

'Naipaul's Women.' *South Asian Review*, Vol 26, no. 1, November 2005.

## Naipaul's Women

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During his visit to Australia in 2001, Naipaul was asked in a radio interview for his opinion of the feminist movement. His reply was hardly a surprise: "I haven't thought about it, not that I wish to avoid the issue" (Cathcart). Just a few months later, his response to a debate at a literary festival between Indian women writers on feminist issues was less temperate: "My life is short. I can't listen to banality. This thing about colonialism, this thing about gender oppression, the very word oppression irritates me" (Gibbons).

Leaving aside the question of what makes Naipaul behave badly on such occasions, he has certainly been consistently irritated by any kind of political generalization. His normal reaction to ideology has always been to resist its spell, and although the behavior of those who have succumbed is a frequent subject of both his fiction and his non-fiction, he has almost entirely avoided any examination of feminists or feminism. Nevertheless, individual women are significant enough in his work to merit close attention.

In reaction to Naipaul's three novels of the 1970s,<sup>1</sup> at least six articles were published on women and sexuality in his fiction.<sup>2</sup> Most of these critics label Naipaul a misogynist, either explicitly or implicitly. For example, Helen Pyne-Timothy claims that "Naipaul has in these works provided a view of women which is extremely harsh, moralistic and judgmental" (306). As Ken Ramchand writes, "There is a substantial negative commentary on his presentation of women" (n.p.).

Given the social and cultural background of Naipaul's family, it is not surprising that, in some sense, women represent the Other for him. Bruce King notes that "Naipaul's novels differ from most European and American fiction in portraying romantic love and sexual freedom as destructive, a dereliction of one's duties. The perspective is Indian, rather than European" (31). This attitude to sex naturally carries over

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into a view of women who, in the traditional, ritualistic world in which he grew up, were expected to be wives and mothers rather than independent, or sexually-free, agents. The division between the sexes was wide and well-defined. Naipaul's imagination has always been a matter of depth rather than breadth, and he has tended more and more to look inward for material for his fiction. He will rarely write from a point of view very far outside his personal experience: he must have at least something in common with his main focalizing characters. His avoidance of women's issues in his fiction stems from the distance he himself feels from women as subjects, and is part of the concern he has developed during his career clarifying the subjective position from which he writes.

Even though women have never been a major concern for Naipaul, a single journal article still cannot hope to analyze all his female characters in any depth. What I hope to achieve here is a survey, to establish whether he can be labeled a misogynist. To this end, I will look at a range of female characters in his novels. I will consider whether remarks like that of Pyne-Timothy quoted above are perhaps equally applicable, in context, to other characters in the same works and, indeed, whether Naipaul's view of the human race is in general, at least sometimes, "extremely harsh."

The women in Naipaul's first three novels seldom have an existence independent from men, while there are some men who seem reasonably independent of women. However, while their social status is usually defined by their relationship to men, women who work are common in *Miguel Street* (1959). Popo's wife works while Popo spends his days making "the thing without a name" (15). Few of the men in the street are much more productive: Hat has his dairy cows and Edward his painting, but Mrs. Morgan brings up their ten children while Morgan is obsessed with making fireworks which no-one will buy, and Uncle Bhakcu fiddles with engines all day, contentedly wrecking perfectly good vehicles, while his wife tries to think of ways to make ends meet. Many of these women have power and wit and they are often the practical half of a marriage. As King says, "It is the women who are strong" (31).

Violence between men and women is a feature of everyday life in *Miguel Street*, but even in the warped morality of the men of the street, it is acceptable only in moderation. Hat remarks, "Is a good thing for a man to beat his woman every now and then" (106), but they despise Toni, who beats his woman "like exercise," and no-one defends George when it is rumored that his wife's death was the result of a beating. Uncle Bhakcu beats his wife, but this becomes a source of pride for both husband and wife, a sign that the marriage is working as it should.

Naipaul describes this violence—almost a matter of ritual—impassively. He shows neither approval nor disapproval of what was, in the world in which he grew up, a fact of life. In later works, especially non-fiction, he becomes more critical of oppression and violence towards women.

