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Colonial anxieties: The psychological importance of place in the writing of V. S. Naipaul

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COLONIAL ANXIETIES: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPORTANCE OF PLACE IN THE WRITING OF V. S. NAIPAUL

by

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Table of Contents

Introduction

In V. S. Naipaul's A Bend in the River, an Indian, who has grown up in Africa and has spent several years studying in England, returns home to Africa and describes to his friend what it was like in the "outside world":

> We feel of the great world that it is simply there, something for the lucky ones among us to explore, and then only at the edges. It never occurs to us to make some contribution to it ourselves. And that is why we miss everything.[1]

The point-of-view here is typical of the characters in Naipaul's fiction. He has given a voice and a central place in Western literature to those who were considered peripheral, the inhabitants of those "dark places of the earth" -- the colonial societies of Africa, Asia, and the West Indies.

In a sense he can be seen as following in the footsteps of Kipling, Conrad, and Forster who ventured before him into those "dark" regions. In an article on Naipaul, Hana Wirth Nesher writes: "When it comes to depicting the colonized society in English literature, the line that begins with Kipling, Conrad, and Forster leads to

Naipaul."[2] But Naipaul differs from these writers in a significant way; as a West Indian, he writes from the point-of-view of one who has himself experienced colonialism.

To speak about the literature which "depicts colonized society" (to use Hana Wirth Nesher's words), it seems important to make a distinction between the literature of empire, as the writing of Kipling, Conrad and Forster might be called, and colonial literature, works written by writers from the colonies (now former colonies). In the literature of empire, the point-of-view usually begins at the center (the mother country) and moves out towards the peripheral territories which make up the empire. Conrad's Heart of Darkness is an example. In colonial literature, the opposite occurs; the point-of-view begins at the periphery of the empire and looks toward the center or mother country as in Naipaul's A Bend in the River. This leads to another distinction. In the literature of empire, the native of the colonies (or colonial) is seen by the narrator as "other" and has little or no self-awareness. In colonial literature, the native is aware of himself as "other" in relation to the mother country, and this complex self-awareness is the point from which the world around him is seen and described.

This sense of being "other" and the feeling that one's society is peripheral are part of the psychological reality

of colonialism, and Naipaul's emphasis on this internal or psychological reality is a distinguishing feature of his writing.

For the Indian character then, in A Bend in the River, the idea of "the great world" as something "only the lucky ones explore" is more than a sense of actual limitations; it is an emotional reality, a matter of vision. And the sense of oneself as "other" or peripheral continues to be true even for those "lucky ones" who venture into "the great world." In a short story by Naipaul called "One Out of Many" an Indian servant follows his employer from Bombay to Washington D. C. On his first night in America, confused and "aching for the Bombay ways," he lays his bedding down in the carpeted corridor outside his employer's apartment door. It is the first in a series of comic and touching errors springing from his sense of displacement. The more he accommodates himself to American life, the more alienated he becomes: "In this city I was alone and it didn't matter what I did (IFS, 56)."

Naipaul's concern with this complex awareness of oneself in relation to "the great world" is evident not only in his fiction but also in his non-fiction. In India: A Wounded Civilization Naipaul describes Gandhi's journey from India to England to study law. It strikes Naipaul as having been "a brave thing to do ... not the English

law ... but the journey itself (IWC,101)." He quotes from Gandhi's autobiography the detailed account of the food he brought with him, the food on board which he refused, the suit he wore on landing, and so on. "The adventure never ceased to be internal," Naipaul observes, and he continues:

> That is the voyage: an internal adventure of anxieties felt and food eaten, with not a word of anything seen or heard that did not directly affect the physical or mental well-being of the writer. The inward concentration is fierce, the self-absorption complete (IWC, 102).

For Naipaul himself, travelling has been the thing which he claims has taken him out of his "colonial shell." His own anguished experience as a traveler and colonial -- "the rawness of my nerves as a colonial travelling among colonials" -- is the focus of much of his writing. The journey, the arrival, and the place are responded to in an intensely subjective manner, and anxieties arising from colonial self-awareness, that sense of being peripheral, dominate the narrator's vision. The titles of two books speak for themselves: Finding the Center and The Enigma of Arrival. In these two autobiographical works Naipaul exposes in himself the same insecurities, blunders, and

bristling self-consciousness that we find in his fictional characters. In The Enigma of Arrival, he explains:

> ... because of my insecure past -- peasant India, colonial Trinidad, my own family circumstances, the colonial grandeur of my ambition...because of this I had been given an especially tender and raw sense of an unaccommodating world (EA, 92).

