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# V. S. Naipaul and a Journey to Trinidad

by Arnold Girdhar



Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001, V. S. Naipaul is among the most distinguished contemporary writers as well as being one of the most controversial. Naipaul's grandparents were Hindu immigrants who left one British colony—India—to settle in another—Trinidad—during the 1800s. Along with thousands of other Indians, they arrived in the Caribbean as indentured laborers, whose travel costs were paid by their employers in return for a set number of years of work, usually on the island's sugar-cane plantations. Born and brought up in Trinidad, Naipaul revealed his intellectual gifts early on; he won a scholarship to Trinidad's best high school and, after graduation, a government scholarship to study abroad. After having earned a degree in English literature at Oxford, he remained in England to pursue a writing career. *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), his fourth published work, brought him international recognition for storytelling and stylistic virtuosity. Other major novels, including *A Bend in the River* (1979) and *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), followed.

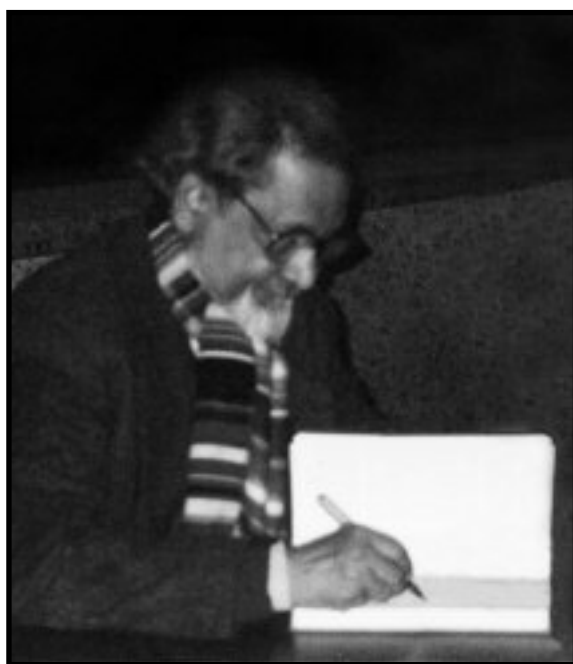
Naipaul also writes journalistic non-fiction based on his travels in the post-colonial world. His books and essays about the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa and the Indian subcontinent have won praise for the author's astuteness of observation and his eye for local color and human interest. However, Naipaul's journalism has also proved highly controversial. The harshness and cynicism of some of his writings, his often-bitter criticism of what he considers incompetent, misguided or wicked on the part of the governments and the peoples of developing countries, has offended many readers. *The*

*Middle Passage* (1963) angered a number of Trinidadians because it criticized conditions in the newly-independent colony. Many African-Trinidadians see Naipaul as the product of a Johnny-come-lately ethnicity compared to their own; Trinidadians of African origin had planted Caribbean roots long before the arrival of

Indian immigrants like Naipaul's ancestors. As a result, Naipaul is still regarded by many as a displaced Indian, an inheritor of indentureship and the diasporic transformations. His bleak but insightful observations of India, including *An Area of Darkness*, *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977), *Among the Believers* (1981) and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990), also aroused hostility. Many Indians see Naipaul as a product of an Indian diaspora who has failed to keep up with, or has mismanaged and misinterpreted, the social and religious customs and traditions, as well as the lan-

guage, of a country that remains proud of its heritage.

Naipaul has interested me for many years, not only because of his gifts as a writer, but also because of the similarity in our backgrounds. I, like Naipaul, am an Indo-Caribbean whose maternal and paternal grandmothers migrated from India to the West Indies during the 1880s. Thus, we are both part of the Indo-Caribbean diaspora, with both of us developing new lives in developed countries. Both of us lost our fathers



**Naipaul autographing his latest novel, *Half a Life*, at the Boston Public Library.**

at crucial times in our lives; Naipaul at twenty-one when he was alone at Oxford, and I at fifteen when I was a senior in a Guyanese high school. Naipaul's mother, the former Droapatie Capildeo, raised seven children by herself when Naipaul's father, Seepersad, died in 1953. My mother, Ivy, after my father, Bolton, died in 1961, rolled up her sleeves to become father and mother wrapped up in one, to care for and to oversee the proper raising of her four children.

Because of this similarity in backgrounds, and because both of us were raised by widows, Naipaul's portrayal of women is of particular interest to me. Growing up in the Republic of Guyana, formerly British Guiana, the only English-speaking country on the South American continent, and also the only continental country, because of its British colonization, grouped with the Caribbean islands, I learned through mimicking about how women should be treated, and how I should react to them in my enclosed world. My education on the way women, especially Indian women, should be regarded, came through the actions of the men I looked up to and imitated. My system of values emerged from a combination of British oppression, Indian cultural subjugation brought by immigrants from the old country, and influences from western-made movies from the 1940s through the 1960s. After reading Naipaul's Caribbean writings, visiting Trinidad, and reliving some of the experiences of most of his characters, I discovered that Indo-Trinidadian women fared no better than Indo-Guyanese women in the way they were treated by Indian males.

