
V.S. Naipaul’s literary opus consists of a wide variety of works, traversing multiple genres in both fiction and non-fiction, to create a distinctive style of writing that has long been considered the prototype for the sub-genres they represent. Naipaul’s prolific career spanning over half a century has been peppered with a lively engagement with the politics of his native Trinidad and Tobago, and also of the chronologically post-colonial world. The Nobel Prize and Booker Prize-winning author of nearly 30 works has often been discussed in critical pieces, ranging from widely read tomes to obscure specialised research output, celebrated journal pieces to dissertations. It is at the juncture of the author’s writing over five decades that Ajay K. Chaubey’s V.S. Naipaul: An Anthology of 21st Century Criticism intervenes to produce a corpus of critical appraisals that delineate the author’s copious output. The book is divided into three sections and seventeen chapters which analyse Naipaul’s works from multiple critical perspectives. The volume also contains a comprehensive Introduction and a Foreword by Manjit Inder Singh, a notable figure in Naipaul scholarship.

The Foreword to the volume graphs the present prominence of Naipaul as a deft craftsman of fiction as well as non-fiction and foregrounds the necessity of the volume: ‘At this point of time when Naipaul’s works go back to nearly fifty-five years, and when awards and fame are behind him, there is a Naipaul curiously divided between admirers and detractors’ (vi). By constructing a binary in terms of subjectivity, the book never trivialises opposition but instead supports multiple views. The Introduction presents the arc of writing that exists on Naipaul. A veritably erudite essay, the Introduction combines the aesthetic tethering of Naipaul with the scholarly qualifications.

The book is divided into three sections titled ‘Contexts and Convergences in Naipaul’s Fictions’, ‘V.S. Naipaul’s Travel Narratives: A Post-colonial Passage to the Globe’, and ‘Identity, Home, Marital and Gender Discourse through Text/s: Critical Essays on V.S. Naipaul’s A House for Mr Biswas’ containing eight, four and five chapters respectively. The 17 chapters address myriad concerns in Naipaul’s writing and, while the first two sections offer wider surveys of the author’s works, the third and final section focuses on a single fiction work of Naipaul in an attempt to rigorously engage with the novel and to provide a framework for intensive critical survey of individual works by the author. The second section contains essays that accentuate the divide between the prefix ‘post-’ with its imperial-historical other, the ‘colonial’, and schematises Naipaul beyond his immediate cartographical periphery as a spokesperson for global travel.

The first chapter, Prakash Chandra Pradhan’s ‘Race, Ethnicity, Sexual Violence and Neocolonialism in V.S. Naipaul’s Guerillas: A Postcolonial Reading’, places Naipaul’s 1975 novel Guerillas in the context of multiple critical approaches – critical race studies and ethnicity, gender and sexuality studies, and a study of neocolonial power structures. The chapter is sufficiently exhaustive and serves as an apt initiation into the book by presenting an overlay that locates Naipaul’s writing on the literary and critical map of postcolonial Caribbean literature. The following chapter, ‘The Dialectics of Homelessness in V.S. Naipaul’s The Mystic Masseur and Half a Life’ by Vishnupriya Sengupta, deals with the contingencies of diaspora in the two works by Naipaul. Extensively locating Naipaul in comparison with Said, Sengupta successfully...
brings the textual and the critical together without the generic bias towards over-analysing the textual content.

The third chapter, Valiur Rahaman’s ‘Invention, Memory, and Place in Magic Seeds: A Perspective of Reading’, is a significant contribution, detailing one of Naipaul’s more recent works with a critical acumen that allows for diverse academic traditions to coalesce and create a ‘perspective of reading’ that cures the afflictions of reading as well. Although Said prefigures here too as an important critical standpoint the ontological enquiry into space and cognition helps develop a significant method for analysis applicable to other works of Naipaul as well. The fourth chapter, Chandan Kumar Panda’s ‘Affirming the Different: A Study of V.S. Naipaul’s Caribbean Fictions’, is a wider survey that bridges the lacuna generally found in specific studies that avoid linking the diverse oeuvre of Naipaul – often a daunting task. While the systemic rigour of the chapter may inadvertently produce a sense of limiting the study to a characterisation of difference in the novels discussed, the additional influx of Plato, Ricoeur and Koselleck provide essential milestones for intense engagement with generic envisionings of Naipaul’s writing.