Romantic love, an idea taken from American movies, is never a success in Naipaul's first three novels. Robert Hemenway writes that "there are no successful love affairs, no successful marriages, in all his work" (193). While I have reservations about the second part of this statement, the first is nearer the truth. In *Miguel Street* both Hat and Edward come to grief through romantic entanglements. When Mrs. Hereira leaves her rich husband and lives in the street for a while with her violent lover Toni, the narrator's mother gives her neighborly advice: "I really wish you was like me. If somebody did marry you off when you was fifteen, we wouldnta been hearing all this nonsense, you hear. Making all this damn fuss about your heart and love and all that rubbish" (111). And it is true that the few lasting marriages in this fictional world are not based on anything romantic. Men hit their wives, the women berate their husbands, but underneath there is mutual respect for each other.

In *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) the wife-beating has an added significance. Ganesh beats his wife Leela for the first time:

A formal affair done without anger on Ganesh's part or resentment on Leela's; and although it formed no part of the marriage ceremony itself, it meant much to both of them. It meant that they had grown up and become independent. ...The moment was precious. (60)

However, when it becomes clear that there will be no children, Ganesh "lost interest in her as a wife and stopped beating her. Leela took it well" (74). This is more than just a joke in rather questionable taste. "I cannot write Sex," Naipaul wrote in 1958 ("London" 13), citing embarrassment and inexperience as his reasons. It is possible to speculate that Naipaul is using wife-beating here as a metaphor for sexual relations. Significantly, once there is no beating, or presumably sex, in their marriage, it becomes an extremely successful working partnership.

In *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958) there are few prominent female characters. Nelly Chitteranjan is young and dreams of studying in London, while her father wants to marry her off to "a fat yellow boy with big yellow teeth" (84). Nelly is no tragic heroine, and is resigned to her fate until she is seen in public with a young man: this makes her ineligible to marry the rich man's son and she is able to go to the Poly. Ironically, her escape is the result of society's oppressive morality.

Mrs. Baksh is more formidable. There is no suggestion of wife-beating in her marriage, and she terrifies her children so much that they always refer to her by the third person plural pronoun.

In the Trinidad world of these three novels, the women are often more sensible and down-to-earth than the men. Sometimes they are dangerous seducers, but just as often they are the ones who keep everything going. Sometimes they are victims, but sometimes they sensibly take themselves off when their men grow violent and unreasonable. The principal interest of all three novels is in the actions of men, but women are far from unimportant, and they are presented with at least as much sympathy and admiration as the male characters.

*A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) contains many female characters, including the powerful Mrs. Tulsi, the mother of Biswas' wife Shama. Mrs. Tulsi uses many unpleasant tricks, such as emotional blackmail, dramatic and strategic illnesses, and contemptuous ridicule, to enforce her power. The Tulsi family is a matriarchy: the usual Hindu custom of women moving in with their husband's families when they marry is reversed in this case, and the men who marry the numerous Tulsi daughters, unless they have money of their own, are absorbed into the family business: "Their names were forgotten; they became Tulsis" (97). This society of women is full of cruelty. Mr. Biswas buys a doll's house for his daughter, but his wife Shama is forced, by the malice of her sisters, to destroy it. "You didn't know what I had to put up with," she tells Biswas. "Talking night and day. Puss-puss here. Puss-puss there. ... So I had to satisfy them" (226).

Shama is portrayed not without sympathy, although she is clearly not as ambitious or interesting as her husband. She is based on Naipaul's own mother, of whom he has said: "I don't think she has ever experienced emotions that are particular to *her*: all of her pleasures and pains are experienced as ritual moments" (Michener 66). Similarly, "for Shama and her sisters and women like them, ambition, if the word could be used, was a series of negatives: not to be unmarried, not to be childless, not to be an undutiful daughter, sister, wife, mother, widow" (160). It is clear that her marriage to a rebellious soul like Biswas is, at least at first, as unfortunate for her as it is for him: as Martha Lewis says, "Shama...does not have even the slightest desire to lead the independent life her husband dreams about" (181). The arrival of their first child is one early step towards a partnership: his argumentative behavior masks his pleasure in their new roles, and "She was morose herself, as though she preferred this bond to the bond of sentimentality" (169). It takes many more years, however, before Shama becomes more his wife than her mother's daughter. Biswas can reflect with "some satisfaction" in the last year of his life that, when financial troubles arise, "Shama did not run straight off to her mother to beg for help. Ten

years before that would have been her first thought. Now she tried to comfort Mr. Biswas, and devised plans on her own" (7). The plans are impractical and Biswas scoffs, but "he had grown to accept her judgement and to respect her optimism" (8). They have their troubles, including violence and long periods of separation, but this is a marriage that works, eventually, in its own unconventional way, providing one counter-example to Hemenway's assertion that there are "no successful marriages in all his work" (193).

