

Exile and Deception: The Perverse Reality of V. S. Naipaul

by

David A. Wolcott

ENG 421

December 8, 1994

Dr. Brice-Finch

"The Americans do not want me because I am too British. The public here do not want me because I am too foreign (*OB 9*). These words, were spoken by Trinidadian author V(idiahar) S(urajprasad) Naipaul, who represents what has become a recurring phenomenon in the post-colonial world. He is an East Indian who was born on the colonial island of Trinidad yet came to live in the colonial powers' capital city of London. Naipaul was faced with the challenge of reconciling his Indian heritage with his British colonial experience in an island nation he could never fully call home. Home is a concept that most would have little trouble visualizing; yet Naipaul is different. He is "a self-styled stateless traveller" (Mendelson 252) who knows no permanent home.

This lack of acceptance and sense of exile are two recurrent themes which appear in a number of V. S. Naipaul's early works, the culmination of which is found in his 1979 work, *A Bend in the River*. What causes these two qualities to continuously appear as a part of Naipaul's "tragically flawed" characters? While many viable solutions have already been presented to this point, which will be touched upon shortly, there is one contributing factor which has been little explored: the tendency for many of Naipaul's characters to fall prey to deception. Throughout his works, Naipaul's characters often misperceive their surroundings. As a result, they feel alienated in a world that they thought they knew but which they realize they know very little. In a number of examples, Naipaul's characters even end up questioning their own role in this alien environment. In order to document this deception, this essay will first look at this sense of alienation which V. S. Naipaul himself has carried throughout his lifetime. Secondly, it will examine the transposition of Naipaul's own psyche upon so many of his literary characters. Thirdly, the essay will target specific examples from Naipaul's writings, with the most blatant

found in *A Bend in the River*, which illustrate just how deceiving his perverse reality may be.

Before examining themes of exile and alienation in Naipaul's works, it is most beneficial to study the source of these emotions and how they are used in some of his early works. V. S. Naipaul's early writings focus on the experience of Trinidadians during the early twentieth century, a time when the concepts of national and cultural autonomy first begin to appear on this island nation. These writings mirror Naipaul's own sense of cultural isolation. Literary critic Selwyn R. Cudjoe speaks of Naipaul as an East Indian who can never reconcile his cultural heritage with the British-ruled and predominantly African-inhabited island of Trinidad. As a result, Naipaul travels to England to begin his writings. However, he does not find peace here either. Naipaul represents the colonial subject in the colonizer's land. His Eastern Hindu heritage does not easily conform to Western Judeo-Christian society. In *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul states that "London was not the centre of my world. I had been misled; but there was nowhere else to go" (Cudjoe 21). During this period Naipaul writes mostly in short story form as he seems unable to organize his thoughts into a coherent novel in which he expresses his "solitary condition" while living in London. Naipaul's works ultimately begin to examine the problems of East Indians as a whole rather than his personal despair.

Naipaul examines the plight of East Indians in Trinidad as an ethnic group who is separated from everyone else because of their vastly different religious and social beliefs. As a result of this isolation, the younger generations begin to adopt many Western cultural traits, an acculturation which signifies a split between the original East Indians in Trinidad and their creolized sons and daughters. Naipaul cites this split as the decay and breakdown of the Hindu family, a phenomenon which, according to Cudjoe, leads the East Indians in Trinidad into a new

era.

This new era represents a period when the East Indian community in Trinidad is in "transition from feudalism to capitalism" (Cudjoe 37). Many of Naipaul's first novels examine this transition. Feudalism is represented by the old ways of the Hindu religion: arranged marriages, the belief in not educating women and the idea that one's fate is predetermined and irreversible. These concepts are incompatible with the more modern teachings of Christianity and Western culture which stresses individual freedom and self-determination. To accommodate these Western beliefs, Naipaul advocates rejecting certain Hindu traits in order to assimilate more easily into Western culture. However, in all his infinite wisdom, at this point in his career Naipaul does not advocate a complete renunciation of Hindu beliefs. He hopes that East Indians can strike a balance between East and West. An example of this desired balance is the life of Mahatma Gandhi. W. T. Stace states that "Gandhi's enormous stature is in part due to the fact that he combined all that is greatest and strongest and noblest in both East and West" (Cudjoe 43).

