## V.S. NAIPAUL: THE MAN AND HIS MISSION: JCLS

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## V.S. NAIPAUL: THE MAN AND HIS MISSION

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Beyond Belief, V.S. Naipaul's second excursion into five Islamic countries, was published in 1998. It's a book of discovery, a follow-up to Among the Believers, a book of stories garnered through travel in Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Malaysia, which was published in 1977. Both dates are important because they are sandwiched between the Islamic revolution in Iran in the early 1970s and the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001. Both books are compilations of stories about people, their journeys, the generations that bred them, and the nuances of faith and belief that sustains them.

Beyond Belief may be read as a panoramic portrait of these countries of "converts," as Naipaul calls Muslims who are not Arabs, Muslims who have through history and mostly through conquest converted to the religion that sees Arabia as the center of civilization and their own history as an adjunct of the Arab story. As such, the book is magnificently ambitious, central to the concerns of the world today, portentous, and, for those who put their faith in forces outside literary insight, prophetic.

In the Prologue to Beyond Belief, Naipaul anticipates a question that the reader may reasonably ask:

It may be asked if different people and different stories in any section of the book would have created or suggested another kind of country. I think not: the train has many coaches, and different classes, but it passes through the same landscape. People are responding to the same political or religious and cultural pressures. The writer has only to listen very carefully and with a clear heart to what people say to him, and ask the next question, and the next. (2)

In India, the metaphor of the train would become real. Sitting in, shall we say, a third class railway carriage, making a sustained journey for any purpose, one's fellow passengers would open conversation with "Where are you from?" And then the next question and the next. We Indians are used to the locative question and have prepared answers. But suppose (unlikely, but just suppose) V.S. Naipaul found himself on such a journey in such a train. Any answer he gave to the questions that would follow "Where are you from?" would, in all probability, confound the understanding of the questioners. What would he say? "Wiltshire?" Or "Trinidad?" And the remark that followed would perhaps be, "I apologize, I thought you were Indian."

Naipaul doesn't answer such questions because the real answer is that he doesn't belong to Wiltshire, Trinidad or indeed, in the sense of being circumscribed by its culture and prejudices, to India. He belongs to literature or to writing, the home of his intellect. But that's not the sort of answer you give to Aap kahan sey hain, janab? [Where are you from?].

This sense of not belonging has enabled Naipaul, the quintessential writer of our times, to look at the world without the constraints of a mission. In a century in which literature, the very art and act of writing, has been coerced into a dedication to Soviet Realism; to progressive causes; to feminism to self-discovery; to antiracist protest; to proselytising in the cause of Islam, Hindutva, Indian secularism, fraudulent spirituality, shallow and humbug life-guidance; to advertising travelogues and to ark-loads of imitative novel writing, grist to the mill of popular, pap publishing; Naipaul has uniquely gone his own way. And his own way has always implicitly posed and answered the question: "What is writing for?" This is not a question that can be asked or answered independent of a time and place. It's not a question that can be answered for all societies at all points in their material and cultural development. And yet the word "societies" here is not misplaced. Writing is for and from within a society. Writers need readers. That readership has always consisted of those who will treat the formulated thought, the organized narrative, the expressed subtlety of ideas, the sharpness of insight as definitions of truth, as keys to their civilization. And that presumes a modern readership whose idea of reading is not derived from revealed literature or from ancient epics and myths from which moral prescription may be derived.

Societies produce the literature that they need. Dysfunctional societies, for instance, the Stalinist constructs of the twentieth century, produce the literature that has been prescribed for them, literature they don't need; literature would distort the purity of their doctrine. Ancient India, ancient Greece lived by their great epics. Greek society, evolving into city-states and democracies in which there was a profound necessity for a comic and tragic self-consciousness, generated the theater. Eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe turned to the novel form to explore the possibilities of life in a changing world to which poetry and the essay could not offer sufficient guidance. Naipaul's work, from his novels of the Caribbean through his books of discovery and inquiry of Africa, Britain, India, and the Islamic countries are essential explorations of our time. Taken together, they could define the burden of literature in our times.

### II

Naipaul is not an Indian writer. He writes in English but he is not a post-colonial writer in the popular, but doomed, classification of today's universities. Neither is a he a British writer with neurotic post-imperial concerns or the narrow prospects of the British writers who accept their shrunken perspectives and world. His personal history is Indian, in so far as India was colonized by the British who sent indentured labor to the West Indies and handed out island scholarships to a handful of the progeny of these marooned islanders to study at Oxford and Cambridge. His childhood was spent in a recognizably Indian but rapidly transforming family whose very language, rural Indian morality, religious observances, and traditional professions would change in the space of a generation. The family would be scattered—to England, to Canada. There would be no going back to India, except for the writer who acknowledges that India is in his blood and feels both drawn to but removed from it. The exact nature of that attraction and removal is examined several times by Naipaul. In his second book of discovery in the country, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, he writes,

India is for me a difficult country. It isn't my home and cannot be my home; and yet I cannot reject it or be indifferent to it; I cannot travel only for the sights. I am at once too close and too far. . . . India, which I visited for the first time in 1962, turned out to be a very strange land. As hundred years had been enough to wash me clean of many Indian religious attitudes; and without these attitudes the distress of India was—and is—almost insupportable. . . . Any inquiry about India has quickly to go beyond the political. It has to be an inquiry about civilisation itself, as it is. And though in India I am a stranger, this starting point of this inquiry has been myself. (8)

That is what I would call a true statement of commitment to writing: the inquiry that begins with the memory and insights of one's own life and goes immediately beyond it to an inquiry into a civilization.

