

[ E S S A Y ]

# LIVES IN HALVES: A HOMAGE TO VIDIADHAR NAIPAUL

LITERARY AND FILM SCHOLAR VIJAY MISHRA DETECTS SHADOWS IN HIS  
OWN CAREER OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF THE NOBEL LAUREATE IN  
LITERATURE FOR 2001

THURSDAY 11 October in my son's flat in Ealing Broadway: the 10 p.m. BBC 1 News finally confirmed what for many years we had been waiting for: the Nobel laureate in literature (the hundredth as it turns out) was V.S. Naipaul. The news item was brief, a sentence at best, perhaps two, as matters far more important or at any rate much more immediate took up much of the news time. My eyes went moist and I said to my wife, 'It is such a relief, I have lived with his works for so long.'

In a sense Naipaul is the writer whom I know best, although the Naipaul bibliography mentions me at most thrice. Yet he is there in much of what I write:

in my style; in my attempt to break into the grand narratives of English literary history; even, shamefully, in my barely suppressed nostalgia for the Pax Britannica. I have lived with Naipaul for some forty years and very much in his shadow. He has also denied me the privilege of originality by being everywhere before me: the Indian plantation diaspora, Oxford, India.

On my mother's side my extended family was almost a spitting image of the Tulsis of *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961): eight sisters and two brothers. Like the Tulsi family, all the sisters were systematically married off into Brahmin or pseudo-Brahmin families at an early age. Many, like my own mother, often regretted being taken out of school to be unceremoniously married off. They regretted the loss of their youth and the freedom of being young. They had few childhood memories that they could share with us—my mother would repeat kite-flying with her brother Dhurup as a way of capturing and extending something that was for her an uncompleted life. And since the families these sisters married into were never as wealthy as my mother's family, her parents' house was where many of them lived.

The Hankar Singh household—my maternal grandmother's—was in a sprawling, half-ruined colonial bungalow in Muanikau, Suva, not unlike the Tulsis'. And here, as in Naipaul's novel, the family squabbled and the sisters fought over children and the husbands counted their luck at having free board. Here our Christmas gifts were like those in the Tulsi household: a balloon, a whistle, a New Zealand Granny Smith apple wrapped in magenta-coloured crepe paper, and a slice of water melon. Every grandchild (by the mid-1950s over fifty in all) received the same gift year in, year out and, like Chinta in *A House for Mr Biswas*, one of the sisters invariably made her impossibly saccharine and syrupy ice cream for Christmas. If a father made the mistake of giving his child something different, that would be cause for a family fight and, like Biswas's gift of a doll's house to Savi, it would have to be destroyed. My first tricycle suffered such a fate, not that it was destroyed but it could not last beyond a week with fifty screaming kids all wanting to take a ride on it!

To read Naipaul was to relive an entire life, a colonial life in the Indian diaspora, separated both from the colonial masters and the native Fijians. It was to understand not only our diasporic selves but also our half-lives; lives to which was denied the vibrancy of the unbroken Fijian life-world around us because in the end we remained 'afraid of the unknown, afraid to leave the familiar temporariness'. 'The familiar temporariness': so often I have returned to this phrase, so often in the many places I have lived I have experienced this sense of the temporarily familiar and the dread of the new. In moments of critical self-reflection I have so often felt that my life has been imitating art. Diaspora that we were, we

became static and in this stasis relapsed into mythology, initially through epic remembrance of the Indian past and subsequently through Bombay cinema. Nor did our lives in the end find an alternative vitality through the postcolonial celebration of the hybrid; rather we remained half and half, masters of neither our own language (we spoke in dialect) nor of those of our masters. We lived, to quote from the last words of Naipaul's recent novel *Half a Life* (the title itself sums it up), lives that remained incomplete, lives that were in halves, lives that belonged nowhere, that could not be grounded in either geography or epistemology. Naipaul had opened *A Bend in the River* (1979) with the words 'the world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it'. It seemed we were nothing, our half-lives incapable of self-redemption. In tragi-comedy, that genre of halves, we found solace, which is why Naipaul's early tragi-comic novels about the Indian diaspora spoke to us directly, and why I spent so long writing a book on that other hyphenated form, the kitschy Bollywood melodrama.