Another reasonably successful marriage appears in Naipaul's next novel, *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963). Mr. Stone marries Margaret, a widow, late in life, only a couple of years before he is due to retire. Margaret is at first dazzling, with her "arch and studied unfemininity" (10). Her voice and manner "recalled that of a celebrated actress" (10), who is never named but from later references is clearly Dame Edith Evans (40). To Mr. Stone's relief, however, once they are married Margaret discards her "party manner" and becomes a woman who "attached the greatest importance to her functions as a woman and a wife. These were to feed, dress, humour, encourage and occasionally seduce and never to let down" (36). Margaret is indeed a good wife, who "revealed a plasticity of character which abridged and rendered painless the process of getting to know her" (44).

Sanna Dhahir, in an examination of female characters in this novel, points out that "in their efforts to show Naipaul as a misogynist, critics have completely overlooked the forcefulness of the archetypal female in some of his fiction" (95). Mr. Stone has no male relatives, only a widowed sister, Olive, and niece, Gwen. His mother died when he was still a teenager: he remembers it as "an occasion for grief—the sharpest he had known" (15). Until his marriage, he has been conscious of his masculine role "in a limited way and only for a few days at a time with his sister Olive" (34). But when his best friend dies, his widow Grace forms, with Margaret, Olive and Gwen, and Mr. Stone's aged retainer Miss Millington, a group of women surrounding him who "all lived in a world of dead or absent men" (104). Earlier, on their honeymoon, Mr. Stone had been "seized by a revulsion for all the women" (55) he had encountered in a Cornish teashop. Margaret, with whom he had been together "for a fortnight, for twenty-four hours a day" (55), was not excluded; but he very soon realizes that these feelings "were a betrayal of her who sat beside him" (56), and her presence becomes, by end of the evening, a comfort after all. There are ups and downs over the next couple of years, but the novel ends with a reasonably contented Mr. Stone looking forward to his wife's return to brighten his empty house.

We see Margaret only through Mr. Stone's eyes. It is necessary, of course, to distinguish between his feelings towards her, which vacillate according to his moods, and Naipaul's implied judgment.<sup>3</sup> However,

despite all her conventional attitudes towards marriage and the roles of the sexes, Margaret is no stereotype; and although her motives for marrying are not examined any more closely than Mr. Stone's, she is sincere: a loving and supportive wife, and just as upset as Mr. Stone by their little fights.

Naipaul is less kind to Mr. Stone's niece Gwen, a teenager "fat and sickly with unfulfilled urges" (24) who has few if any redeeming features. But Gwen is matched in unpleasantness by Stone's colleague Whymper, and runs away with him at the end of the novel. Although in this book, as in all Naipaul's previous novels, the roles of the sexes are reasonably distinct, there is no hatred, fear or disapproval of women in general implied by the author, whatever the attitudes of the male characters might be.

Sandra, in *The Mimic Men* (1967), is another kind of wife. A Londoner, she marries Ralph Singh as a way to avoid a dreary future when her academic ambitions fail, and goes with him to his native Caribbean island of Isabella. "It seemed a textbook example of the ill-advised mixed marriage" (41), but Singh warns that "the obvious and plausible is often wrong...even now all I have against Sandra is her name" (41). Not "everyone's idea of a beauty; few women are," Sandra nevertheless "overwhelmed me then; and she would overwhelm me now, I know" (43), Singh writes from the standpoint of twenty years later. His recollection of their marriage is entirely without acrimony. Sandra bears no blame; Singh himself had "willed the gift away" (76). Even at the end of the marriage, he felt that "it was not for me to decide to leave; that decision was hers alone" (76): "other relationships awaited her, other countries. I had nowhere to go" (76).