Naipaul's three books and some essays on India began to draw fire as far back as 1963 when he published An Area of Darkness. One of the attitudes of which he had been washed clean, was the characteristic Indian blindness to poverty, to extreme inequality, to suffering and to the filth around. I remember reading An Area of Darkness in my college days in Pune. The book caused a furor. It was compared by critics to Mother India, a book written by Katherine Mayo, an American writer of the 1920s, who was said to write of the suffering and the malpractices of child-marriage and female infanticide in India to put a spoke in the wheels of the Indian Independence movement as it gathered momentum.

Naipaul wrote of his revulsion at the social habits that Indians seemed to ignore—the defecation in public, the total ignorance of social hygiene, the superstition, hypocrisy, double standards, and the comic and malappropriate mimicry of the West which he encountered during his year's sojourn. The Indian intellectual community exploded with righteous indignation. Naipaul was a traitor. He was giving a bad impression of the country. They wrote and spoke of him as though they had hired an advertising agent for the civilization who had ended up doing a bad job. Even then, and in the face of what can only be seen as the reaction of injured national pride, I admired the vision of the man who stated what should have been obvious, but stated it in an irrefutable style. Did I dare say that to my contemporaries? I can't remember.

In all the noise generated by this book the objection which seemed to hold some water came from the Left, from intellectuals who had presumably evolved a socialistic or communistic outlook as a retreat from the very attitudes which Naipaul exposed. Yes, they said, we were all guilty of turning away from the beggars and the starvation,

but Naipaul should understand that this was the inheritance that colonialism left India and we were battling to overawe this legacy with political action. That first book and Naipaul's perspective were unique. His vision had to have an answer. This Leftist critical objection to Naipaul's vision pacified the conscience of my generation of readers, but certainly left me with a series of begged questions.

Naipaul turned to those questions when he returned to India in 1977 to write India: A Wounded Civilization. The book contains many more ideas than can be given room here but the germ of an idea, first developed in this book and later becoming the center of Naipaul's vision of Indian history, is that enshrined in its title: India is a "wounded civilization." Its wounds were inflicted by continuous conquest, the slaughter and obliteration of culture and continuity that the conquests entailed. And, unlike the historians of the nationalist era who consciously adhere to the credo that the pre-British conquests of India are best left in the shadows of history, lest they inflame irrational and uncontrollable passions, Naipaul points a wagging historical finger. Naipaul is standing in the wide avenue of what used to be the main thoroughfare of the capital of the fourteenth century kingdom of Vijayanagar. At one end is a temple which, four hundred years after the destruction of the city, still stands. At the other is a giant statue of the bull of Shiva:

That once glorious avenue—not a national monument, still permitted to live—is a slum. Its surface where unpaved, is a green-black slurry of mud and excrement, through which the sandaled pilgrims unheedingly pad to the food stalls and souvenir shops, loud and gay with radios. And there are starved squatters with their starved animals in the ruins, the broken stone facades patched up with mud and rocks, the doorways stripped of the sculptures which existed until recently. Life goes on, the past continues. After conquest and destruction, the past simply reasserts itself. (Naipaul, *India* 15)

Vijayanagar was wiped out by a confederacy of its Muslim neighbours, some of whom had been its allies against others in the years before the final obliteration of the kingdom and its ruling castes.

Naipaul goes on to say that by the time it was destroyed, Vijayanagar represented a fossilized Hinduism. It may not have deserved its fate, but it had ceased to generate the historical energy to withstand it. Vijayanagar's fate gives Naipaul the key to the wound that prevents India from becoming whole again:

It was in Vijayanagar at this time . . . that I began to wonder about the intellectual depletion that must have come to India with the invasions and conquests of the last thousand years. What happened in Vijayanagar happened, in varying degrees, in other parts of the country. In the north ruin lies on ruin: Moslem ruin on Hindu ruin, Moslem on Moslem. In the history books, in the accounts of wars

and conquests and plunder, the intellectual depletion passes unnoticed. (Naipaul, *India* 17)

India makes itself archaic again. This is the statement of a vast historical probability. Naipaul states this speculatively and then turns, here and in subsequent works, to the original sources of Indian history, to the accounts of travellers in the pre-Muslim and the Muslim and Mughal periods. The idea that begins here is substantiated and detailed in subsequent books and essays.

The book raised a second storm. Naipaul was again vilified by those who had a vision of India that was independent of its reality. *India A Wounded Civilization* goes on to examine and condemn the living legacy of Gandhi. After the thousands of books written on Gandhi and Gandhianism, Naipaul is refreshingly brief and insightful. In all his books Gandhi is mentioned with the deepest of intellectual respect. From *India: A Wounded Civilization* to *Magic Seeds*, the novel which Naipaul has proclaimed is his last book, Gandhi is seen as uniquely honest in the community of Indian writers. Naipaul begins here his assessment of the Gandhian movement, which he says was built in eleven years from 1919 to 1930. Thereafter the structure survived and was the strongest factor in the gaining of Indian Independence, but it generated a petrifaction of attitude, a compulsive return to the past which wouldn't serve the material needs of the new India or propel it out of poverty. Gandhianism leads to an imaginary innocence, one that is not even fully understood, one that belongs to an undiscovered history before the wound. It leads to a cult of poverty—a religion India least requires.

There is a third idea in India: A Wounded Civilization, which has proved controversially prophetic. The book was written after a journey occasioned by the crisis in India's political life, which resulted in the state of Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi's government. In Bombay, Naipaul asks to see the chawls, the shanties and slums of the city and writes about the order and small benefits that the organization of the nascent Shiv Sena have brought to the sanitation and, marginally, to the health and well-being of these filthy and neglected warrens overpopulated by the influx of villagers into the city. It's 1977 and the Shiv Sena, a novel political movement, restricted to Maharashtra, has hit upon the idea of organizing this neglected, all too visible mass of the cities—these people who have been driven by destitution to the metropolis and haven't the attributes which will municipalize them. They may even be a majority in the city, but they are non-people in its civic life. The Sena sets out to organize and win them. Its patron saint is Shivaji. The Sena's methods of disciplining and drilling are not far removed from those of popular militant movements in Europe with mystical philosophies and nascent grudges substituted for ideology. Their leader has been known to express an admiration for Hitler. The Sena are labelled "fascist" by the liberals and the Left. "But this is an easy, imported word," says Naipaul.

