

**‘The Imaginative Promptings of My Many-Sided Background’: V.S. Naipaul’s
Diasporic Sensibility.**

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Twice displaced from his ancestral homeland of India, V.S. Naipaul seems to epitomise the diasporic writer. But categorisation of such an extraordinary individual is not easy, even if the categories are clearly defined, and the details of the theories of diaspora that have been developed over the years are subject to dispute. James Clifford summarises William Safran’s ‘main features of diaspora’ as ‘a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host ... country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship,’¹ but points out that ‘there is little room in his definition for the principled *ambivalence* about physical return and attachment to land which has characterized much Jewish diasporic consciousness.’² Vijay Mishra, further, says that ‘one of the overriding characteristics of diasporas is that diasporas do not, as a general rule, return.’³ Satendra Nandan adds, ‘Unlike some other diasporas, the Indian consciousness of India is not linked by a single region or transferred institutions, nor by colonial hierarchies transplanted, nor by politics or

¹ James Clifford, ‘Diasporas,’ *Cultural Anthropology* 9:3 (1994): 305.

² Clifford 305.

³ Vijay Mishra, ‘New Lamps for Old: Diasporas Migrancy Border,’ *Interrogating Post-colonialism: Theory, Text and Context* ed. Harish Trivedi and Meenakshi Mukherjee (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1996) 75.

economics or military considerations. Indeed not even by language. It is essentially and vitally one of cultural imagination.’⁴ There is also a distinction between two types of Indian diasporas, ‘the old diaspora of exclusivism, the new of the border,’⁵ and Naipaul is generally accepted as belonging to the first, though ‘the distinction ... will continue to be eroded.’⁶

Naipaul was born into a diasporic community, easily characterised by Safran’s definition. The way he has chosen to use that background as a writer is something rather different. Instead of drawing heavily on memories of the homeland and the collective identity, he has made his difference into a distinction, and turned his alienation into an abiding preoccupation.

Naipaul was born in 1932 in the British colony of Trinidad, descended from Indian indentured labourers brought to work the island’s sugar plantations following the abolition of slavery. The indenture system was, of course, little better than slavery and many of the Indian families in rural Trinidad were desperately poor, with little education. Nevertheless, a few of Naipaul’s forebears were more fortunate or resourceful than the majority, sufficiently so that Naipaul, though his immediate family was not economically secure during his childhood, was able to develop his academic potential and escape the narrow world of Trinidad by winning a scholarship to study at Oxford University. He thus became doubly diasporic; since leaving Trinidad in 1950 he has lived mainly in England.

Although to my knowledge he has never described himself as ‘diasporic’, from his earliest fiction, the diasporic nature of the world he came into has both been

⁴ Satendra Nandan, ‘The Diasporic Consciousness: From Biswas to Biswasghat,’ *Interrogating Post-colonialism: Theory, Text and Context* ed. Harish Trivedi and Meenakshi Mukherjee (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1996) 54.

⁵ Vijay Mishra, ‘(B)ordering Naipaul: Indenture History and Diasporic Poetics,’ *Diaspora* 5:2 (1996): 189.

⁶ Mishra, (B)ordering 227.

his subject and informed his sensibility. This tendency became, if possible, more marked when he embarked on his 'second career' of non-fiction writing. Then, in 1984, he published *Finding the Centre*, a memoir which further underlined his consciousness of himself as a wanderer without a settled feeling of home. This book offers a convenient starting point to examine the many ways in which this sensibility manifests itself in Naipaul's oeuvre.

In his Foreword, Naipaul explains that the first part of *Finding the Centre*, 'Prologue to an Autobiography', 'is an account of ... my literary beginnings and the imaginative promptings of my many-sided background.'⁷ As a young child (like any young child), he found that 'growing up within my extended family, knowing nothing else, or looking at everything else from the outside I had no social sense, no sense of other societies.'⁸ His mother's family home in the small rural town of Chaguanas was his whole world – 'I didn't like or dislike living there; it was all I knew' – until 1938, when his immediate family moved to Port of Spain. This displacement, at the age of five or six, would have been the young Naipaul's first experience of the kind of change in home and circumstances of which he later made such a feature in his writing; and, like some later moves and unlike others, it was not, on the whole, an unwelcome change: 'After the shut-in compound life of the house in Chaguanas, I liked living on a city street. I liked looking at other people, other families.'⁹ The relishing of such a change is one facet of the sensibility which makes a writer: the fascination with new scenes, the enjoyment of observing unfamiliar people and cultures. Even though some of these people were Indians, they were 'Port of Spain Indians' who 'had no country roots, were individuals, hardly a community ... not

⁷ V.S. Naipaul, *Finding the Centre* (London: Penguin, 1985) 9.

⁸ Naipaul, *Finding* 37.