Naipaul's own struggles are vivid proof of the difficulties that colonial subjects came to experience during such a tumultuous transition. But how does Naipaul transfer this part of his psyche onto his literary characters? One of the most artistically obvious example is the character Mr. Biswas in Naipaul's 1961 novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Mr. Biswas is an East Indian who desires to break free from his Hindu heritage but has difficulty assimilating himself into Western culture. The narrator tells of Mr. Biswas' struggle to find a new position in the colonial society while he remains surrounded by elements of his East Indian culture. For example, the Tulsis, Mr. Biswas' family by marriage, "symbolize the solidity and continuity of the East Indian in Trinidad... there is hierarchy in Hanuman House and his problem is that it is not a hierarchy which he can

accept" (Cudjoe 52, 240). Mr. Biswas cannot accept this hierarchy because he longs to express his individuality which Western society encourages. However, Eastern tradition suppresses this desire because the welfare of the whole family overrides any individual needs. To break free of this oppressive home environment, Mr. Biswas moves his family to the Chase which ultimately ends in disaster as "he begins to feel trapped by a future that is closing in on him" (Cudjoe 55).

The novel reaches a turning point when Mr. Biswas moves to the island's major city, Port of Spain. At the same time, the Tulsi family breaks up and many of the relatives move to a new estate closer to the city. These two events, both portraying a move from countryside to city, indicate the breakup of Hindu tradition and culture, the alienation of its religious subjects and, what Cudjoe refers to as, the beginning of the transition from "feudalism to capitalism." The devout Hindu Tulsi family are unable to exist in such a system so they leave the estate near the city. While Mr. Biswas still has difficulty reconciling his Indian heritage with Western ideals in the city, he finds an instrument which provides some relief. Ironically, it is the same instrument Naipaul discovered: writing. Biswas begins to write "in an attempt to externalize and objectify the past so he can examine it" (Cudjoe 60-61). However, by the end of the novel, Mr. Biswas, according to Kelly, "remains the frustrated artist whose dreams are elusive but whose spirit and humanity are never diminished in his quest for order and placidity" (Kelly 72).

After this transition from feudalism to capitalism, Naipaul begins examining the effort by colonial subjects to forge a new and unique national identity. However, many of the dynamics of this development cause an even deeper sense of exile and alienation. Most notably, during this period Naipaul is centered in London, attempting to write about foreign lands. Being in London, he is too alienated from the plight of both his own people and the many others about which he

attempts to write. One example of Naipaul's literature on post-colonialism is *The Mimic Men*. This novel analyzes the role of former colonial subjects in a post-colonial society. Naipaul focuses on the first post-colonial generation or the first "free" East Indians. As a result, they face a challenge which never existed in earlier generations. Selwyn Cudjoe illustrates this situation by stating that since "slavery and colonialism reduce people to almost exclusively their economic functions, the primary goal of independence should be to enable them to realize their social functions" (Cudjoe 101). However, this change is difficult for post-colonial citizens because their former social function was to be an obedient colonial subject, hardly a position which encourages self-realization. As a result, Naipaul's characters in *The Mimic Men* are in a constant state of disarray. His characters are unable to realize their true function because they "mimic the men of the New World... colonial people are doomed forever to be pale reflectors of the dominant power" (Cudjoe 102).

The culmination of Naipaul's state of exile and sense of alienation occurs in his novel, *A Bend in the River*. As rebellion overcomes an interior African nation, a new national consciousness is forged. However, this nation is one which aims at producing a new African man. He would witness the emergence of Africa as a viable force, spiritually, economically, intellectually and politically. Yet this new Africa does not embrace everyone. Those who are left from the days of European colonialism are fresh out of luck. East Indians, such as the main character Salim, despite being of Africa, had "no use at all for the kind of freedom that had come to Africa" (*BITR* 160).

