

## A STUDY ON NAIPAUL IN THE MIRROR OF CRITICS

<sup>1</sup>Anitha

### Introduction

Naipaul has earned a reputation as one of the most gifted prose stylists of the twentieth century as well as one of the most controversial critics of the effects of imperialism in the Third World. Employing a variety of literary idioms, from short stories to essays to mixed-genre pieces that blend autobiography, fiction, and journalistic reporting, Naipaul describes the bitter legacy of colonialism on personal and societal levels. The early novels and short stories, based loosely on his experiences growing up in Trinidad, have been acclaimed for their narrative skill, colorful use of West Indian dialect, and wry humor as they express themes of individual rootlessness and cultural deprivation that are the effects of colonial history.

The characters in his early short fiction are often depicted as alienated from the societies in which they are born, as they spend their lives trying to escape or to build a sanctuary they can call their own. Naipaul's later novels, historical essays, and social commentaries based on his extensive travels throughout Africa, Asia, South America, and the Caribbean, continue to explore the relation of colonialism to the loss of cultural identity, but without the humor that was a hallmark of his earlier fiction writing. The later works, while being admired for their keen observation and clear descriptive style, have garnered intense criticism for their often bleakly negative appraisal of cultures ravaged by centuries of oppression, particularly by the people of the regions he describes. Naipaul has won numerous literary awards in Britain including the Somerset Maugham Award, the Hawthornden Prize, and the Booker Prize and his name repeatedly appears on lists of candidates for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Naipaul was born in Port of Spain, Trinidad, in 1932, the second generation descendant of an East Indian grandfather who came to the West Indies in the early 1900s as an indentured laborer in the British colonial administration. Naipaul's love for and facility in the English language has been credited to his father, Seepersad Naipaul, a journalist and author of a collection of short stories exhibiting many of the themes of entrapment and alienation that also were themes in his son's fiction. Naipaul excelled in the colonial British school system in Trinidad, winning a scholarship in 1950 to study English at Oxford. After graduating in

1954, Naipaul became a writer and editor for the British Broadcasting Corporation program "Caribbean Voices," where his earliest short stories about loneliness, the fear of existence, and the strains of changing cultural sensibilities were first broadcast. In 1955 he married Patricia Ann Hale, an Englishwoman. Around this time he began to write a series of short stories and character sketches based on his childhood in Trinidad, most of which were published in *Miguel Street* (1959), which won the 1961 Somerset Maugham Award, and *A Flag on the Island* (1967).

In 1957 Naipaul published his first novel, *The Mystic Masseur*, a farce about a religious crank who attends to Trinidad's spiritual problems. This was followed in 1958 by the publication of *The Suffrage of Elvira*, which won the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize for its comic portrayal of vote rigging in Trinidad. Although it won no literary awards, his third novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), about a Trinidadian Hindu whose greatest desire is to own his own home, became the novel which would win Naipaul his greatest literary acclaim. The novel, which has elements of high comedy and tragic pathos, has become closely associated with Naipaul's own personal search for meaning and community despite the alienating effects of colonialism.

In the early 1960s Naipaul reviewed hundreds of books for *The New Statesman* and other publications, where he became known as an uncompromisingly harsh critic of most of his literary contemporaries. It was also during this period that Naipaul wrote his first two works of nonfiction.

*The Middle Passage* (1962) and *An Area of Darkness* (1964) are both based on his travel to and observations of postcolonial conditions in the Caribbean, Africa, and India. His fiction writing continued to win critical acclaim for its forceful prose style: Naipaul received the Hawthornden Prize for *Mr. Stone and the Knight's Companion* (1964), the story of a Caribbean man living in England, and the Booker Prize for *In a Free State* (1971), a mixed-genre work that contains short fiction pieces dealing with the themes of alienation and exile as well as factual eyewitness accounts of postcolonial oppression and discrimination.

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<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar, Manav Bharti University, Solan, Shimla, HP

From the 1970s until the present Naipaul has continued to use travel as an inspiration for his nonfiction, producing works on, among other things, the character of Indian people in India: *A Wounded Civilization* (1977); the dangers of charismatic political leadership in *The Return of Eva Perón* (1980); Islamic fanaticism in the Middle East in *Among the Believers* (1981); the legacy of slavery in the United States in *A Turn in the South* (1989); and Islam in Southeast Asia in *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among the Converted Peoples* (1998).

In all these works he positions himself as a stateless wanderer who uses a keen sense of observation to come to sometimes devastating conclusions about the possibility for Third World individuals and societies to rebuild themselves from the ruins of colonial administration. His fiction, notably in *Guerillas* (1975), *A Bend in the River* (1979), and *A Way in the World* (1994), combines autobiographical themes of his own search for identity and community with his more overarching themes of historical anarchy and chaos caused by colonialism. Naipaul was given a knighthood in 1990 for his literary achievements, and he continues to write fiction and nonfiction dealing with themes of rootlessness and exile from his home in London.