The middle-class leadership of the Sena might talk of martial glory and dream of political power. But at this lower and more desperate level the Sena had become something else: a yearning for community, an ideal of self-help, men rejecting rejection. (Naipaul, *India* 64)

At the time of the Emergency, I was writing for the radical newspapers in London and I remember the horror with which this endorsement of the "fascist" Sena was met. They were fascists. They were extortionists and protection racketeers. The rich and the religious minorities had everything to fear from these political goondas [goons]. The combination of the cult of Shivaji and the sight of feeble young men with matchstick limbs parading each dawn in khaki shorts and with lathis [staves] may not have filled me with dread, but unlike Naipaul, I had no premonition or idea that this movement was a symptom of something larger. At the time, if the police had smashed them into submission with a few cracked heads, I wouldn't have been sorry. And yet Naipaul's premonition proved to be right. The Sena was only one formation which was using legendary icons and allegiances to harness an energy which had to pull India out of Gandhian stagnation, out of a look backward.

Reading India: A Wounded Civilization and holding these three ideas in solution—the historical wound that has left India intellectually handicapped if not sterile, the limitations of the Gandhian project through which ancient stagnations and defeats reassert themselves and the birth of the organizing impulse within the neglected and destitute of India—one can see the book as the clearest description of the developments of that era. The measured tones in which the connections are made is masterful. Its witnessed history.

Naipaul's plea at the end of the book is not for any "fascist" form of organization, not for Shivaji or any renascent Hinduism. It is the understanding that the stability of the Gandhian India, an idea that came to the fore early in the twentieth century and persisted, is an illusion. India will not be stable again for a long time:

While India tries to go back to an idea of its past, it will not possess that past or be enriched by it. The past can now be possessed only by inquiry and scholarship, by intellectual rather than spiritual discipline. The past has to be seen to be dead; or the past will kill. (Naipaul, *India* 174)

How then did this slayer of the past acquire a reputation for being, as Salman Rushdie so damningly pronounced "A cheer-leader for the BJP?" How then does William Dalrymple, expert on Mughal couture and cuisine, in an article in *The Guardian* on March 20, 2004, pronounce V.S. Naipaul to be historically ignorant and a self-confessed "supporter of the entire Sangh Parivar Programme?"

Both Rushdie and Dalrymple are latter-day critics of Naipaul. They join the attack after Naipaul writes his third book of travel and discovery in the country, *India: A Million Mutinies Now.* It remains, even in the words of Naipaul's critics such as Edward Luce, the clearest and most diverse account of the reality, the flux and the dynamic of contemporary India. It is, to my mind, a growth from, rather

than a revision of, the ideas formed during the earlier journeys. It uses the form invented in *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* and is a collection of stories discovered or revealed on a journey around India from Mumbai, through a turn in the South and Communist Party ruled Bengal, to Lucknow, Delhi, and Kashmir. It is a passage through India and Naipaul sees all over—through the lives of people he meets, in the large and small social and political movements, a new dynamic.

Sections of society, which have been hitherto silent, for centuries and millennia, are, through the hurly-burly and even through the corruption and confusion of democracy, asserting themselves. The assertion is both the result of and a part of self-discovery, a newfound collective confidence, an *atma-vishwas*. Its political dimensions are caste politics and this may entail the rise of demagogues who will by force abolish the pernicious caste system though they may make themselves rich and perpetrate small tyrannies on the way. And caste has to go, even if it means reinforcing its political cohesion.

In *India:* A *Wounded Civilization*, Naipaul uses the strongest language against the practices of untouchability—a quotation would make a Communist party rabble-rouser proud. And the socio-political dimension of this new movement, the culmination of Indian democratic awakening, is the rise of "Hindutva," a realization after more than a thousand years of subservience, that the ancient way of life which is Hinduism can also be a force for political cohesion.

It is not a religion of private conscience and private practice. It comes with certain 'legal concepts'. These concepts have 'civic significance' and create a certain kind of social order. The religious idea cannot be separated from the social order. Therefore, the construction of a polity on national lines, if it means a displacement of the religious principle of solidarity is simply unthinkable. (Iqbal 39)

No, these are not the words of some Hindutvic fascist. It's a quote from Mohammed Iqbal making a speech in 1930 favoring the formation of Pakistan. Pakistan was formed. Iran underwent a revolution using Islam as a uniting force to sweep away the modernizations and police state of the Shah. Now Al Qaeda calls on Muslims the world over to unite and aim at a universal Taliban-like Islamic polity and world. The rise of this Islamic force must be understood, I keep being told, even if one doesn't sympathize with its ultimate aim. It is the reaction to humiliation, suffering, and imperialism.

In India the movement of Hindutva is, according to Naipaul, a reaction to humiliation, suffering, and historical imperialism. It doesn't want to dominate the world. It is an awakening that can stimulate the population as it is into nationhood and that need not, under any tenet of classical Hindu belief, turn its energies to suppressing or killing minorities. Awakenings carry criminals in their wake and there are vicious and foolish men who have ridden the wave to gain power and to

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betray the movement through which India stumbles and moves on. V.S. Naipaul has publicly, in my hearing, denounced them. But should he not see in the contemporary movements of India this awakened energy?