⁹ Naipaul, *Finding* 30.

people of caste. We didn't see in them any of our own formalities or restrictions.'¹⁰

This kind of individuality seems to have become an aspect of Naipaul's life, and his rejection of a sense of community and lack of a stable sense of a place to call home has, in his own case though not in the case of many of his characters, contributed to his successful career.

After leaving Oxford University Naipaul had thought of living in India – he applied unsuccessfully to work there in 1954¹¹ – but on his first visit in 1962 he felt out of place not because of his difference, but because of his similarity to the people around him:

For the first time in my life I was one of the crowd. There was nothing in my appearance or dress to distinguish me from the crowd eternally hurrying into Churchgate Station. In Trinidad to be an Indian was to be distinctive. To be anything there was distinctive; difference was each man's attribute. To be an Indian in England was distinctive; in Egypt it was more so. Now in Bombay I entered a shop or a restaurant and awaited a special quality of response. And there was nothing. It was like being denied part of my reality.¹²

His visit to the Village of the Dubes, where his grandfather had been born and from where he had set off on his journey to Trinidad, though at first exhilarating, soon turns sour when the patriarch of the family presses him for money to pursue a law-suit. The claims of kinship turn out to be intrusive and disturbing and Naipaul makes an ignominious escape from their demands.¹³ As *The Enigma of Arrival* shows, Naipaul finally made his home among strangers, whose lives he finds endlessly fascinating, in the Wiltshire countryside, where his Indian face was distinctive. He had, according to

¹⁰ Naipaul, *Finding* 16.

¹¹ Patrick French, *The World Is What It Is* (London: Picador, 2008) 132.

¹² V.S. Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness* (London: André Deutsch, 1964) 44-6.

¹³ Naipaul, *Area* 271-7.

his biographer Patrick French, deliberately changed his cultural identity at around the time of his journey to India: 'he was giving up his West Indian imprimatur and taking on an English one,' one of his friends reported.¹⁴ French attributes this decision to his personal qualities and acute reading of cultural trends:

Ambitious, protean, made of smart material, deracinated by the accelerated politics of the end of empire, Vidiya made a conscious choice to refashion himself. The vogue for West Indian writing was over and, uniquely among his contemporaries, he saw the implications of this early enough to do something about it.¹⁵

This 'English' identity has a strongly Indic quality: Naipaul has remained a vegetarian and often writes of his Hindu discomfort with other food traditions, and the distinction of his physical appearance has remained an important element in his self-image.

The quality of adaptability which made this refashioning possible would have been encouraged by the circumstances of Naipaul's early life, where within a reasonably close and secure family unit, he experienced several moves between city and country, and between communal households and the relative comfort of a home shared only with his nuclear family. And his education in the British colonial system at Queen's Royal College played a significant part in the development of his attitudes and sympathies. Mishra discusses 'the degree to which Naipaul's cultural prejudices, and his coloniality, are a function of the history of colonial education. Arguments that locate Naipaul in the narratives of exile and loss ... oversimplify because this complex counternarrative is missing from them.'¹⁶ Without that schooling, Naipaul

¹⁴ French 214.

¹⁵ French 214.

¹⁶ Mishra, (B)ordering 194.

would never have been able to take on an English identity with such success. The deracination which began with the journey of his family from India to Trinidad, continued with the move from rural Trinidad to Port of Spain and his schooling, and was completed after a decade or so in England, provided him with opportunities for self-creation beyond anything available to those rooted more securely in a home culture. This is surely part of what Naipaul means when he says, 'I've been a free man.'¹⁷

However, such success comes at a great risk, as Naipaul shows with such disparate characters as Indar in *A Bend in the River*, Santosh in *In A Free State*, and Willie in *Half A Life*. Indar, of an Indian family from a town on the east coast of Africa which had become violent and ejected the 'foreign' – or diasporic – population, could say, at his most optimistic, 'I'm a lucky man. I carry the world within me. ... In this world beggars are the only people who can be choosers. Everyone else has his side chosen for him. I can choose.'¹⁸ But after some difficult times in the West, Indar comes to feel that 'it is time for him to go home. There is some dream village in his head.'¹⁹ The cruel reality is that there is no real home for Indar to take refuge in. His family has not lived in India for many generations, and his childhood home in Africa no longer exists. Indar has become one of the men alluded to in the opening sentences of the novel, 'men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing,'²⁰ who have no place in the world. Whether Salim, the narrator, can himself be counted among their number is unresolved at the end of the novel: he

¹⁷ Mel Gussow, 'V. S. Naipaul in Search of Himself,' *New York Times Book Review*, April 24, 1994, 30.

¹⁸ V.S. Naipaul, *A Bend in the River* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980) 161.

¹⁹ Naipaul, *Bend* 251-2.