Sandra, like Margaret, is an intelligent and witty woman, despite her academic failures. "She had cruel eye for the common (45); and her "gift of the phrase" (68) makes her seem stronger than she really is: Singh does not see until it is too late that she "could also be vulnerable to the phrase" (68). Singh is not Naipaul. However, Singh is not an unreliable narrator, in the sense that the sympathy Singh expresses for Sandra is not ironically undercut by a different authorial view. Sandra is strong and vital; perhaps the first woman in Naipaul's fiction to have, potentially, an existence independent of men and marriage.

We cannot, however, equate Singh's attitudes towards women with Naipaul's. Before he leaves the island for the first time, he has a covert relationship with his cousin Sally: "We simply came together; and nothing again was to equal that sudden understanding, that shared feeling of self-violation, which was for me security and purity" (155). Singh's childhood attitude to marriage is equally unhealthy: he is unable to utter the word "wife" in front of his class. And "more than thirty years later, the man agrees with the child: it is a terrible word"

(90). Much is made by critics of Singh's encounter with a grotesquely overweight prostitute. Richard Kelly, for example, sees this as proof of "Naipaul's apparent abhorrence of women's bodies" (98). Why this episode is chosen to represent Naipaul's attitude, rather than Singh's adoration of Sandra's breasts, for example, is unclear. It is essential to draw the line between literary criticism and psychoanalysis, and not to make generalizations about Naipaul's attitudes based on such select examples drawn from his fiction.

There is a tendency among critics to divide Naipaul's female characters into categories, for example Martha Lewis' "householders and bitches" and Consuelo Lopez de Villegas' "matriarchs and man-eaters." Although this makes analysis easier, it flattens out the differences between individual characters. Lewis, in an otherwise perceptive article, lumps Sandra in her second category along with the three main female characters in the next three novels. However, I would argue that *In a Free State* (1971) presents a new type of woman, one with whom Naipaul clearly has little sympathy. Linda, the British expatriate wife in the title story, is shallow, malicious and promiscuous. But the same could be said of Bobby, her companion on an African road trip. In fact, Linda is less objectionable than Bobby in some ways. She complains about "the smell of Africa," and Bobby replies, "I've never got on with people who talk about things like the smell of Africa" (139). Linda at least has the advantage of being honest about her reactions. And Naipaul immediately introduces another aspect: "It was the smell, in a warm shuttered room, that Bobby liked" (139). Bobby likes young African men, whom he pays for sexual favors. His predilection for the African smell is not the sentimental liberal attitude he would like to claim, but a source of exploitative sexual satisfaction.

Several critics have commented on a passage in this novel where Bobby reacts to the sight, in Linda's hotel bedroom, of "a vaginal deodorant with an appalling name" (176). According to Pyne-Timothy, "There is the unmistakable feeling about scenes of this nature that women are really unlovely, unclean creatures, barely acceptable by the world of men" (302). This kind of analysis ignores the context entirely. The narrative is in the third person. However, the feelings, and the use of the adjective "appalling," are Bobby's, and are presented with ample irony. We are never for a moment invited to sympathize with Bobby. Linda is partly a foil, in the story, against which the weak and self-serving character of Bobby can be viewed. Both are unpleasant and inadequate, and although their gender and sexuality form part of this characterization, it cannot be claimed that Naipaul implies any more approval for the masculine than the feminine in this case.

*Guerrillas* (1975), based on a real-life murder in Trinidad, is Naipaul's most shocking book. He knew it would shock: he said in an

interview, “The fact that it shocks you is part of its success.” However, he went on to say, “But it’s the wrong kind of success if you just think, God she [Jane] was such an unpleasant girl. If she was really all that unpleasant, if you hadn’t been made to understand her, you wouldn’t have found her death to be so appalling” (Mukherjee and Boyers 86). This shows that Naipaul is not always in complete control: Jane is very unlikable and readers might well consider that she brings her murder upon herself. Pyne-Timothy is indeed misled into believing that this was Naipaul’s intention: “It may well be maintained that the dictates of the plot of this extremely harsh and pessimistic work, where Jane must be brutally murdered, demand that the reader’s response to this woman must be as negative as possible in order to mitigate the effects of the nightmarish quality of the rape and murder of which she is the victim” (300). But as Naipaul has clearly stated, he did not wish to mitigate these effects, and he has given the reader more comfort than he intended.