#### Ш

Naipaul has always and famously attracted misunderstanding, sometimes willful and malicious, sometimes simply through the unexamined habits and reflexes of a politically correct criticism. Derek Walcott, poet and Nobel laureate from the Caribbean, famously said that V.S. Naipaul doesn't like Negroes. It isn't a particularly perceptive or profound remark and begs several questions, not the least of which is "Were Negroes placed on God's earth for the likes of V.S. Naipaul to like?" More damning is the late Edward Said's judgement that V.S. Naipaul "is a writer who tells the western power what it wants to hear about its former colonies" (192).

Walcott is a poet whose verse and plays are, for the most part, set in the marooned societies of the Caribbean. His project has been to give these societies a voice. He does so, though perhaps not as powerfully, universally and as successfully as Bob Marley. Walcott's international reputation, at least among the readers of literary publications, grew when he was awarded the "Genius" grant from the MacArthur Foundation—a large sum of money and five-year fellowship dispensed by generous Americans to deserving people. His achievement, very distinct from that of his co-Caribbean writer Naipaul, caught the imagination of the American referees of the award by being celebratory about the small societies of the West Indies. His large work *Omeros* has been acclaimed as an epic which projects life in the contemporary Caribbean in a modern heroic form.

In that sense, Walcott is the perfect candidate and literary standard-bearer for the political mood of the post-1960s decades during which the black population of America began the movement for its civil rights and its long, assertive march through the institutions of the U.S. The Caribbean too had its black power moment and the slogans of political revolt—"Black is Beautiful," "Back to Africa"—initiated a politico-cultural movement to adjust the self-image of black populations all over the world. Through Black Studies, the black populations asserted their distinctions. The academies saw it as rediscovering their own histories. Whether these studies contributed any history of value I cannot judge, but they certainly set out to make their own definitions of the past, to decolonize their understanding and this very endeavour supposedly contributed to their sense of dignity, power, and strength in the world. Derek Walcott's poems undoubtedly made an impact amongst the intellectual population that supported such a movement for black awareness and assertion.

The same cannot be said of V.S. Naipaul. His work does the opposite of mythmaking. The novels and the books of travel and discovery do nothing to flatter the populations of which they speak. Seeing is all. The object and not the ideology is in focus. Naipaul doesn't lack the inclusive sympathy that assists a writer to see his character in totality, but he is wholly innocent of the urge to go with the current of populist or popular feeling. His first book on his journey round the Caribbean, *The Middle Passage: Impressions of Five Societies—British, French and Dutch in the West Indies and South America*, does nothing to bolster or support the self-image of the emergent "nations" of the Caribbean.

The book arises from his travels in the 1960s when the movement for independence from British colonial rule is scattering the Caribbean into tiny unviable nation-state islands. Naipaul sees them as fragmented societies that cannot sustain life as it is evolving in the modern world. They have cars and phones but they are culturally and intellectually starved societies. Their history, he suspects, has made them violent and cruel places.

The novels he has written about the Indian community settled in the Caribbean, mostly in Trinidad and Guyana, drawing on the stories of his father and mother's families are also mercilessly perceptive. Though outwardly they are comic novels—the most notable being A House for Mr. Biswas—they are chronicles of a dysfunctional, uprooted community, ravaged to its very soul by the transplantation that colonialism has imposed on it.

In Edward Said's view, if indeed it can be called a "view," very little is seen, Naipaul says what the ex-colonial masters want him to say. The ex-colonial masters are dead and so, arguably, are the colonial attitudes of the master to the colonized. To not see that Britain, for instance, has forged a new and freshly nuanced relationship with the people of the subcontinent, is to subscribe to an ideological myth, which insults both the progress of the subcontinent and the cultural gifts of the British. Did Edward Said support the Palestinian cause because Muslims want him to? The charge is patently false and can only be made by someone who can't or hasn't bothered to read. It may be cheeky to say that about someone who was a professor at an American University, but the evidence of the books is compelling.

Naipaul's novels on the Caribbean Indian community are an implicit indictment of the cruelty of colonialism and its greedy transplantation of peasant communities, sold into indenture across the globe. They are as damning, despite and through their comic form, of the communities in which they are set, as the works of Dickens are of the social hypocrisy and cruelty of Victorian England. Only, with Dickens, there is an indication that a moral awakening and a will to reform may produce happiness. In Naipaul's work, the prevalent sense is that there is, in these communities, nowhere to go.

In a sense Edward Said's negative opinion is expected if one understands its provenance. Said's scholarly reputation was built on the critical condemnation of the works and lives of the writers, adventurers and scholars who translated the works of the Orient into European languages. His contention is that these "Orientalists" assisted the exploitative enterprise of colonialism by denigrating the societies whose work, historical and religious texts they collected, explored, and translated. Said's supporters and acolytes claim that he has uniquely explored and exposed the political dimensions of academic work. Whether such a claim is justified or not, whether Said is another fellow-traveller on the anti-colonial impulse and

sentiment that has become an ideological current in Western universities, is not the subject of this essay. Said may be heroic in his attack on Zionism and deserve the support of the world for it. About Naipaul's vision he is belittling, insulting, and wrong.

Naipaul's single work of history, though historical tracts and considerations run through all his books, is *The Loss of El Dorado*, a history of Trinidad and the European conquest of the Caribbean. It is the most spirited and savage attack on the early European voyages of discovery and colonial exploit which exterminated the native Caribbean population and waded through their blood to set up the plantations worked by imported slaves. It is, as Naipaul tells it, a history of unparalleled greed, cupidity, cruelty, and barbarism.

His subsequent historical chapters, scattered in his other "novels" and covering the colonial enterprise in the Caribbean and South America, detailing the lies of Walter Raleigh and Francisco Miranda are exposures and not flattery. One can be sure that they would not be chosen by Miranda and Raleigh as their favoured bedside reading.