The British ruled the two colonies, Guyana and Trinidad, for well over a hundred and fifty years. During this time, non-whites were made to feel inferior in a variety of ways: where they could live, which schools they could attend, what jobs they could hold. Non-whites simply knew their places. As a result of this oppression by the British, non-whites (mostly Africans and Indians) began to imitate their "white masters." And how did they practice their imitation? On their supposedly weaker counterparts, of course: their women. The mistreatment of these women can be described as psychological copycatting—we tend to imitate the actions of those around us, whether it be our elders, our superiors, or our peers. Most often, parents who are guilty of child abuse have been abused as children themselves. It's all a part of the vicious cyclical ride from which some abusers fear getting off.

The typical Indian family is based on a traditional patriarchal hierarchy. The Indian migrants who came to British Guiana and Trinidad brought with them their customs, culture and religion. Most of them worked and lived on the sugar-cane plantations. Some of the men, receiving their paychecks on a Friday afternoon, would visit the nearest company "rumshop," get blinding drunk, and stay that way for most of the weekend. Hard-earned money was wasted. Family members, including wives, would be verbally and physically abused by the men in their lives. These women, caught in a lifelong trap, would stay with their marriages and their families from abusive weekend to abusive weekend. In both Guyana and Trinidad, the entertainment market was flooded with movies made in England and America. These movies, produced between the 1940s and the early 1960s, years before the women's movement had made any significant impact on western society, fed the West Indian audiences a steady diet of male dominance. There were also weekly Indian imports, with the plots of the Indian movies appearing as if they were being dispensed from the same mold, cut from the same ideological pattern: men were almost always dominant; women were almost always subservient. These stereotypical patterns in the movies continued to have great influence on a generation of men who were born into a patriarchal system, and who would find little need to change the status quo. Women in the Caribbean were kept in their submissive roles partially because of the strong influences of movie plots based on male domination.

Surfing the internet in the fall of 2000, I learned that Sir Vidia Naipaul (he had been knighted by Queen Elizabeth in 1990) would be in Trinidad to advise an Indian movie company on the filming of his first book-turned-movie, *The Mystic Masseur*. Bollywood was coming to Chaguaramas, an area that was once used as a service base by the U. S. government. I thought that this might be an ideal situation to meet and possibly to interview the author himself. I would also be able to interview others who had studied Naipaul and his works, as well as to do research at the University of the West Indies' St. Augustine campus. With the aid of a grant from the BSC Foundation, I flew to Port of Spain, Trinidad, during winter break in January 2001.

Trinidad's population is a mixture of East Indians, Africans, Europeans, Chinese, native Indians and the "doughlah" (who can be compared to the American mulatto), and its culture blends customs and traditions from the island's different ethnic groups. The style of life is pretty much the same as when Naipaul left the island in the 1950s, with one major difference: econom-

**The house that Naipaul grew up in, in Chaguaramas, Trinidad, nicknamed the “Lion House.”**

ic growth. Trinidad is booming, thanks to the island's oil refineries and pitch lakes, which have led to one of the strongest dollars in the Caribbean.

I was eager to find out what changes, if any, had occurred in the position of Caribbean women during the past half-century. Had the feminist movement affected their lives? During the journey, I was pleasantly surprised to see that one of the airport officials I encountered in Grenada was a woman of Indian descent. In the past, I had seen only men in such positions; the few women who worked at airports were relegated to inferior jobs. Another woman whom I spoke with was the proprietor of one of the Indian roti shops which line one of the busiest streets of Port of Spain, in the suburb of St. James. The fact that the line in front of her shop was the longest testified to the fact that she served the best roti and curry on the island. She told me that after her husband had died, she had rolled up her sleeves and gone to work. She currently employed three efficient young Indian girls to help her serve the many eager customers waiting in line. She was proud to say that her roti business was financing university educations for her children.

Another Indian woman whom I met in Trinidad had moved up the economic ladder from housemaid to business tycoon. She had married her employer, one of the largest furniture merchants on the island, and, upon his death, inherited the company. At first, Mrs. Hoosein had put the business up for sale, but two months later, she announced that the sale was off and that she had decided to run the business herself. During my first meeting with her, Mrs. Hoosein had seemed unsure of herself, and I still remember the weak handshake with which she greeted me. But within months, the former Indo-Guyanese young lady had grown into a mature and confident businesswoman.



Ten days of traveling, researching and interviewing went by very quickly. Unfortunately, I did not get a chance to meet Sir Vidia during my visit to Trinidad. However, interviews with several people who know Naipaul, research at the University of the West Indies and, most importantly, meeting and mixing with Caribbean women, especially Indian women, increased my curiosity and understanding of Naipaul and of the women he describes, both in his novels set in Trinidad and in his three non-fictional books about India.

I discovered that the women in the Caribbean, like the women in India, have gone through a negative and wounded progression. Even though women have risen to levels of responsibility in the home and workplace that were once reserved for men only, there is an uneasy feeling in the background that the strides women have made are largely dependent on the whims of a male-dominated society and that rights that have taken Caribbean women years to fight for could evaporate quickly.

*—Arnold Girdhar is Professor of English*