Jane, like Linda, is a white woman in an alien environment, seeking sexual satisfaction and unable to believe in her own vulnerability. However, she is in some ways more like Bobby, seeking the thrill of interracial sex with Jimmy with no thought of the consequences. Nevertheless, the concentration of critics on Jane’s unpleasant qualities ignores a very significant fact: she is raped and murdered by two men, Jimmy and Bryant, and although her own behavior contributes to her fate, they initiate and perpetrate this horrible crime.

These two men have a homosexual relationship. Breathtakingly, Pyne-Timothy cites Jimmy’s realization of Bryant’s “complete beauty” at the moment of the sexual act, as speaking “eloquently about the value which the author places on men and lack of esteem in which he holds women” (303). This is the first time I have seen a suggestion that Naipaul, often considered a homophobe,<sup>4</sup> is so much a misogynist that he has homosexual tendencies. Hemenway, similarly, sees Jimmy’s view as equivalent to Naipaul’s: “In *Guerrillas*, Naipaul insists on referring to women’s genitals as a ‘great hairiness’” (193). This reference is to a pathological vision Jimmy has of a prostitute immediately after the murder. It is clearly not a phrase attributable to Naipaul. It seems that, when a political point is to be made, many critics abandon their interpretive caution about conflating the views of an author with those of his characters. Certainly these are third-person narratives, but the use of rhetoric in all kinds of narrative voices to develop character using carefully controlled distance between author, implied author, narrator and character was thoroughly explored by Wayne C. Booth in his important book *The Rhetoric of Fiction* back in 1961.

Nevertheless, Jane is a repugnant character, whereas there is some limited sympathy for Jimmy, and more for Bryant. She is probably the best argument in Naipaul's novels so far for the case that he is a misogynist. However, she is only the least admirable character in a novel without any admirable characters, a novel Naipaul himself said was about "nasty, wicked people" (Blandford 54).

Naipaul's next novel, and his last for some time, was *A Bend in the River* (1979). The narrator, Salim, a young merchant, living in the inland town on the Congo River, is sexually naive until he meets Yvette, the wife of a European historian at the local university set up by the country's Big Man. Before this he has female friends, such as the African village woman, Zabeth, a regular customer at his store. Pyne-Timothy notes that Naipaul intends "to set Zabeth apart from womankind" (302). She is both celibate and physically attractive: Pyne-Timothy sees this as an indication that "a woman can only be a complete, unfractured personality, an intelligent and worthwhile member of her community, if her energies are withdrawn from sexual indulgence" (302). But other intelligent and worthwhile women who are not celibate appear in Naipaul's works: Sandra, in *The Mimic Men*, and Margaret Stone, for example. And behaving with civilization and generosity does not earn Naipaul's female characters Pyne-Timothy's approval either. Yvette has given Salim "a physical fulfillment which could not be more complete" (205), as well as new ways of viewing his world. But when their affair ends, when Salim begins to feel that she is drifting away from him to another lover, in his jealous rage he beats her and spits on her. Yvette's reaction to this violence and humiliation, on reflection, is one of understanding. She rings Salim from home and offers comfort and sympathy—which Salim returns. Pyne-Timothy finds this appalling: "What is alarming is the way in which the author treats this visitation of outrage and horror on a woman. ... Women are apparently gluttons for punishment. And the perpetrator of this deed is absolved by the author's deliberate attempt to channel the reader's sympathy towards Salim" (304-5).

There are several points to note here. Firstly, Pyne-Timothy sees Yvette's generosity, a trait which most readers would find sympathetic, as masochistic, even though she stays away from Salim from this time onwards. However, the fact that Yvette forgives Salim is also seen as a trick by Naipaul to encourage the reader to absolve Salim. This tangled argument contains too many slippages of logic to straighten out. Also, in a novel written in the first person, there is no surprise in the fact that Salim's point of view is prevalent. The question is whether Yvette is demonized by Naipaul, in order to justify Salim's violence. The answer is that she is not. Unlike Jane in *Guerrillas*, who is in some ways in a similar position—a white woman seeking sexual adventure—Yvette is

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only made to bear a small portion of responsibility for Salim's behavior, and that portion is diminished even further by her acknowledgement of it.

