

# Obituary

## Magic Seeds in an Era of Darkness: V.S. Naipaul (1932–2018)

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad “Vidia” Naipaul, one of the most prominent writers of our times, passed away on 11 August 2018 at the age of 85. His complex identity suffused his life: Caribbean by birth, born and raised in Trinidad, he had the Indian immigrant background of his ancestors, Hindus of the Brahmin caste, who had crossed half the world to make a better living as bonded labourers in another part of the British Empire. Naipaul left Trinidad already in 1950 to study in the motherland of the Empire, which had begun to crumble with India and Pakistan’s independence in 1947. He travelled frequently, and to many ends of the world, but his country residence in Wiltshire became the focal point of his life.

His many travels took him repeatedly to South Asia, the Near East, Africa, the Caribbean and North America – but he would return to his Wiltshire residence to meditate and sort out his impressions, write his reports, travelogues, essays and fiction, trying to make sense out of what he had seen and perceived. He wrote his entire life, making him to one of the most respected authors of English prose. He received the most prestigious literary awards, among them the Booker Prize (for his novel *In a Free State*, 1971) and the Nobel Prize in Literature (2001). Queen Elizabeth knighted him in 1989, transforming him into “Sir Vidia”.

The criticism was always strong, and bitter. Like Nirad C. Chaudhuri (1897–1999), he was accused of having internalised the perspective of the colonial overlords, a product of the East India Company’s famous commitment to create a class of Indians “English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect”, as detailed by Lord Macaulay’s dreadful “Minute on Education” of 1835. Was Naipaul an Englishman by choice or was it perhaps his destiny as a former colonial subject? A certain nostalgia for empire is palpable, already before the formal end of the colonial epoch in Trinidad, as in his first novel *The Mystical Masseur* (1957) and *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961) – the two novels that made him an acclaimed author.

His first, long-awaited journey to India in 1962, when the Empire had finally broken apart and even a small outpost like Trinidad and Tobago gained independence, was deeply disappointing. Accompanied by his wife Patricia Ann Hale, he tried to discover his ancestral past and the roots of his own identity, but he could hardly relate his expectations to what he saw. For Naipaul, Indian culture appeared to have lost its dynamic. Naipaul found himself a stranger, a critical observ-

er more than participant. He remained more or less an outsider, pointing with his finger to the scars left by the colonial past all across the social and cultural milieu.

In particular the first of his three novels on India, *An Area of Darkness* (1964), is a relatively merciless account of India and its self-declared timeless social, cultural and ritual traditions. Naipaul's India is an almost hopeless case. Almost everything he perceives arouses his sense of fundamental opposition, even the idea of selfless service in the Gandhian Ashram he visits. Naipaul himself describes his emotions in the country of his ancestors as a kind of desperation – for him, India was a devastated culture. The titles of the following two books, though milder in tone, speak for themselves: *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977) and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990). Nissim Ezekiel (1924–2004), perhaps the greatest Indian poet in English, wrote an extremely bitter essay on Naipaul's imaginary of India, while Salman Rushdie and many others distanced themselves from Naipaul.

Others continued to see him as one of their own at last – a representative of the Indian diaspora who had managed to inscribe himself into Great Britain's cultural memory. Naipaul was always ready to enter a dialogue. He repeatedly came to South Asia, speaking at the famous Jaipur literary festival before thousands of listeners, and more recently – already in his wheelchair – to the Dhaka literary festival in 2016. His second wife Nadira, born in Mombasa (Kenya) to Pakistani parents and having grown up in Bangladesh's capital Dhaka (East Pakistan until 1971), prompted his growing interest in Bengali literature and culture in his final years.

Naipaul used to respond slowly, hesitating, cautious, groping for the right expression, melancholic and with a good sense of humour and irony at the same time. He was a gifted speaker, able to maintain his focus. At the same time he was respected for his listening, particularly during his many travels. He would begin by sorting out his impressions during the journeys, writing reports and essays. After this, fictional writing would follow. He didn't avoid confrontation, but preferred a clear statement to a friendly statement, as long as he perceived it to be true. *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (1981) and *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among the Converted Peoples* (1998) are critical accounts of Islam in the 20th century, particularly with regard to Khomeini's Iran. His interactions with the Shia theological orthodoxy in Qom demonstrate Naipaul's courage to enter the tiger's den.

In doing so, he could play on his Indian background, allowing him to be perceived as “one of us” in a way, even though he was non-Muslim. He never tired of raising his critical voice, and didn't belong to those who, in their effort to understand the “other”, tend towards cultural relativism and refrain from moral and political judgements. Naipaul was everything but non-judgemental: he did judge. And his judgements could be tough and even enervating. Critics such as Salman Rushdie and Edward Said saw in Naipaul's judgements on Is-

lam and the Islamic countries the traces of a reactionary resentment hardly hidden behind the rhetoric of enlightened speech.