### IV

Naipaul's biographer designate, Patrick French, recently asked me what I knew of one Michael X. He wanted first hand the political atmosphere that gave rise to the subject of Naipaul's long essay/book, the *Killings in Trinidad*. He had heard that I had been in England during the years of his rise to notoriety and may even have met him or associated with him.

I told him what I knew of the man and the phenomenon that bred him. As an Indian with Marxist leanings in my twenties, I lived and interacted in London with a set of other bed-sit dwellers, mostly Indians, who were writers, painters, poets, dope-dealers, and idlers of all description. We felt ourselves—for reasons arising from our alienness, our poverty, arrogance, and stubbornness—on the margins of British social life. Those of us who had jobs were, in our working existences, integrated into the fringe immigrant economic activity of the capital. If we had Oxbridge degrees, we taught in schools. If we were itinerant musicians, we cleaned upper class ladies' houses for agency wages and tips. We painted houses, walked dogs, and washed up in canteen kitchens.

There was a ferment of Black Power at the time. The West Indian population, which lived in close proximity to us bed-sit dwellers, was alive with the idea of a potential political awakening. The last years of the 1960s were deceptively heady days. A generation that had just come to earning maturity, inspired by the Beatles and Bob Dylan, alienated from the misuse of power in the Vietnam war, saw itself as being destined to transform the world. (Much as the misguided Islamic *jihadis* of today may project the possibilities of their religious revolution). Resistance to the Vietnam war had, at that time, given a huge boost to the black movement in the U.S.

In Britain the black "leaders," mimicking the rhetoric of the U.S., began to preach. My friends and I followed their lecture circuits. The rhetoric said, "when the

time comes we have to organize." We thought the time had come, but nobody was offering us an organization to join. One of the demagogues who arose as a black leader was a light-skinned Trinidadian called Michael X whose credentials as the leader of the British blacks ("King of the Queen's niggers" as one visiting black American radical put it) were being announced by journalists in the national press. By this time I was trying to prove my own credentials as a candidate member of an immigrant organization, of West Indians mixed in with a minority of Indian and Pakistani members, called the British Black Panther Movement.

The older members of the Movement knew Michael well and had indeed broken away from the North London outfit he controlled, The Black House. Some of these older members still interacted with Michael X who was born Michael de Freitas. He came as a seaman to London and was soon enrolled as a thug and enforcer in the pay of a notorious slum landlord called Rachmann. De Freitas was employed to threaten and evict tenants of Rachmann's tenements who fell into rent arrears. Bullying people must have been hard work. Michael de Freitas transformed himself into Michael Abdul Malik when the idea of black Islam came to Britain from across the Atlantic and later into Michael X when that mock identity seemed to be the most terrifying and lucrative.

The name changes, the supposed political evolution—the discarding of colonially imposed Christianity, the disowning of the "slave name" of European origin—were duly reported in the British press. The rhetoric was yielding results. John Lennon contributed money to The Black House, and the subsequent publicity brought donations from other pop stars and from the rebellious heirs of prosperous business families. Michael X and his project, which amounted to no more than "abuse whitey," terrified whitey and whitey paid to assuage the guilt that X laid on him. X became rich enough to immigrate to Trinidad with three or four followers when his support fell off in Britain. Gail Benson, a young white woman, left her respectable husband and home to follow him and his fellow traveller, a man who called himself Jamal, to the "commune" in Trinidad which was to be the hub of world revolution. X and Jamal murdered their young white follower and buried her in the grounds of their house. The Trinidadian police found out, and X was hunted down eventually in the remote wastes of Guyana, betrayed by the tribal people from whom he had to beg food. He was brought back to Trinidad, renounced his X-ness, and went back to being plain Michael de Freitas. Lawyers from Britain, still believing that they were acting on behalf of a revolutionary, rushed to form committees and went to Trinidad to defend him, but the Trinidadian court convicted and sentenced Michael. The appeals were unsuccessful. He was hanged.

Naipaul examined, researched and wrote the story, first as an essay and then using the same theme and inspiration to transform the material into *Guerrillas*, a novel. Each in its own form explains the tragedy of a man encouraged by a fantasy of our times to create his own fantastic identity, and delusion of leadership and power—none of which Michael de Freitas possessed. He was no-one, he led no-one and his power only lasted for the moment in which his white donors felt guilty for

being who they were in a world in which blacks were seen as emerging from oppression. The fantasy led Michael to murder, to flight, capture, and the rope.

Naipaul, from Trinidad himself, identified the hoax, the proclivity to self-deception, and the genesis of the encouragement from the whites (themselves self-deluded) that led to it. He didn't see in the story the progress and counter-revolutionary containment of a radical or a martyr, but saw the tragedy of a weak man who played the part of a phantom to fulfil the fantasies of millionaire white radicals. X was a creature of their shallow and guilty conscience, an attempt by Britain to keep up with America which had produced a vibrant black movement and Malcolm X. Michael was an unashamed mimic—of the name, of the stance, of the tough talk of the "no compromise with whitey." Whitey lapped it up. And de Freitas who harboured the secret of his part-white ancestry, played along till the end.

At the heart of Naipaul's account of these happenings is not a dislike for the man who wanted so badly to be the leader of the negroes (as Walcott would have it), but a perception of the tragic muddle and self-delusion which, goaded on by meaningless rhetoric, led to pointless murder. It was Naipaul who saw before any of us that Michael X's stance was nothing but a fashionable form of begging disguised as historical blackmail. And that the movement of immigrants could either integrate as it has with the main body of British politics or, again as it has, throw up new and more institutionalized ways of begging from the State.

