by the tragedy, and characters and events in their books are transformed into a pre- and post-September 2001 setting. Pakistan and Afghanistan, if not the Muslim world, has been irremediably altered and the writers have responded. Nadeem's novel *The Wasted Vigil* is set in Afghanistan, a country whose agonies seem endlessly repeated. Kamila's *Burnt Shadows* is a political thriller that moves from the bombing of Nagasaki in 1945 to the 2001 World Trade Centre attacks. "The book would be an allegory in some way," she says.

More questions are asked, but nothing that the trio have not faced before. A question not asked -- either by the audience or by Tahmima Anam -- is about 1971, when the Pakistan regime unleashed a most brutal genocide upon its own citizens under the garb of protecting the country's unity. The brutal assault tore apart the country. And yet, such a tumultuous and tragic national trauma has never been adequately explored or treated by its literati. In fact, that same behaviour, i.e. military rule, contempt for civilian rule, religious fronts, and a perpetual belligerence continues to this day. While 9/11 inspires spirited artistic responses, why has their own national crime and a greater tragedy been not truly addressed by Pakistan's best and the brightest, like the ones seated before me? Shouldn't they be taking a hard look at their own national crimes rather than only swim in the misdeeds of others?

The allotted time is strictly followed; the crowd mills around for the wine. I pick up Nadeem's book and get it autographed by him. 'Love and Solidarity,' he writes. Yes, of course, but as I step out of the Asia House I feel I had expected more, a little more.

S I Ahmed occasionally reports from London for *The Daily Star* literature page.

Marriage

FARHANA MAZHAR ALI



A bright day getting brighter --
The hairpin lost and found
Beneath a creased rump
The toaster fucked --
We go for a walk in silly sunlight

Life ends in death
Roses wilt in summer heat
Scorched snatches of a faraway song
Wraps itself around a tired oak
Spatter down from spangled leaves
To bird-shit I and my husband

He had it right, old Orway
When he wrought on a summer day:
Why should a foolish Marriage Vow,
Which long ago was made,
Oblige us to each other now
When passion is decayed.
We lov'd, and we lov'd, as long as we could:
Till our love was lov'd out in us both:
But, our Marriage is death when the Pleasure is fled:
Twas Pleasure first made it an Oath.

The world and the sun smile
And shimmy on the headstone
Of our shallow marriage grave --
Rages and fears, my dears,
Or tears -- dancing motes sing
By speckled bark of tree --
Hear me clear, will get you nowhere!

Farhana Mazhar Ali is based in Chicago and is currently in Madras.

Two Poems by Nausheen Eusuf

Advice for Slackers

Papers on Wordsworth, Shakespeare, Donne?
Easy enough: a Google search reveals
a thousand hits, a cornucopia
from which to sample, borrow, steal.
For context, go to Wikipedia.
Just paraphrase to conceal your little caper.
Add a cover page, submit your paper.
Now that you're done: go out, relax, have fun.

But if you're caught, feign shock and disbelief
at the strange resemblance your paper bears
to some unseemly site. If you still get an F
and must repeat the course -- well, here's
to better luck. Old habits are hard to shake,
but next time, don't repeat the same mistake.

Where The Heart Is

Home is where the plants look up,
the floors shine and curtains rustle
when they hear you turn the key.