In 1982, when *A Bend in the River* was Naipaul's latest novel, Hemenway wrote:

A Naipaul reader has a right to ask, does this author hate women? Unattractive women inhabit his fiction from the beginning, and one searches hard in his more recent fiction to find a woman who has not been denied the reader's sympathy. His women characters are either severely limited by tradition, or seem semiwhores bent on using men for personal ends. (192)

Statements like these are very much based on personal opinions and reactions. If Hemenway finds most of Naipaul's women unattractive, that is one thing: like his statement that there are "no successful marriages in all his work" (193), it is open to interpretation. Standards of attractiveness and marital success might differ. However, I cannot agree that it is difficult to find a woman "who has not been denied the reader's sympathy." Apart from Linda and Jane who, I agree, are largely unsympathetic characters, all Naipaul's major women characters are presented with the same compassion as most of the men. As Helen Hayward writes, Naipaul "blends, in an unsettling manner, sympathy with irony, cruelty with compassion, in the treatment of certain characters" (4). This is true, in fact, of practically all his fictional characters since *A House for Mr. Biswas*, whether male or female. Lewis points out that "Naipaul's harsh treatment of his fictional figures, men and women alike, and his often scathing remarks about his fellow human beings do not...spring from sheer hatred and misanthropy, but an underlying idealism resulting in uncompromising views" (210). When Adrian Rowe-Evans interviewed Naipaul in 1971, he asked about the "conflict between the loving approach and what one might call the surgical approach to character," and Naipaul replied:

One can't be entirely sympathetic: one must have views; one must do more than merely respond emotionally. ...I may sit down in an enormous rage to write something; I might even begin in terms of caricature and animosity; but in the course of writing something will happen. That side of me, that comes out in the writing, is the better side, and better not because it's nicer, but because it's truer; it's the side that in one's rage one might wish to forget. (30)

One might suspect that, while writing *Guerrillas*, this process of transformation from rage to understanding was incomplete, at least as far as the character of Jane was concerned. But it is essential to

appreciate the complexity of Naipaul's work. The "political" approach, whether feminist, postcolonial or Marxist, often seems to lack the ability to comprehend this complexity. Elaine Fido claims, "we as readers...have the right to object if we see certain traits being constantly repeated as if they were morally health perceptions of human behaviour when in fact they are playing on the sicknesses which sexism creates and fosters in the mind" (90-1). However, Naipaul never implies that the relations between the sexes in his fiction are "morally healthy." Hemenway's explanation for his negative portrayal of women is that "he deliberately denies his readers the hope that modern men and women, confronted by an earth slowly going back to bush, by nation states self-destructing in genocide and guerrilla warfare, can find solace in the personal bonds of love, sex or marriage" (194). In this unsettling, fractured world, "healthy" relationships are doomed. However, Hemenway and Fido's failure to see in any of Naipaul's work examples of joy or satisfaction in relations between men and women to some extent misses the point that the interest of narrative is always in the dramatic phases of relationships, that is, the beginning and especially the end. Salim's violence towards Yvette takes place at the end of what was, at first, a satisfying and joyful affair.

In 1987, Naipaul published *The Enigma of Arrival*, an unusual book which seems more like a memoir than a novel. There are many women in *The Enigma of Arrival*, such as Mrs. Phillips, the housekeeper at the manor where Naipaul rents a cottage, Brenda, the unfaithful wife murdered by her husband, and Jack's wife. It is true that most of these women are wives. However, they are each seen as individuals, and Naipaul often finds himself closer to the wife than the husband. Mrs. Phillips becomes a good friend, especially towards the end: "her tone was intimate, half questioning, half looking for reassurance—I might have been a relation" (304), he writes of their last conversation.

Brenda, the unfaithful wife, is only seen at a distance. Her dramatic end is reported to Naipaul by Mrs. Phillips. Brenda is not really pitied for her fate, but that cannot be construed as a sexist attitude on Naipaul's part: "She 'taunted' him—it was the verdict. And all hearts were with the living, the survivor, the man; as, had it occurred the other way, they would have been with the woman" (72). These characters are viewed with a degree of detachment which renders moral concepts like blame and reward irrelevant.