²⁰ Naipaul, *Bend* 9.

shares Indar's background in many ways and ends the novel in flight from the life he had made in the town on the bend of the Congo River.

Santosh, in the story 'One out of Many' in *In a Free State*, is a less sophisticated character. He has left his friends in Bombay, where he was the 'respected' servant of 'an important man',²¹ and travelled with his employer to Washington. Although in Bombay he slept on the pavement (with other 'respectable people: we didn't encourage riff-raff'²²) and in Washington he has become an American citizen, married to a black woman, with a well-paid job and a house to live in, his prosperity has not brought happiness or contentment:

I was a free man: I could do anything I wanted. ... I could run away, hang myself, surrender, confess, hide. It didn't matter what I did, because I was alone. And I didn't know what I wanted to do. It was like the time when I felt my senses revive and I wanted to go out and enjoy and I found there was nothing to enjoy.²³

However, he also realises that 'my strength in this house is that I am a stranger.'²⁴ His isolation, his 'strangeness', makes him stronger as well as less happy.

Freedom is equally ambivalent for Willie in *Half a Life*. His mother's family were low-caste 'backwards', and he had felt more sympathy with their cause than his father's high-caste pretensions:

His mother's firebrand uncle had agitated for years for freedom for the backwards. Willie had always put himself on that side. Now he saw that the freedom the firebrand had been agitating about was his for the asking. No one he met in the college or outside it, knew the rules of Willie's own place, and

²¹ V.S. Naipaul, *In a Free State* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) 21.

²² Naipaul, *In a Free State* 21.

²³ Naipaul, *In a Free State* 54-5.

²⁴ Naipaul, *In a Free State* 57.

Willie began to understand that he was free to present himself as he wished.

He could, as it were, write his own revolution. The possibilities were dizzying.

He could, within reason, re-make himself and his past and his ancestry. ...

It excited him, and began to give him a feeling of power.²⁵

Typically for a Naipaul character, Willie's feeling of power comes to him as an individual, when he is alone, rather than as a member of a group. 'His own revolution' is not likely to help the 'backward' community in any way. When he does join the rebels in the sequel *Magic Seeds*, shamed into it by his sister's accusations of self-centredness and her comparisons of his life with Gandhi's, the revolution brings no good to anyone: the sacrifices they make are futile and meaningless, and Willie, safely back in London, alone and once again without direction, concludes that 'it is wrong to have an ideal view of the world. That's where the mischief starts.'²⁶

Each of these figures could be said to have some elements of the diasporic, though Santosh and Willie both leave India as individuals for different, personal reasons rather than as part of a larger pattern of migration. Indar shares the background of Salim, the narrator-protagonist of *A Bend in a River* – the east African coast which 'was an Arab-Indian-Persian-Portuguese place.' Salim's family, from north-western Indian, were part of a diaspora, but 'when we had come no one could tell me. We were not that kind of people.'²⁷ Each of them could in some sense represent an alternative history of Naipaul's own life, if things had gone differently – if some element of luck or ambition had aligned differently. None of these characters, however, share Naipaul's family background of indenture. Willie's sister Sarojini, in *Magic Seeds*, uses a story of indenture from Gandhi's autobiography to heighten

²⁵ V.S. Naipaul, *Half a Life* (London: Picador, 2001) 60-1.

²⁶ V.S. Naipaul, *Magic Seeds* (New York: Knopf, 2004) 280.

²⁷ Naipaul, *Bend* 17.

Willie's political consciousness, a story about an 'indentured Tamil labourer with the bloody head ... beaten up by the planter to whom he had been indentured. The transplanted serfs of the empire, with no rights at all.'²⁸ One descendant of these 'transplanted serfs' is the narrator of 'Tell Me Who to Kill', the most disturbed and adrift of all Naipaul's characters, quite unable to make sense of his life. This man – never named in the story – is from a rural area of a Caribbean island, perhaps Trinidad, underprivileged, without the opportunity for education afforded to his younger brother Dayo, or to other descendants of indentured labourers whose families had moved to the towns, as have Ralph Singh's family in *The Mimic Men*, or indeed Naipaul himself. Indenture is certainly, as Mishra states, integral to Naipaul's work – 'the experience of indenture is given artistic form in his works and ... the artistic documentation of the effects of indenture is part of their internal structure.'²⁹ This does not mean, of course, that the background of indenture has equivalent effects on different characters. As Dayo's brother says, 'We all come out of the same pot, but some people move ahead and some people get left behind.'³⁰ Dayo's brother perhaps, like Bogart (the man on whom the character in *Miguel Street* was based, and whom Naipaul tracked down later, as described in *Finding the Centre*) 'escaped too soon; still passive, he had settled for nullity.'³¹ Naipaul had, like many of his contemporaries, timed his escape better:

He [Bogart] had lived the life of freedom But though he appeared not to know it, the Hindu family life he had wanted to escape from – the life of our extended family, our clan – had disintegrated in Trinidad. The family Bogart had known in my grandmother's house in Port of Spain – neutered men,

²⁸ Naipaul, *Magic* 23.