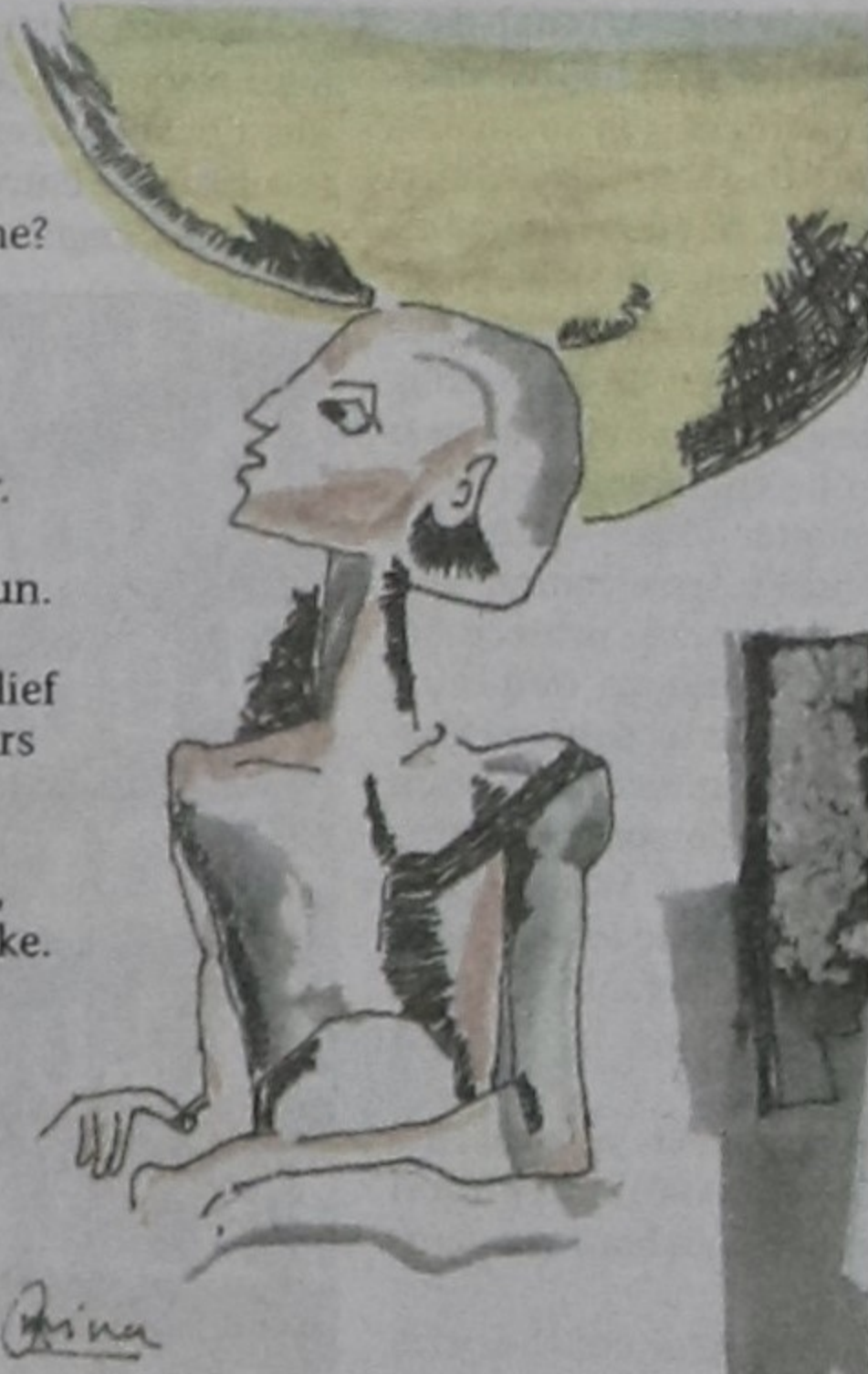
Home is where the walls proudly array
your birthdays, schoolmates, parents
and friends, knowing no perfection

better than your first trembling steps
or the awkward letters with which
you learned to spell your name.

Home is where the breeze enters
and lingers in rooms that miss
the footsteps that will not return.

Home is where someone waits
for you when you are gone;
or failing that, it waits alone.

Nausheen Eusuf teaches at BRAC University



Ringling On and On...

SUNANDA KABIR

The telephone is ringing...ringing on and on
You are to come to me today
I spent the whole morning with the orchids--
Impatience seems to be blooming
for thousands and thousands of years
in deep violet flowers
For you my deepest of love still!
In my thoughts of self-created loneliness
I reach out to you, you only
You are there and there you are
in all my existence

Suddenly I desire,
The salty taste of your lips sweeps away
The careful decorations of ignored Ahalya:
The stone woman
brimming with speechless dialogue
Who will lead her in the prehistoric forest
With what trust?

Today you were to come
But the phone rings--
Rings on and on, and
I know you will say:
"Sorry, can't make it today."

Sunanda Kabir is a Bangladeshi poet.



O Absent-Minded One

(Anmona, Anmona)
RABINDRANATH TAGORE
(translated by Fakrul Alam)

O absent-minded one,
I won't send you a garlanded message.
But if you don't find out what I have to say
How will you know the truth about me?
I'll never know your response then, o absent-minded one!
When the time is right and evening lovely and quiet
When your eyes become spellbound in the fading light,
Let me soothe you with soft tunes.
Will you listen then to the message I've strung
In languid and mild measures?
Just as a firefly flitting through shal forests,
Weave in hushed darkness a rosary of light,
In a lonely corner of your soul's courtyard,
All alone I'll go on composing my songs for you,
Completely rapt in homage,
O absent-minded one!

This is what all should know.

Fakrul Alam is professor of English at Dhaka University.