This documentary account and the Guerrillas are Naipaul's only forays into tackling a phenomenon that has distorted the discourse of the last few decades: the rhetoric of race. At the center of this discourse, or at its beginning, are the historical phenomenon of slavery and colonial conquest. The discourse is initiated in America by the articulated resistance of the Civil Rights Movement and the collective demand of American blacks for voting rights, material progress, and social and political equality. In Britain the racial idea was initiated during the adjustment of immigrant communities to living and working in Britain and becoming British in sometimes easy and sometimes difficult ways. It remains a movement which generates fear and leads logically to the investigation of "culture," of schemes of values, and has given rise in Britain to the ideas of "multiculture."

Like most ideas in history, its percolation down through a pyramid of interpretations causes it to be distorted and exploited. But it is still a powerful idea. It initiates curiosity about other cultures and, beyond the phase of shared cuisines, Pashmina shawls and explained religious festivals, it literally creates the reputations of writers who set out to satisfy that curiosity or exploit it. Novels of slavery, with the pathos of historical atrocity at their heart, are written and published. The uprooted communities of the world, people who have moved from one part of the planet to the other either forcibly or voluntarily in search of work perhaps, begin to tabulate their discontents and search for their roots. Green-card-holding Americans write about their divided selves while munching hamburgers. Whole genres of prose and poetry in sympathy with this post-colonial enterprise are published and studied. The critical

approach to them is constrained, or at the least restrained, by an injunction to political correctness.

V.S. Naipaul is one writer who has stood aloof from this movement while living through it. He may even claim that he never lived through it, that it existed but passed him by. But the people who have made this myth their raison d'etre or their livelihood haven't. His is perhaps the truest non-apologetic, politically unconcerned about being correct "multiculture."

In an interview he once said that what attracted him first to Africa was the idea of discovering a culture that he imagined, never having been there, would be somehow closer to the earth. His various travels through Africa resulted in several long essays and two seminal novels: In a Free State and A Bend in the River. Both novels contemplate the lives of startlingly original, though unquirky and real, characters suffering the consequences of civil conflict. The first book, researched through a sojourn in central Africa and the Congo foreshadows the political changes, the wars, the rise of dictatorships, and the perpetration of genocide in the tragic continent. A Bend in the River tells the story of a clutch of displaced people, an Asian colonial central character, white adventurers—academic, sexual, and militarily mercenary—and Africans, challenged by shifting tribal and political upheavals.

Both novels are unsentimental and both are terrifyingly real in their attempts to chronicle the barbarism of decolonizing Africa in the twentieth century. His vision of Africa is devastating only because the tragedy of Africa is such. The novels are uncluttered with any attempt to apologize for or to historicize the ugliness with theories of colonialism. Greed, delusion, and cruelty are not the characteristics of any one race.

Those who write about V.S. Naipaul as a "fine prose writer," an unnecessary compliment which has followed him through his career, may be well-intentioned, but they miss the point. The power of Naipaul's prose is not in the poise of the sentence but in the cumulative insights into human behaviour, contemporary history, and into the writings and products of time. All of Naipaul's work is informed by a sense of history; and that it never exhibits commitment to the causes and casuistries of our time. At the end of *In a Free State*, the narrator captures the scene in a restaurant hut in the Egyptian desert. The performers of a touring Chinese circus have arrived there in minibuses and after their meal have lined up the waiters who have served them to give each one of them presents in an envelope:

The ragged waiters stood stiffly, with serious averted faces, like soldiers being decorated, then all the Chinese rose and, chattering, laughing softly, shuffled out of the echoing hut with their relaxed, slightly splayed gait . . .

The waiter, his face still tense with pleasure, showed the medal on his dirty striped *jibbah*. It had been turned out from a mould that had lost its sharpness; but the ill-defined face was no doubt

Chinese and no doubt that of the leader. In the envelope were pretty coloured postcards of Chinese peonies.

Peonies, China! So many empires had come here . . . Now another remote empire was announcing itself. A medal, a postcard; and all that was asked in return was anger and a sense of injustice.

Perhaps that had been the only pure time, at the beginning when the ancient artist, knowing no other land, had learned to look at his own and had seen it as complete. (Naipaul, *In a Free State* 246)

Infused with a sense of history, Naipaul's work reflects the world he has so restlessly traversed. He has seen it everywhere as incomplete. The committed writer doesn't see the incompleteness. He idealizes its end. He or she reproduces the world as that commitment. Only history can prove that the commitment is a deviation or a folly. Only historical prescience can condemn that commitment as a passing phase, a further incompleteness and restore to the task of writing the monocultural values of a shared humanity.

V

Returning to his Indian historical theme, Naipaul has surveyed the Indian centuries as no one else has from the perspectives of the present. In an interview in the *New York Times* recorded in June 2005, Naipaul had provocatively said, there are no thinkers in India. The remark stirred up the usual set of nationalistic hornets. In some quarters the remark was dismissed as characteristic mischief, but there is a sense in which Vidia Naipaul is serious and intends the remark to be taken literally. Here, in a suspended contradiction of his remark, is a quote from a "thinking" Indian:

But few could see the obvious, being blinded by the glitter of the Mughal emperor's mountainous hoard of gold and gems, his marble palaces, the Peacock throne, the Taj. But behind the imperial façade there was another scene, another life—people in mud hovels, their lives barely distinct from those of animals, wretched half-naked, half-starved, and from whom every drop of sap had been wrung out by their predatory masters, Muslim as well as Hindu. . . .

At the height of Mughal splendour under Shah Jahan, over a quarter of the gross national product of the empire was appropriated by just 655 individuals, while the bulk of the approximately 120 million people of India lived on a dead level of poverty. No one gave a thought to their plight. Famine swept the land every few years, devouring hundreds of thousands of men, and in its wake came, always and inevitably, pestilence, devouring hundreds of thousands more. In Mughal India the contrast between legend and reality was grotesque. (qtd. in Eraly 520)

This is from the epilogue of Abraham Eraly's history of the Mughal invasion and rule, *The Mughal Throne*. Curiously, the book jacket has an endorsing quote from a review: "An excellent introduction to this period and the sometimes forgotten moment of multicultural assimilation it represented . . . one of the most crucial and misrepresented periods of Indian history." The review is by William Dalrymple. Eraly's history, 550 pages of it, is replete with the wars, the slaughter, the cruelty, and finally the crushing poverty in which a foreign satrapy of central Asian monarchs, chieftains, and their courtiers, those 655 individuals, left India.