²⁹ Mishra, (B)ordering 215.

³⁰ Naipaul, *In a Free State* 65.

³¹ Naipaul, *Finding* 49.

oppressed and cantankerous women, uneducated children – had scattered, and changed. To everyone there had come the wish to break away; and the disintegration of our private Hindu world – in all, we were fifty cousins – had released energy in people who might otherwise have remained passive. Many of my cousins, starting late, acquired professions, wealth; some migrated to more demanding lands.

For all its physical wretchedness and internal tensions, the life of the clan had given us all a start. It had given us a caste certainty, a high sense of the self.³²

Diaspora is shown here in a favourable light – at least the second diaspora of the clan, propelled by the sense of self given to the children and, judging from *A House for Mr Biswas*, this impulse would only have been encouraged by the almost obsessive emphasis on the children's education. Through this education, as foreign as it was in many of its aspects, they were able to envisage other futures for themselves in other worlds.

Among the previous generation the choice seemed to be between an escape to 'nullity', like Bogart's, or the confines of the Hindu world which entrapped Naipaul's aunt: 'My father's sister had spent all her life in Trinidad; but in her caste vision no other community mattered or properly existed.'³³ The exception, the person whose story is in a way even more remarkable than Naipaul's, is his father Seepersad, and once again it is through education that he escaped the narrow, impoverished world of his sister and his brother, who was sent to work in the cane-fields for eight cents a day – 'when he was old he would cry at the memory of those eight cents a day.'³⁴ But

³² Naipaul, *Finding* 48-9.

³³ Naipaul, *Finding* 56.

³⁴ Naipaul, *Finding* 58.

even then it was ‘to become a pundit and so fulfil the family destiny’ that Seepersad was educated, and, Naipaul suspects, his ambition to write, ‘in a small agricultural colony where writing was not an occupation’ was ‘a version of the pundit’s vocation.’³⁵ Thus the past of the diasporic community feeds into its future; thus, Naipaul found that escaping the past was only part of what was necessary to become a writer: ‘To become a writer, that noble thing, I had thought it necessary to leave. Actually to write, it was necessary to go back.’³⁶

He does not mean, however, that one should return and live in one’s childhood home (‘the career wasn’t possible in Trinidad, a small, mainly agricultural colony’³⁷), but that his material, as a writer, was to be found there. ‘Half a writer’s work ... is the discovery of his subject. And a problem for me was that my life had been varied, full of upheavals and moves. ... Trying to make a beginning as a writer, I didn’t know where to focus. ... My very particularity – which was the subject sitting on my shoulder – had been encumbering me.’³⁸ This sudden revelation, according to Naipaul’s own version of events, occurred in 1955 when he ‘wrote the first sentence of my first publishable book.’³⁹ He had, however, been writing about Trinidad before this, as can be seen from his letters to his father: ‘My, the stories that I seem to be writing. There is no lack of material. I feel sure a three-month stay in Trinidad would keep me writing for three years,’ he wrote in August 1953.⁴⁰ Part of Naipaul’s sensibility seems to be typified by this kind of impulse towards dramatisation of his past – not exactly falsification but rearranging the emphasis on certain aspects. No

³⁵ Naipaul, *Finding* 58.

³⁶ Naipaul, *Finding* 40.

³⁷ Naipaul, *Finding* 27.

³⁸ Naipaul, *Finding* 26-7.

³⁹ Naipaul, *Finding* 15.

⁴⁰ V.S. Naipaul, *Letters Between a Father and Son* ed. Gillon Aitken (London: Little, Brown, 1999) 291.

doubt this moment had been important, perhaps as a revelation of style rather than subject matter. He describes in *A Way in the World* his decision at about this time ‘to make a fresh start as a writer. I thought I would turn away from what I had done, and go back to the beginning: try to see whether I couldn’t make writing out of plain concrete statements, adding meaning to meaning in simple stages.’⁴¹ And along with the simplification of the style, there came another illumination: ‘that comedy, the preserver we in Trinidad had always known, was close to me, a double inheritance, from my story-telling Hindu family, and from the Creole street life of Port of Spain.’⁴² Thus he brings together three major elements in his work – material, style and humour – into a single life-changing era, a moment of reinvention with a talismanic quality which finally opened the door at which he had been waiting for admission for years.