While Salim has lived in Africa his entire life, he is alien to this "new" Africa. He is a coastal African. At least there he thought he had some roots on which to build and to cling. Yet

here he is as alien to this land as an Eskimo to the Amazon. Though he has spent his entire life in and among Africans, Salim believes that "however much the rest of us study Africa, however deep our sympathy, we will remain outsiders" (*BITR* 141-42).

Now that it has been established that so many of Naipaul's characters are alienated from their environment, what is a possible explanation for this alienation? One possibility which merits further discussion is the tendency for Naipaul's characters to fall prey to deception. Many of Naipaul's characters, as will be illustrated in a moment, come to grossly misjudge certain aspects of their respective settings as well as in regard to their fellow characters. Such acts occur in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, *Guerrillas* and in *A Bend in the River* where such deception becomes a focal point of the novel itself. This deception, when discovered, leads to a sense of being lost in a world the character believed that he/she once knew. The characters begin to feel alienated and in a state of exile from what they once thought of as home. As a result, they wish to leave their respective settings in an effort to escape the chaos ensuing around them.

One such example of deception is found in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. During his first visit to Hanuman House, Mr. Biswas believes it to stand "like an alien white fortress... little was really known about this family" (*HFMB* 80, 85). To Biswas, both the house and family hold a mysterious attraction, a possible way to advance his future well-being. However, appearances can be deceiving. Upon marrying one of the Tulsi daughters, Mr. Biswas pays a dear price for this apparent life of security, his "loss of identity" (Kelly 72). Mr. Biswas becomes a prisoner in Hanuman House until he manages to divide the once united Tulsi clan. As a result of his initial deception, Biswas feels his life has been irreparably altered at the hands of "this domineering matriarch and her unruly household [who] stand ready to swallow up the dreams and individually

of the young" (Kelly 57) Mr. Biswas.

Two subsequent examples of deception appear in Naipaul's 1975 novel *Guerrillas*. The first such act relates to Jane's perception of Peter Roche. After a bitter divorce, Jane is looking for a marked change of lifestyle. She sees the fulfillment of this hope in Peter Roche. Roche, the exiled former leader of the South African resistance, is perceived by Jane as a 'doer', "a man who has suffered greatly for his convictions... he would remake the world" (Kelly 121). She sees him as a savvy businessman who fills an important position on this, otherwise unimportant, island as a business liaison to the "honorable" revolutionary commune of Thrushcross Grange. However, reality and ultimately disappointment sets in when Jane realizes "that she had come to a place at the end of the world, to a place that had exhausted its possibilities" (Kelly 121). Her only link to these surroundings is through Roche. However, Jane soon admits to her deception concerning Roche. She realizes that Roche is an emotionally impotent (it would seem that the pun applies here in that Jane and Roche's physical relationship is less than riveting). Jane becomes an exile in a foreign land acting out "a gripping drama of death, sexual violence, and political and spiritual impotence that illuminates the savages of history on individual lives" (G 215).

A second example of Naipaul's use of deception lies in his treatment of Thrushcross Grange. The reference to *Wuthering Heights* gives the reader a sense of English arrogance. The commune is most literally a "People's Commune for the Land and the Revolution" administered by the High Command and led by Haji James Ahmed. Such an institution sounds like a marvelous and most beneficial place; however, reality sets in when Jane and Roche travel to the Grange. There was "no sign of cultivation... so bogus... so hidden away" (G 6-7). If this is the state of Thrushcross Grange, then what is the purpose of Roche's job with Sablich's? Quite frankly,

nothing. Roche himself has been deceived by his job; it is a meaningless position that holds no prospects for advancement.

The most striking examples of deception come into play during Naipaul's most riveting work, *A Bend in the River*. From as early as the second page in the novel, Naipaul instills in his characters a constant self-doubt of their lives. Salim is given the opportunity to take over a business in the African interior if he leaves the familiar African coast. The town where Salim must travel to is located on a bend in the river. Although the town has had its problems because of its strategic positioning on the river, it is a promising locale for a savvy businessman. However, in what becomes a very Conradian vision of one man's journey into depth and despair (*The Heart of Darkness*), the reader watches as the world Salim thought he was entering is vastly different from the one he comes to experience. Salim states:

As I got deeper into Africa - the scrub, the desert, the rocky climb up to the mountains, the lakes, the rain in the afternoon, the mud and then, on the other, wetter side of the mountains, the fern forests and the gorilla forests - as I got deeper I thought, 'But this is madness. I am going in the wrong direction. There can't be a new life at the end of this (BITR 10).