The impression this book gives of being autobiographical is not unjustified. However, if he had described it as an autobiography, Naipaul says, "I think I would be run out of town, because there's no autobiography there—no family, no wife, no friends, no infidelities, nothing. That whole bit of life is torn out. There's nothing about me

apart from my writing” (Gussow). The narrator, who is, he has made it quite clear, Naipaul himself,<sup>5</sup> appears to be a solitary man, living alone in the cottage in the manor grounds, traveling alone, looking at the world around him with the cool eye of a non-participant. It might be noted that Naipaul’s first wife Patricia never appears, in *Enigma* or in his non-fiction. In the early travel books there is sometimes a suggestion, as small a hint as the use of the first person plural, that someone is with him. This could be seen as a studied suppression of his wife’s significance, “writing her out” of his life. It might just as easily be seen as a matter of delicacy and respect for her privacy, and a wish not to implicate her in his personal vision.

Naipaul’s next work of fiction, *A Way in the World* (1994), is another unusual book. The large cast of characters in the nine sections of the book, some fictional, some factual, is composed mainly of men. This is a by-product of the historical themes of much of the book: exploration, revolution, imperialism. Nevertheless, there are a few women. The first section of the book is mainly an account by a female teacher of the Trinidad esthete Leonard Side. Why Naipaul chose a woman to narrate this account is not absolutely clear, but it shows at least that he is not prejudiced against women *per se*. There is considerable sympathy in his portrayal of Phyllis, the cast-off French West Indian wife of an African chief, stranded in Ivory Coast with nowhere to go, but nevertheless living an independent, energetic life. And there is a touching relationship between Francisco Miranda, the Venezuelan revolutionary, and his English *de facto* wife Sarah. Naipaul builds on surviving letters, barely literate, which Sarah sent Miranda while he was in Trinidad, and composes the other side of the correspondence, filling out the picture of this seemingly ill-matched pair: the elegant radical and his working-class consort, who has borne him two sons. “My dear Sally, I love every misspelt word you write and every mistake you make. ...I think without you, my dear Sally, I would become quite dizzy here” (253). The language Naipaul uses for Miranda’s letters is unusually affectionate, and he and his loyal Sally have one of the most healthy and conventionally loving relationships in all Naipaul’s work.

Naipaul’s most recent two novels, *Half A Life* (2001) and *Magic Seeds* (2004), are unique among his fiction, in that they share a cast of characters. Many of these characters are female: *Half a Life*, especially, is very much concerned with sex in the life of the main character, Willie Chandran. Ana, Willie’s long-term partner, “young and small and thin, and quite pretty” with “a wonderfully easy manner” (125), is a sympathetic character. She is generous to Willie, including him in her life without asking much in return, and, when Willie leaves her, it is open to the reader to decide that he has abandoned her unkindly to an

uncertain fate in her troubled East African country. Before he leaves, he has an affair with a married neighbor, Graça, which, like Salim's affair with Yvette in *A Bend in the River*, offers Willie a previously unimagined physical fulfillment. Graça, nevertheless, turns out to be somewhat mentally deranged; Willie's physical infatuation had blinded him to the fact. Another lover, Perdita, is the girlfriend and, later, (in *Magic Seeds*) wife of Willie's friend Roger. In London, before he meets Ana, Willie believes he and Perdita are in love, only to be disappointed when he finds that Roger and Perdita have a more solid relationship than he had thought. In *Magic Seeds*, after the years with Ana and then with the guerrillas in India, Willie returns to London and stays with Roger and Perdita. Willie seduces Perdita, as he had wished to thirty years ago, but it is an affair of great coldness, and Perdita is described in unpleasant terms: "He considered her biggish belly—so ugly on a woman, so much uglier than on a man. Her skin was bad, coarse, caking" (187). Their affair very soon becomes a matter of "habit alone—not need, not excitement" (198). Adultery, as so often in Naipaul's fiction, is not morally wrong, but it is a blind alley. There is little drama involved: the risk of discovery never seems to be a concern. In *Half a Life*, even while "helpless in this life of sensation" with Graça, he begins to feel "the inanity of my life...and with it there came the beginning of respect for the religious outlawing of sexual extremes" (211).