There were, however, limits to what could be done with the Trinidad material: ‘That was a good place to begin. But I couldn’t stay there. My anxiety constantly to prove myself as a writer, the need to write another book and then another, led me away.’⁴³ In *Reading and Writing* he analysed his difficulties:

as a writer of fiction, barely understanding my world – our family background, our migration, the curious half-remembered India in which we continued to live for a generation ... I too could begin only with the externals of things. To do more, as I soon had to, since I had no idea or illusion of a complete world waiting for me somewhere, I had to find other ways.⁴⁴

⁴¹ V.S. Naipaul, *A Way in the World* (London: Minerva, 1995) 86.

⁴² Naipaul, *Way* 86.

⁴³ Naipaul, *Finding* 27.

⁴⁴ V.S. Naipaul, *Reading and Writing: A Personal Account* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2000) 55-6.

The absence of that ‘idea or illusion of a complete world’ seems to be a thoroughly characteristic feature of the diasporic sensibility, and that lack of illusion, that rootlessness, gives the writers of Indian diaspora much of their idiosyncratic freshness of vision, and makes them inventive in their search for material.

And so, beyond the Caribbean, Naipaul began investigating other parts of the world and using them as subjects both for fiction and non-fiction. Travel ‘broadened my world view; it showed me a changing world and took me out of my own colonial shell: it became the substitute for the mature social experience – the deepening knowledge of a society – which my background and the nature of my life denied me.’⁴⁵ First he went to India:

India was the greater hurt. It was a subject country. It was also the place from whose very great poverty our grandfathers had had to run away in the late nineteenth century. The two Indias were separate. The political India, of the freedom movement, had its great names. The other, more personal India was quite hidden; it vanished when memories faded. ...

It was to this personal India, and not the India of independence and its great names, that I went when the time came. But nothing had prepared me for the dereliction I saw.⁴⁶

An Area of Darkness was the result of this first trip to India, and although there are parts of the book which seem almost like a mini-novel (the account of Naipaul’s time in Srinagar, for example) the experience did not result in a novel. He later wrote:

For every kind of experience there is a proper form, and I do not see what novel I could have written about India. Fiction works best in a confined moral and cultural area, where the rules are generally known; and in that confined

⁴⁵ Naipaul, *Finding* 11.

⁴⁶ Naipaul, *Reading* 43-4.

area it deals best with things – emotions, impulses, moral anxieties – that would be unseizable or incomplete in other literary forms.

The experience I had had was particular to me. To do a novel about it, it would have been necessary to create someone like myself, someone of my ancestry and background, and to work out some business which would have taken this person to India. It would have been necessary more or less to duplicate the original experience, and it would have added nothing.⁴⁷

Interestingly, during this trip to India he wrote *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion*, in which, almost uniquely among his novels, he did not ‘create someone like myself, someone of my ancestry and background’, a decision he came to regret: ‘I like the excellent material, still, but I felt it was thrown away by my suppression of the narrator, the observer who was an essential part of the story.’⁴⁸ *Mr Stone* is an attempt – largely successful – to inhabit a different kind of cultural sensibility from his own, though if the novel is read carefully, it can be seen that elements of Naipaul’s world are faintly visible in the background.⁴⁹ However, as French points out, ‘*Mr Stone and the Knights Companion* was a feat, but it did not offer a way forward as a writer. He could not write further novels about dull life in London, nor could he return to the world of *Miguel Street*: his knowledge and his patois were out of date.’⁵⁰ And in the world Naipaul travelled to see he found diasporic elements everywhere. In *Finding the Centre* he writes,

⁴⁷ Naipaul, *Reading* 49-50.

⁴⁸ Aamer Hussein, ‘Delivering the Truth: An Interview with V.S. Naipaul’, *Conversations with V.S. Naipaul* ed. Feroza Jussawalla (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997) 156.

⁴⁹ See Gillian Dooley, ‘Naipaul’s ‘Fraudulent’ London Novel: *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion*,’ *Journal of Contemporary Literature* (forthcoming 2009) for a discussion of these elements.

⁵⁰ French 226.

The people I found, the people I was attracted to, were not unlike myself.

They too were trying to find order in their world, looking for the centre. ... A writer after a time carries his world with him, his own burden of experience, human experience and literary experience (one deepening the other); and I do believe ... that I would have found equivalent connections with my past and myself wherever I had gone.⁵¹

There were expatriates in the Ivory Coast, like Philip, an Englishman who had become 'a man out of his country, a man moving between two continents: one place always made bearable by the prospect of departure for another.'⁵² People like this were easier for Naipaul to understand than the indigenous people. From the time of his earliest travels, related in *The Middle Passage*, he had found indigenous people opaque: 'I had tried hard to feel interest in the Amerindians as a whole, but had failed. I couldn't read their faces; I couldn't understand their language, and could never gauge at what level communication was possible.'⁵³ He had similar problems in Africa. Time and again in his fiction and non-fiction we find this kind of bafflement with people of completely different backgrounds, which some have labelled racist.⁵⁴ His usual recourse is to focus on those he understands, while the rest remain defined by their difference, absolutely Other. This tendency is clear in *In a Free State, A Bend in the River, Half a Life* and 'The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro' (in *Finding the Centre*); Africans appear in these books seen through the eyes of an expatriate or traveller, never from their own point of view, and there is always a certain difficulty in interpreting their society and culture, and in communicating with them. This seems only logical in a writer for whom the personal perspective is paramount: in *Mr Stone*

⁵¹ Naipaul, *Finding* 10.