One cannot presume to speak for Dalrymple but his remarks presumably mean that this era of Muslim rule has been characterized as other than the summation that appends Eraly's history. It is also a new and startlingly original definition of multiculturalism. One knows the word as defining the liberal aspiration of today's Britain and Europe, which have over the last few decades imported millions of people from their ex-colonies to work, mainly in the lower reaches of their economies. The social programe to assimilate these people into a civil society, free of racial strife, has been dubbed "multiculturalism."

Dalrymple points us to a more deeply historical use of the word. The imperial impulse, the conquest, slaughter, suppression, cruelty, shame, degradation, and subsequent victimization must be taken together with the benefits of having a braver, more intelligent, monotheistic, fratricidal race which brings all the pluses of *kebabi* cuisine and the flora of Central Asia, together with their sartorial, poetic, and polygamous inclinations, to the culture. Multiculturalism is this rich amalgam, surely? The bottom line is what counts, what? Black academics in America would profit from accepting the Dalrymple definition and revisiting the "multiculturalism" of America and the benefits of the great cotton economy before and after the civil war.

Perhaps all imperial endeavor ought to be seen as bestowing the benefits of "multiculturalism." And though the world has had centuries of imperialism and even more centuries of multicultural exchange and familiarity, since the Sumarians came to the Indus (or vice versa?), we have by no means laid the foundations for real multiculture in our modern world.

There are indeed as many definitions of "culture" as there are cultures. And yet with the narrowing of the world, with the ability of information, people, armies, and hatreds to get from one end of the earth to the other before the sun sets, these cultures have inevitably come into contact and conflict and, in some instances, to gentle coexistence.

At a meeting in India in 2005 in which V.S. Naipaul addressed members of the cultural wing of the Bharatiya Janata Party which has Hindutva as its crux, he was asked what he thought of the fundamental clash of civilizations in the world today. His reply was that he didn't recognize that there was a clash of civilizations, though he said he could guess what the questioner intended. He articulated his guess. The intention was an invitation to see the central clash in the world today as that of the civilization of the West pitted against the forces of fundamentalist Islam. And further, the question was perhaps an invitation to denounce the culture and intentions of Islam itself. Naipaul said he was going to do neither.

He didn't himself believe in that clash of civilizations. He didn't denounce the culture and intentions of Islam.

He never has.

Naipaul's two books which deal with the stories of Islamic countries and the stories of people who live in them, have no exposition of the religion to offer. They are not in any respect theological tracts. They are journeys through four "convert" countries undertaken in 1979 and 1997. The books are made up entirely of encounters with people in Iran, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Pakistan. They use the stories to explore the interstices of a thesis, the elements of which are modified and expanded as the stories provide new insights. These are stories of change. Nothing is fixed. Except the given historical fact that the societies that Naipaul is examining are "convert" societies, made up of people who were converted to Islam after the initial formation of the religion in Arabia.

Naipaul admits that he knew nothing of Islam before his first journey began. His idea that he was travelling among converted peoples who perhaps carried in their folk memory, in their traditions, something of the people they had been before their conversion, came as he travelled. As Muslims and as Muslim nations they took on the history of the conquerors and convertors. They became turkeys rooting for Christmas and spread its message of birth and rebirth. Pakistani history texts judge their history from the invasion of India by Arabs, not from the remains of Mohenjodaro and the civilization of the Indus Valley that lie within their state. The Taliban blow up the Bhumiyan Buddhas as remnants of the heresy of a past which, by definition, is innocent of the coming of prophecy.

This obliteration of the past has a very particular effect on the convert societies. Their "culture" may consist of *kebabs* and courtesans, of verse and venery, but their "civilization" is finally the tenets and observances of Islam. Critics of this idea of converted people observe that all religious people are converts. The Arabs are themselves the first converts, Christians in England and Germany were converted to a religion born in Bethlehem . . . and so on.

Fair enough. But for Christians all over the world there has never been a surrender of their own history to that of the Middle East. Their national allegiance defines them more clearly than their Christian religion and their secular texts and history probably more so than the *Bible* and all its interpretations. The "civilization" of the Russian peasant six centuries ago may have been circumscribed by that of the Russian orthodox church, but that narrative ended some time ago. In the Islamic world it has been revived time and again, and lives. In the boastful words of the Indian poet Iqbal, whose Hindu grandfather was the family's first Muslim convert, "phir kissney zinda keeya tasgara-e-yezdaan ko?" (Who resurrected the tales of the supreme God?)<sup>2</sup>

# VI

For a writer like Naipaul, who travels to discover, the central value is that of civilization which he defines implicitly as the progress of human ideas—ideas that

refresh the possibilities of life. Such a dedication must arise from faith in a universal human culture or at least from faith in a common humanity beyond belief. Naipaul's yardstick for behaviour is that common shared humanity though he never stoops to define it, as defining such a tremulous creature would cause it to fly away. Instead the stories make their own appeal in terms that any reader, idiosyncratically inclined or religiously dedicated, can understand.

The stories of the people he meets in the convert countries contain the narrative of the past, present, and possible future of those countries. In 1979, he meets the editor and publisher of the *Teheran Times*. Iran has undergone a revolution. Students who call themselves the followers of Imam Khomeni have seized the American embassy and are holding its diplomats hostage. In *Among the Believers*, Naipaul talks to the newspaperman:

I said "Mr Parvez, you are a good Muslim and good Shia. Your paper used to be full of criticism of materialist civilizations. Why are your sons studying in the United States?" . . .