As early as the first chapter of the novel, Salim begins to doubt his reasons for leaving the relatively safe African coast for this journey into what now appears to be the bowels of the earth. However, he settles into his new home and attempts to make the best of what he has.

After a short rebellion, law and order are established with the emergence of the new President. However, with this new sense of stability comes Salim's disillusionment with this town on the river. Salim recalls that "during the days of the rebellion I had had the sharpest sense of

the beauty of the river and the forest... when the peace came I had simply stopped looking about me. And now I felt that the mystery and the magic of the place had gone" (*BITR* 103). The new President is, apparently, an educated man who sees himself as the savior of this African nation. He will bring the country out of the "dark ages" and into an era of progress and stability. The only catch is that this is to be a nation of Africans (black Africans that is). Colonialists, such as Salim, are now looked upon as outsiders. They are not of this new nation; they are merely passers-by.

One project of the President which represents this commitment to progress is the establishment of the State Domain. This new entity is to be the proof of African intellectualism. It will foster education and cultural advancement for its students and faculty. Lecturers and scholars come from all over to be a part of this new African creation. Yet, the Domain is distinctly un-African. It by-passes "real Africa, the difficult Africa of bush and villages... it [is] like a curious fulfillment of Father Huisman's prophecy about the retreat of African Africa, and the success of European graft" (*BITR* 108).

The Domain, ironically, does not even fulfill its original purpose. It has deceived the entire community into believing that it is a monument dedicated to the glory of the new African nation. Yet this can not be farther from the truth. Outside of the main concourse, the Domain has been allowed to physically deteriorate. The funds are not available to maintain the entire complex in such a pristine state. After witnessing both the nuances of the African colonial city and the Europeanized Domain, Salim concludes that:

the Domain was a hoax. But... it was full of serious men. So I moved between the Domain and the town. It was always reassuring to return to the town I knew, to get away

from the Africa of words and ideas as it existed on the Domain (and from which, often, Africans were physically absent) (*BITR* 131).

The Domain becomes a uniquely European institution which attempts to fill the needs of an African nation in search of its own identity. It is no wonder that so many people experience such a profound sense of exile in this struggling community.

Throughout his early novels and particularly in *A Bend in the River*, V.S. Naipaul explores the themes of exile and alienation of colonial peoples from their colonial lands. Naipaul uses his personal experiences as an East Indian to add a sense of legitimacy and artistic flair to his works. The fact that so many of Naipaul's characters seem to gravely misperceive their surroundings is a major factor which contributes to these characters alienation. The sense of exile from one's home and even oneself that appears so fervently in Naipaul's work is perhaps best illustrated through the following words spoken by Salim in *A Bend in the River*:

I had my first alarm about myself, the beginning of the decay of a man I had known myself to be... I was homesick... but home was hardly a place I could return to. Home was something in my head. It was something I had lost... I began to feel that any life I might have anywhere - however rich and successful and better furnished - would only be a version of the life I lived now" (*BITR* 184).

Works Cited

- Cudjoe, Selwyn R. *V. S. Naipaul: A Materialist Reading*. The University of Massachusetts Press: Amherst, 1988.
- Kelly, Richard. *V. S. Naipaul*. Continuum: New York, 1989.
- Mendelson, Phyllis, ed., *Contemporary Literary Criticism, Volume 7*. Gale Research Company: Detroit, 1977.
- Naipaul, V. S. *A Bend in the River*. Penguin Books: London, 1979.
- Naipaul, V. S. *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Penguin Books: London, 1981.
- Naipaul, V. S. *Guerrillas*. Vintage Books: New York, 1975.
- Naipaul, V. S. *The Overcrowded Baracoon*. Vintage Books: New York, 1972.