⁵² Naipaul, *Finding* 125.

⁵³ V.S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage* (New York: Macmillan, 1963) 102.

⁵⁴ See for example Mishra, (B)ordering 216.

he had experimented with an alien view, one to which his own world was the complete Other, but he felt this to be deeply fraudulent and he never attempted a similar experiment again. One expatriate Naipaul met in the Ivory Coast told him stories of human sacrifice and other alien African ways:

I believed what this man said. He liked living in Africa; he had worked nowhere else; he could work nowhere else. His directness came from his acceptance of African ways. But his acceptance went with a correct distancing of himself from the continent and its people. And for him that perhaps was the charm of the expatriate life: the heightened sense of self that Africa gave.⁵⁵

Others, like Father Huismans in *A Bend in the River*, failed to keep the 'correct' distance: he had 'read too much in that mingling of the peoples by our river; and he had paid for it' with his life.⁵⁶

But more interesting to Naipaul than these expatriates – westerners who had chosen to spend their lives in another country – were the diasporic Africans who had returned to live in Africa. Two women he met in the Ivory Coast were *antillaises*, francophone West Indian women of African ancestry who had married African men in Paris:

Antillaises could be deceived in Paris. They could be dazzled by a man who said he came of a chief's family and had so many slaves and servants ... at home. West Indian women, with their own idea of love, could find in an African's declaration of love and even his offer of marriage things the man never intended. A West Indian woman in the Ivory Coast was without tribe or family; her African husband could, without guilt, say goodbye. If an Ivorian brought home a foreign wife his family chose an African wife for him and sent

⁵⁵ Naipaul, *Finding* 141.

⁵⁶ Naipaul, *Bend* 87.

her to the house. If the African wife wasn't accepted, the man's family laid a curse on the man. And the man was so terrified of the curse ... that he usually obeyed.⁵⁷

This is the situation explained to Naipaul by Arlette, who speaks from personal experience. He admires Arlette's attitude: 'To live in Africa, she said, was to have all one's ideas and values questioned. And it was good, she added, for that to happen. So ... what seemed like criticism of Africa turned out not to be criticism at all.'⁵⁸

Nevertheless, racial solidarity was not to be found by returned members of the African diaspora: their experience tended to be even less comfortable than Naipaul's in India. One difficulty for the diasporic returnees in Africa resulted from their ideas of themselves as superior to the Africans:

Arlette said that in the Ivory Coast the French West Indians, *les antillais*, behaved like French people. They looked down on the Africans, and – because they thought of themselves as civilized and French – they expected the Africans to look up to them. ... The West Indians made an error; Africans looked up to nobody; and life was as a result full of stress for some West Indians in the Ivory Coast.⁵⁹

Furthermore,

To be black was not to be African or find community with Africans. Many West Indian women who had married Africans had found that. ... It was easier for a white woman to marry an African The white woman would know she was marrying exotically; that would be part of the attraction. The West

⁵⁷ Naipaul, *Finding* 106.

⁵⁸ Naipaul, *Finding* 106.

⁵⁹ Naipaul, *Finding* 92.

Indian woman, with her own racial ideas, would be looking in Africa for a double security.⁶⁰

These observations come from Janet, a black Guyanese, brought up in England, who was married to the English expatriate Philip. This triply diasporic woman ‘had no anxieties about “belonging”’, regarding herself as ‘someone “from England”’.⁶¹ Janet has happily left ‘the political nastiness of independent Guyana’⁶² behind her; another West Indian, Andrée from Guadeloupe, who had been married to an African and abandoned by her husband, looked to France as her home, though she was ‘trapped’ in the Ivory Coast.⁶³

As for Naipaul, accepting the Nobel Prize he called England ‘my home,’ and like these women discounted his Caribbean birthplace.⁶⁴ However, in *The Enigma of Arrival* he meditates at length on his new home in England, comparing it in many ways with Trinidad – the idea of gardening in both places, for example, and the way the English language is used – and relating his journey from Trinidad to Wiltshire. He had expected to find a whole world in England, full of settled, deep-rooted people in contrast to his own rootless state. ‘But I had hardly begun to look, the land and its life had hardly begun to shape itself about me, when things began to change.’⁶⁵ Was this merely a matter of his own personal vision, ‘the decadence that was in my eye,’⁶⁶ or was this idea of flux and decay real? He resolves this by contemplating his neighbour Jack’s life and death:

⁶⁰ Naipaul, *Finding* 123.