So, deep down, he was divided. With one part of his mind he was for the faith, and opposed to all that stood outside it; in a world grown strange, he wished to continue to belong to himself for as long as possible. With another part of his mind he recognised the world outside as paramount, part of the future of his sons. It was in that division of the mind—as much as in the excesses of the Shah—that the Islamic revolution had begun in Iran. And it was there that it was ending. (261)

Naipaul's conclusion is not that the Islamic revolution is breathing its last in Iran, but that "In Iran and elsewhere men would have to make their peace with the world which they knew existed beyond the faith" (493). It is an optimistic conclusion to the harrowing journey, to the narrative of a half-made world in turmoil. And the duality, the internal dilemma that faces the zealot, the faith on the one hand and the world as it insists on being, beyond faith, is the clash that Naipaul sees. This, rather than the "clash of civilisations" about which he was asked at the BJP meeting. And the fate of the revolution? It was the late twentieth century—and not the faith—that could supply the answers—in institutions, legislation, economic systems (494). For the fundamentalist there are no answers outside the faith and it is heresy to look for them. The prediction that Islamic countries would have to look beyond the revealed text for modern answers for the ordering of modern society and the generation of a modern culture, is self-evident. It can't be the basis of a reputation for being "anti-Islam."

In his second book of travel, *Beyond Belief*, through the same countries, Naipaul meets some of the same people and takes their stories on. He also comes to the conclusion that:

There is another way of considering the theme of conversion. It can be seen as a kind of crossover from old beliefs, earth religions, the cults of rulers and local deities, to the revealed religions—Christianity and Islam principally—with their larger philosophical and humanitarian social concerns . . . In some of the cultures described in this book the crossover to Islam is still going on. It is the extra drama in the background, like a cultural big bang, the steady grinding down of the old world. (2)

Since that sentence was written the world has seen increased turmoil in the Middle East where militant Zionism lays claim to lands given to the Jews in revealed texts. It has witnessed the war of terror waged by a confederation of Muslim fundamentalist groups against the West, again going by the book; and against insufficiently fundamental rulers of Muslim countries such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Algeria, and the Yemen—means more prompting from the text.

Yet the war of terror is brutally "modern" in its use of information and the media to organize and coordinate its finances, its raids and its videoed execution of civilian captives such as the journalist Daniel Pearl and the two American engineers in Iraq who had their heads severed with blunt knives. Freedom for Palestine, Chechnya, or Kashmir are quoted as their passing aims. But the others are beyond the politics of nation states fighting to be. They have declared that their final aim is to live in a world ordered by their own beliefs, in which there will be no unbelievers—a universal Islamic state. Dream on, one may say in a society in which thought and expression are free, except that this dream has turned to the recurrent bloodletting of the innocent. By the text of course.

In what seems an apparent paradox, this murder, the bombings and the beheadings are planned, controlled, and carried out by men who have in other ways embraced the modern world. They are engineers, scientists, economists, university graduates, some of them trained in the U.S. They are by no means the wretched of the earth pushed into the corner of rebellion. They too must live a divided existence—on the one hand, the lure of modernity through all they have learnt and all that reading or knowledge of the wider world may have brought, and on the other: the faith. And if they claim and declare it's their faith that has taken them there, who can condescend to attribute other motives to such highly motivated assassins? In their case, divided souls though they are, faith won.

They were "ordinary blokes" as their astounded erstwhile neighbours in Germany and Newcastle later said. But doesn't that mean that there are millions who suffer the same divide, experience the same dilemma in different degrees, and in whom the opposite forces will win—despite and without destroying faith?

In Iraq, in September 2005, the British engineer Ken Bigley was captured by a *jihadi* group who demanded the release of all women prisoners held by the U.S. or U.K. in Iraq as the price of his release. A video of him blindfolded, pleading for his life and calling on Tony Blair to negotiate his release was sent by his captors to an

Arab TV channel and was transmitted all around the world. The Muslim Council of Britain joined the rest of the country in pleading for his release and sent two respected teachers of Islam to Iraq to try and make contact with the kidnappers and plead for Bigley's life. It was the first time since the Rushdie affair that a Muslim religious body came out on the side of a hostage held by men calling themselves *jihadis*. The Muslim Council even declared the kidnapping illegal under Sharia law.

On the face of it, this is the furthest that a British Muslim body has gone in support of a non-Muslim hostage. They declared that killing the innocent was strictly and expressly forbidden by Islam. The two-man delegation was careful to say that they also condemn the killing by the U.S. and its allies of Iraqi civilians and such a declaration presumably goes some way in providing them cover for asking for Mr. Bigley's release. They need the cover. It is by no means certain that all Muslims in Britain accept their leadership or agree with their initiative. It is very doubtful that the Muslim council will go further than that. They are not about to call on Hamas to stop the suicide bombing of innocent civilians who may be Israeli citizens and Jews. Or are they?

Is their theological declaration about the slaying of innocents a strategic move to demonstrate that "ordinary" Muslims whom the Council purports to represent are as British and concerned about the headline case as anyone else? Silence in this case was not an option.

Their declaration, supported by theological judgement or not, is not representative. Whereas Naipaul's book *Among Believers* identifies in Mr. Parvez, the newspaper editor of the *Tehran Times*, the very divide that could certainly be more representative of the Muslims in Britain.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Rushdie was quoted here in the magazine *Outlook*, published in India, but it has since become a commonly quoted phrase.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Iqbal's quote comes from a recording of the work by Nusrat Fateh Ali. The recording is of a poem called "Shikwa, Jawab-e-Shikwa" [Plaint to God and the Reply].

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