Sayantan Pal Chowdhury’s ‘V.S. Naipaul’s Half a Life: A Study of Powerless Group of the Third World Women’ presents a study of a novel from a gender studies perspective, unlocking patterns that are useful across the study of Naipaul’s fictions. Paramita Ghosh’s ‘The Concept of Migration and Exile in V.S. Naipaul – A Selective Study’, builds a framework to study narratives of migration and displacement in Naipaul. ‘V.S. Naipaul: The Quest for Identity amid Deracination’ by Satendra Kumar and Balkar Singh proposes a survey from the purview of identity and race studies. This exhaustive chapter is an important part of the section, helping develop the statements from supporting chapters into a cogent whole.

Asis De’s ‘An Apology for Failure: Searching Home and Identity in V.S. Naipaul’s The Mimic Men’, a theoretically rich chapter appearing well into the volume, suitably rounds off the section. As per ‘contexts and convergences’ to which the section attests, De’s contribution is primed to project a suitable context of examination and a point of convergence and de-compartmentalisaton altogether highly essential for the vision of the volume to succeed.

The second section of the volume sets off with Shashank Shekhar Sharma and N.D.R. Chandra’s ‘Discourse on Travel Theory and Naipaul’s Travelogue: Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey’. The chapter, despite its primary focus on Among the Believers, deals comprehensively with travel narratives and theories of travel writing. Amod Kumar Rai’s ‘V.S. Naipaul: A Pioneer in Non-fiction Writing’ further sets the tone for the section, discussing Naipaul’s non-fiction endeavours, and thus balancing the act of critical comprehension of his fictions. Aju Mukhopadhyay reads into Naipaul’s assessment of his ancestral land in ‘V.S. Naipaul’s Reflections on India: A Critical Examination’. This offsets the perspectives of diaspora studies by looking at a crucial aspect of Naipaul’s travels – his travel back to the country of his ancestral origin. The 12th chapter of the volume, ‘Naipaul’s The Masque of Africa: Exploring History, Culture and Civilization’ by Bishun Kumar, engages Naipaul’s 2010 non-fiction work with a specific study of cartographical lineage as viewed by the author.

The first chapter of the third section, and the volume’s 13th chapter, ‘V.S. Naipaul’s A House for Mr Biswas: An Incessant Quest for Identity and Independence’ by Madhu Sharma, discusses the fundamental issues of the novel in a lucid way, addressing the same from a perspective agreeable to intermediate readers and seasoned scholars alike. Vineet Kashyap’s ‘Significance of “Home” in V.S. Naipaul’s A House for Mr Biswas’ considers within its remit the linguistic/lingual metaphor of home and dissects the underlying diasporic consciousness

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operating in Naipaul’s psyche as he sends his protagonist on a consistently thwarted quest for a shelter or a space of belonging.

Deepak Kumar and Shagufta Naj in their essay ‘Anguish and Defeat of Unhoused and Unnecessary: A Critical Study of V.S. Naipaul’s A House for Mr Biswas’ extend on the premise developed by the previous two essays, intensifying the postcolonial engagement with the novel to yield newer results. Mujeeb Ali Murshed Qasim’s ‘The Theme of Marriage in V.S. Naipaul’s A House for Mr Biswas’ applies theoretical underpinnings of gender studies to unlock the dimensions of patriarchal diasporic overtures in the novel. ‘Fossilized Folks: Women in Naipaul’s A House for Mr Biswas, The Mystic Masseur and Half a Life’ undertakes the gender studies perspective in a wider applicability, reading into three of the author’s works in a systematic and methodical engagement that allows for a broadening of outlook with regard to the way Naipaul addresses women in his works.

There exist critical volumes on Naipaul which endorse an erudition that is lost on the reader who attempts to grasp the subject. There are also such volumes that overtly trivialise the subject and render it in a manner that scholarly engagement is denied. Though there certainly do exist volumes that transcend this binary and situate themselves in various genres, it must be noted that the present volume is successful in distilling the strengths of the two dominant patterns. The voluminous exercise into unravelling and decoding the fictions, narratives, techniques and arrangements of Naipaul leaves little to be desired. It is a holistic critical endeavour that endorses critical engagement rather than passive absorption of critical materials. A thoroughly well-edited book, V.S. Naipaul: An Anthology of 21st Century Criticism presents Naipaul’s writings through a scholarly lens that is densely as well as lucidly populated by critical terminology necessary to delve into the author’s writings, his “archaeology of knowledge”, which has the exceptional flair to intermingle murky places and people’ (xviii).

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