⁶¹ Naipaul, *Finding* 123.

⁶² Naipaul, *Finding* 123.

⁶³ Naipaul, *Finding* 102.

⁶⁴ French xii.

⁶⁵ V.S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival* (London: Penguin, 1987) 51.

⁶⁶ Naipaul, *Enigma* 77.

I had seen Jack as solid, rooted in his earth. But I had also seen him as something from the past, a remnant, something that would be swept away before my camera would get the pictures. My ideas about Jack were wrong. He was not exactly a remnant; he had created his own life, his own world, almost his own continent. But the world about him, which he so enjoyed and used, was too precious not to be used by others. And it was only when he had gone, when the town workers who had replaced him had gone, it was only then that I saw how tenuous, really, the hold of all of these people had been on the land they worked or lived in.⁶⁷

This tenuous hold seems to extend to the human condition: even the estate inherited by the reclusive landlord has been whittled down from its former extensive glory, and ‘the future was so easy to see: a hotel or a school or foundation taking over the big house and setting the decayed grounds to rights.’⁶⁸ Thus Naipaul comes to the understanding that what he had thought of as his own ‘especially tender or raw sense of an unaccommodating world’⁶⁹ is perhaps nothing more nor less than the human predicament. Perhaps only in African culture could be seen the kind of wholeness he had looked for in the old world of England. In *The Loss of El Dorado* he described the terror of sorcery among the slaves in Trinidad at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the Ivory Coast he encountered the same phenomena:

Magic and poison – in the old documents of the islands, they had seemed like the weapons of despair; and they probably had been. Here in the Ivory Coast

⁶⁷ Naipaul, *Enigma* 87.

⁶⁸ Naipaul, *Enigma* 53.

⁶⁹ Naipaul, *Enigma* 87.

they were part of a world that was still whole. ... Men here knew another reality; they lived easily in a world of spirit and spirits.⁷⁰

However, Naipaul never seems to have tried to get close enough to this world to test its wholeness. Perhaps, if he had similar access to the world of Africa as he had gained to Wiltshire life, he would discover that this world was also tenuous and subject to change and decay. And perhaps there is a hint of this in the story of the mysterious events in the village of Kilometre 17 in the Ivory Coast, where a person possessed by evil spirits was said to have been exorcised by the Celestial Christians:

The visitor saw the highways and skyscrapers of Abidjan, and he thought of development and African success. But Abidjan was in Africa, and in the minds of the people the world was to be made safe in another way as well. The reassuring message in the government-controlled press was that there was light at either end of the African tunnel.⁷¹

The Africans still living in Africa – those who have not been dispersed by slavery and the other forces of empire and modernity – are perhaps the least diasporic people in the world, if the accepted theories of human evolution are correct. But no place on earth is immune to change. Naipaul seems to see Africa as invulnerable: in ‘The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro’ the emphasis is on the effect Africa has upon those who come from abroad, but despite the wholeness and strength Naipaul senses in African society, and his anxiety about the fate of the modern buildings erected by foreigners, once those foreigners are no longer in Africa to look after them (‘would the faith survive? Or would Africans be claimed by another idea of reality?’⁷²) history shows, of course, plenty of evidence of a corresponding effect of expatriates –

⁷⁰ Naipaul, *Finding* 89.

⁷¹ Naipaul, *Finding* 86.

⁷² Naipaul, *Finding* 136.

imperialists and exploiters – upon African society. Naipaul makes no apology for this bias: ‘The intellectual adventure is also a human one: I can move only according to my sympathy. . . . And in the Ivory Coast I moved in the main among expatriates, white and black.’⁷³

Despite his settled home base in Wiltshire, where he has lived now for nearly four decades, Naipaul himself has been a traveller. French’s biography charts the range of his travels, and the extent to which travel has shaped his life. In *Finding the Centre* he relates a dream which seems significant:

I dreamed I was on a roof or bridge. The material, of glass or transparent plastic, had begun to perish: seemingly melted at the edges. I asked whether the bridge would be mended. The answer was no. What had been built had been built; the roof or bridge I was on would crumble away. Was it safe, though? Could I cross. The answer was yes. The bridge was safe; I could cross. And in the dream that was the most important thing, because I wasn’t going to pass that way again.⁷⁴

There is much in this dream, not only the African tendency to let foreign technology decay, but also Naipaul’s sense of his own transience in this dangerous world, and the assurance of his personal safety as he passes through. It emphasises the safety to be found in continuous movement through the world, for someone like Naipaul, ejected from his ancestral home by the forces of history and cursed and blessed in equal measure with the compulsion constantly to travel:

I travel to discover other states of mind. And if for this intellectual adventure I go to places where people live restricted lives, it is because my curiosity is still dictated in part by my colonial Trinidad background. I go to places which,

⁷³ Naipaul, *Finding* 87.