Naipaul's *India: A Wounded Civilization*, published in 1977, had been a strident, panic-driven critique. Ten years later came *The Enigma of Arrival*—a postcolonial intervention into the most hallowed of all English discourses, that of the Romantic imagination. By 1990, in the wake of that latter work, there had developed another voice in Naipaul—a voice tinged with ennui, and articulating a fin-de-siècle exhaustion with the world, as if the writer had arrived in this world too late, in a world past its prime, a world that could no longer lock itself into meaning, a world itself living in halves, a world in which the realist novel, always so redemptive, was dead.

*India: A Million Mutinies Now*, published in 1990, was, if anything, an over-compensatory work from a Naipaul who had begun to look at India through the eyes of the detached ethnographer. The early Naipaul had viewed Indian lives as 'unnecessary and unaccommodated', as if the essential message of Krishna in the field of battle—there is no life without acts, inaction is also action—had been lost on this once grand civilisation. The later Naipaul began to see differently and silently admired democratic India's creative energies. But with the admiration came a loosening of the critique: the erstwhile perspective of the always sad, always unhappy, always panic-ridden writer from a liminal society was no longer there. This later Naipaul, for whom the picaresque comedy of life had been so essential for diasporic survival in colonial plantation cultures (like my own), is still a sombre figure.

In spite of his rejection of Trinidad and its Indian diaspora, this figure was to become a gifted artist precisely because of the freedom that came to him from what he scathingly referred to as half-baked societies. These societies, poor

flotsam and jetsam of imperialism, without the power of settler communities to destroy native peoples, had a perspective that came not from any smug sense of having triumphed through sly mimicry or hybridism, but through a need to fill the void, to see the world afresh, to make sense of their lives. These societies were bonded to a strange legacy of imperialism, the legacy that even in its most perverse forms still left behind the grammar of a just society or its possibility.

The day after the Nobel Prize was announced I was on my way to Oxford on the so-called London–Oxford tube. I bought two newspapers, *The Times* and the *Guardian*, specifically to read their accounts of Naipaul. At another time Naipaul's win would have made front-page headlines. This week, the events in Afghanistan being what they were, *The Times* devoted page 15 to him and the *Guardian* page 12. The *Guardian*, however, carried a fine essay by the West Indian British writer Caryl Phillips in its 'Friday Review' section. Phillips goes to the heart of Naipaul's contradiction: feeling hostility towards half-baked, hybrid societies yet being a product of that very same culture, himself a 'towering contradiction to his own argument'.

Phillips recounts a conversation he had with Derek Walcott, that other West Indian Nobel laureate, in New York on the previous Sunday:

'Caz, you think Vidia will win the Nobel?' I looked at Derek. 'I don't know. It seems likely,' I said. Derek threw out a few other names, and then he paused. 'You know, I hope he does. For no matter what he says, it's bigger than him. It will mean something for the region. It will provide some substance to the achievement.'

Phillips, like me, must acknowledge Naipaul's scandalous failure to go beyond his closed world, the failure that brought on him the critical ire of Said, Achebe, Lamming, and even Walcott and Rushdie. But also like me, Phillips responds to Naipaul as someone with whom he can empathise (after all he wrote the screenplay of *The Mystic Masseur* for the recent Merchant Ivory film). Although Naipaul excluded any mention of Trinidad from his thank-you list when informed about the Nobel award (he mentioned Britain and his ancestral homeland, India), it is the Caribbean, as Phillips says, that gave Naipaul his great theme: loss. Which is why, concludes Phillips, 'throughout the Caribbean, people are celebrating this most dyspeptic of sons. No so much, "Well done, Sir Vidia," but "You hear about Vido? Naipaul's boy. He done good, eh?"' More generally, the old Indian plantation diaspora, in its many dialects from demotic Fiji Hindi to patois French and creole English, will be saying the same.