Possibly, the most interesting woman in these two novels is Willie's sister Sarojini. She is bossy and tries to hector Willie into committing himself to the political cause she and her German husband espouse. Willie shares his father's opinion that Sarojini is ugly, like her mother, and worries about her until she marries and "becomes the complete married woman...just like my mother. ...I am not sure I like this Sarojini" (115). She is presumptuous, insensitive, and hard to like.

At the beginning of *Magic Seeds*, Willie has left Ana and is staying with Sarojini in Berlin. Willie allows her to talk him into joining a guerrilla group in India, while she stays, quite safely, in Germany. Sarojini has become stylish and attractive, and "travel and study and the politics of revolution, and her easy half-and-half life with the undemanding photographer, appeared to have given her a complete intellectual system" (9). Halfway through the book, she has a change of heart and begins to realize the dangerous game she has played: "All I wanted was to do good. It is my curse. The business went so wrong so quickly for you. What can I say? I will never forgive myself" (158). Sarojini has a kind of life-changing awakening, gaining an awareness denied to most of Naipaul's characters, Willie included, showing that she is unusually capable of growth and improvement. In the end, she becomes Willie's only real confidante, the one person who can

understand the problems which persist even after he is freed from the Indian prison.

No character in these two novels is totally sympathetic. Willie is maddeningly passive, and other men appear weak or opportunistic. Most sympathetic, however, is probably Ana, while others, like Perdita, are viewed with unsettling coldness. Misanthropic these books might be, but misogynist they are not.

Sisters, mothers, wives, lovers: it is true that few of Naipaul's women do not fall into one of these categories. Nevertheless, it cannot be justly inferred that they are not treated as individuals. Resisting, and subverting, stereotypes has always been at the core of Naipaul's vision. This may leave some readers puzzled: How can a woman with bad skin be attractive? How can a marriage be anything but a failure when the couples argue constantly? How can violence between the sexes ever be anything but reprehensible? That Naipaul is aware of women's concerns, nay, sympathetic to their plight is obvious from his non-fiction, especially the two books on Islam, *Among the Believers* and *Beyond Belief*. In Pakistan, for example, Naipaul is brutal about "the veiling and effective imprisoning of women, and giving men tomcatting rights over four women at a time, to use and discard at will" (*Beyond Belief* 251).

An unprejudiced reading of Naipaul suggests that his reputation as a misogynist is based merely on two or three characters, and a few incidents, principally from the three novels of the 1970s. The total impression of his wider work is much more complex. He does from time to time portray misogyny in his characters: Jimmy in *Guerrillas* and Bobby in *In a Free State* are probably misogynists, but this does not mean that Naipaul shares their views of women, especially since he clearly disapproves of their behavior and attitudes in every other respect. Women, in Naipaul's fiction, are rarely central but often important, and are not singled out for his anger or contempt. They are, on the whole, treated with no less, nor more, sympathy and respect than their husbands, brothers, sons, and lovers.

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## Notes

1. *In a Free State* (1971), *Guerrillas* (1975), and *A Bend in the River* (1979).

2. See Fido (1985), Griffith (1985), Hemenway (1982), Lewis (1984), Lopez de Villegas (1977-78), and Pyne-Timothy (1985).

3. Dhahir makes a convincing case for a deep-seated fear of Mother Earth in Mr. Stone, while pointing out that "the difference between character and writer is that the first does not begin to come to grips with his matrophobia until the end of the narrative; the other seems to have already recognized it for

what it is; otherwise he would not be using, so consciously and pervasively, this full array of Earth Mother imagery" (95).

4. For example, "There is a not-too-covert homophobic air in the description of the Bryant-Jimmy relationship" (Gupta 47).

5. "I thought I should make the writer be myself—let that be true and within that set the fictional composite picture" (Niven 163).

6. Interviews with V.S. Naipaul are a major source of information for this article. Accordingly, to avoid confusion, bibliographical style has been adapted to the extent that the interviewer is treated as the author of each interview, rather than the interviewee.

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