⁷⁴ Naipaul, *Finding* 142.

however alien, connect in some way with what I already know. When my curiosity has been satisfied, when there are no more surprises, the intellectual adventure is over and I become anxious to leave.⁷⁵

The connection with ‘what I already know’ is often in the shape of a diasporic or expatriate community. He finds such communities in Mauritius, on Caribbean islands, and in South America. Even when travelling in the Islamic world, he devotes his attention not to the Arabs but the ‘converted peoples’:

Islam is in its origins an Arab religion. Everyone not an Arab who is a Muslim is a convert. Islam is not simply a matter of conscience or private belief. It makes imperial demands. A convert’s worldview alters. His holy places are in Arab lands; his sacred language is Arabic. His idea of history alters. He rejects his own; he becomes, whether he likes it or not, a part of the Arab story. The convert has to turn away from everything that is his. The disturbance for societies is immense, and even after a thousand years can remain unresolved; the turning away has to be done again and again.⁷⁶

Without entering into the validity of this controversial assertion, it is nevertheless possible to see parallels between what Naipaul is decrying here, and the kind of disturbance caused by the ‘imperial demands’ made by Western societies upon his ancestors and those of other people like him, the dispersed millions of the world, even though there is not necessarily any physical dispersal involved in the conversion of societies to Islam.

So for Naipaul, the feeling of being uprooted and deracinated, which may have started with his first move from the security of all he knew to the new, exciting

⁷⁵ Naipaul, *Finding* 87.

⁷⁶ V.S. Naipaul, *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples* (New York: Random House, 1998) xi.

world of Port of Spain at the age of six, became, paradoxically, his means of making a place for himself in the world. He talks of his fear of extinction, bequeathed by his father: ‘That was his subsidiary gift to me. That fear became mine as well. It was linked with the idea of the vocation: the fear could be combated only by the exercise of the vocation.’⁷⁷ The compulsion to write and keep writing against all discouragement is fed by this fear of extinction by an uncaring world in which the writer has no natural place: in *The Enigma of Arrival* his state of mind is contrasted with his landlord’s situation:

Whatever my spiritual state at the moment of arrival, I knew I would have to save myself and look for health; I knew I would have to act at some time. His privilege—his house, his staff, his income, the acres he could look down at every day and know to be his—this privilege could press him down into himself, into non-doing and nullity.⁷⁸

In contrast, he found that ‘there was a special anguish attached to the career: whatever the labour of any piece of writing, whatever its creative challenges and satisfactions, time had always taken me away from it. ... Emptiness, restlessness built up again; and it was necessary, out of my internal resources alone, to start on another book, to commit myself to that consuming process again.’⁷⁹ French sees this anguish and fear as inextricably linked to Naipaul’s rejection of Trinidad:

If you reject the land that formed you, as Naipaul began to do actively in his thirties, you become defined by that rejection. It provides you with a struggle. ... Naipaul’s dismissal of his homeland became part of his persona, a persona he invented in order to realize his early ambition to escape the periphery for

⁷⁷ Naipaul, *Finding* 72.

⁷⁸ Naipaul, *Enigma* 175.

⁷⁹ Naipaul, *Enigma* 94.

the centre, to leave the powerless for the powerful, and to make himself a great writer. ... His ambition was linked to fear, as it often is in an author or creative artist. ... Everyone has entanglements and rivalries ... : his attempt to avoid them and become solely 'the writer' was itself an act of pre-emptive rejection, which arose from anxiety and fear.⁸⁰

The ambition came from a unique combination of factors in Naipaul's childhood. Firstly, there was the early security of the closed world which gave him a Hindu 'caste certainty, a high sense of the self.'⁸¹ Then came the ambition and neurosis of his father, transmitted to him in childhood and reinforced by his father's early death, which made it a positive duty to continue and become the writer his father was prevented from being. Finally, the British education system offered Naipaul the skills and then the slender but successfully grasped opportunity to make good his flight to centre from periphery. If Naipaul had not been a member of diasporic community, benignly neglected within the British empire, perhaps that ambition would never have arisen, let alone been realised. Certainly the works produced by a more secure and settled Naipaul would have been totally different: perhaps more mature and judicious, but it is difficult to imagine that they would be as exciting, unsettling and brilliant as the books he has produced over the past fifty years.

⁸⁰ French xv.

⁸¹ Naipaul, *Finding* 48-9.

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