Even the role of Islam in South Asia did not find mercy in Naipaul's eyes. Some 14.2 per cent of India's population is Muslim, at least 172 million people. In Bangladesh and Pakistan, non-Muslim minorities from small sections of society are systematically marginalised and even threatened. However, Naipaul's critical books on India and on Islam make him no friend of the rising religious-based nationalism in India, which sees Islam only as a disturbing factor in what would otherwise be a holistic cultural environment completely at peace with itself.

Naipaul could not easily take part in nationalist identity politics. He was far too aware of the deep wounds of colonialism that had disturbed the cultural world of its subjects from within, leading to its traumatising and even self-destruction. Nationalist radicalism was for Naipaul a form of cultural self-destruction.

Willie Somerset Chandran, in Naipaul's novels *Half a Life* (2001) and *Magic Seeds* (2004), is a kind of alter ego of the author. Born and brought up in Mozambique, the unmoored intellectual and recently divorced Chandran (*Magic Seeds*) follows the suggestion of his sister in Berlin to seek contact with the Maoist guerrillas in Indian tribal regions. Chandran decides to go to India and join their fight, but his romantic ideas of the communist fight for justice are soon frustrated. Nonetheless, it takes him several years before he decides to give up and surrender to the police, at which he receives a lengthy prison sentence. Friends in London publish his earlier collection of poetry and lobby for him on the political level. They manage to get him released and returned to London, where he finds himself in an upper-middle-class environment with its complicated relationships. After his years of hiding under the simplest living conditions and in prison, the new environment is no less alien to him than the endless ideological discussions in the Indian Jungle.

Naipaul's occupation with Africa is no less impressive, particularly his extraordinary Congo novel *A Bend in the River* (1979) and his late collection of essays *The Masque of Africa* (2010). The essays, in particular, are filled with a melancholic view of the past. The Kampala of 1966, where Naipaul had spent some time as a lecturer at the famous Makerere University, is hardly recognisable 42 years later. The population explosion and uncontrolled construction work, the signs of urban decay, the decline of law and structure estrange and isolate the observer – a role that he otherwise loved to cultivate. During his trip to Uganda in 2008 he also visits places that he could not visit or considered unimportant in 1966, like the grave of king Kabaka Muteesa I (1837–1884), where Naipaul is charmed by the pre-colonial architecture of the Ugandan grass houses, but at the same time aware of the cruelty of the feudal system that prevailed in the region immediately before the advent of the colonial colonising powers.

However, even in colonisation he could not see a civilising power. Much more tangible was the process of cultural uprooting that accompanied colonisation. Looking out over the seemingly endless urban landscape, continually spreading further out, and the churches and mosques on the hilltops, he reasons: “Foreign religion, to go by the competing ecclesiastical buildings on the hilltops, was like an applied and contagious illness, curing nothing, giving no final answers, keeping everyone in a state of nerves, fighting wrong battles, narrowing the mind” (chapter 1, *The Masque of Africa*, 2010).

With *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) Naipaul returned once again to the Caribbean – a region that he occasionally described as his real homeland. Even here, Naipaul perceives above all the losses and terror of Western cultural domination. The Royal Swedish Academy explained in awarding the Nobel Prize of 2001 that Naipaul forced his readers “to look at the presence of a repressed history”, which places Naipaul correctly into the context of postcolonial writing. He remained a controversial author, however, who was much read, but also rejected, loved and hated, criticised, but not ignored.

Naipaul was not a great fan of magical realism or trendy ways of producing literature in general. He was more or less a conservative modernist in his narratives: driven by the will to understand and to explain in complex sentences but relatively linear plots. Beyond that, he declared the end of the literary prose long form, the novel, into whose development he had invested a lot of energy.

His language was English and nothing else. The Bhojpuri of his ancestors was a closed door for him. His language was an acquired language, but he transformed it into a tool to negotiate his complex identity between the margins of the Empire and the postcolonial centre. Without doubt, he was one of the great narrators of our time, whether or not one loves his prose. Nobody is forced to agree with his rather harsh statements on India, on Islam, on lost cases of identity. His judgements were straightforward, often without mercy, sometimes stubborn. Writing was a serious matter to him. He did not take it easy, wherever he was. The Wiltshire residence was not made to transform him into a connoisseur of the world. On the contrary: the world made him suffer. Travelling was essential for him, not for some kind of touristic experience or enjoyment, but rather as a painful way to discover the world and its suffering – to discover the world and to discover his own self at the same time.

However, he was not depressive, however dark his diagnosis of our epoch. He loved British understatement and subtle irony. Certainly, his search for a world where he could feel himself at home, in which a secure identity is possible, could appear to be desperate. His realism was suffused with a vision of a world in which identity was possible, and in which different identities could connect into a conclusive whole. Whether and how this is possible remains an

open question – and the life achievement of the great author V. S. Naipaul was to support and maintain this openness to the future.

*Heinz Werner Wessler*