This dissertation draws attention to the psychological importance of place in Naipaul's writing. "Place" in his writing may mean what one has left behind as well as the situation into which one arrives. In either case, what is predominant is the heightened awareness of oneself in relation to place. As Naipaul himself expressed it in regard to Gandhi's journey to England, it is not the external features of a journey or a place which occupy the colonial's thoughts so much as the "internal adventure of anxieties." The problematic relationship between self and place in Naipaul's writing (implied in phrases like "an unaccommodating world") has its origins in his colonial background and can be described as his own "internal adventure of anxieties."

There is a dichotomy at the center of Naipaul's intense response to place: he has neither been able to feel at ease

with his colonial heritage nor relinquish its hold on his literary imagination.

His feelings about his colonial past are expressed in his writing in mixed tones of hostility, prejudice, and nostalgia. This in turn has led to a great deal of antagonistic criticism of his work. Some critics have described him as "reactionary," "imperialist" and "racist." At the root of this kind of criticism is the frustrated attempt on the part of many readers to determine Naipaul's allegiance in terms of race and politics. As an Indian from the West Indies living in England and writing about many places, he seems not to be attached to any particular society. Yet few writers have stirred up so much controversial response to their work based on racial and political grounds. One critic wrote of his early novels: "Naipaul's whole purpose is to show how funny Trinidad Indians are."[3] Another wrote: "He apparently has no sympathy for the understandable human deceits meant to serve national or ethnic pride."[4] And a recent study describes him as "entrenched within the dominant imperial discourse of his age."[5]

A more appreciative accessment of Naipaul's enigmatic role comes from L. D. Nachman in "The Worlds of V. S. Naipaul":

> What is beyond explanation is that Naipaul did not slip into the role which the post-war, post-colonial world fashioned for him. He could have been the lionized critic of Western failings, the voice and spokesman for the victims of Western power and success. Instead he has somehow gained the intellectual freedom to perceive the world undistorted by the reigning ideologies and the current sentimentalities.[6]

Although I agree with Nachman that Naipaul has refused to "slip into the role" of spokesman for the victims of Western power, I find the conclusion he draws from this somewhat naive. To "become a powerful critic of that very role" is clearly to take on the opposite role. And Naipaul's perceptions of the world, if "undistorted by the reigning ideologies," have nevertheless been "distorted" by his own colonial experience.

Nachman's view of Naipaul is typical of what Selwyn Cudjoe, in his recent book V. S. Naipaul: A Materialist Reading, calls an "idealist" approach. Cudjoe argues that "First World" critics of Naipaul "reduce the entire critical enterprise to a search for confirmatory and presupposed judgements about their own reality...[and] the

result is a game of mirrored reflections in which critics attempt to see how well colonial reality confirms their expectations of what it ought to be."[7] Cudjoe raises an interesting issue in the interpretation of colonial literature. The question of the "other" moves from the literary work itself to the critical text where distinctions begin to be made between "First World" and "Third World" critics and their different ways of seeing. As valid and interesting as this seems, Cudjoe's ideas about Naipaul's "First World" critics are over-generalized, and he inadvertently falls into a similar "game of mirrored reflections" by seeking to confirm his own ideas about Third World reality.

This dissertation is not an "idealist" reading of V. S. Naipaul's work. It does not simply restate or confirm Naipaul's view of the world but gives deep consideration to those recurring images and ideas which have been interpreted as Naipaul's negative portrayal of Third World societies and which have offended many Third World readers. However, my focus is on the writer himself and not on colonial and postcolonial societies. "Materialist" readings of Naipaul which view him as misrepresenting certain social and political realities fail to acknowledge the autobiographical implications of his work. They fail

to see the artist himself as "exemplary sufferer" (to use Susan Sontag's term)[8] and his art as a continuing effort to reconcile himself to these realities.

My approach to Naipaul's work is biographical; however, this dissertation cannot be read as a biography. Five of the six chapters are devoted to a critical analysis of Naipaul's works. The first chapter alone closely examines Naipaul's background: the colonial history which brought Naipaul's grandparents to the island of Trinidad, Naipaul's early family life, and his early colonial education. From this full picture of Naipaul's background the ideas about self in relation to place can be more readily grasped in those works that will be discussed.

My discussion of colonialism centers mainly on those countries under British rule up until the middle of the twentieth century -- countries of Africa, the West Indies and India -- though in my analysis of A Bend in the River which is set in Zaire, my discussion naturally broadens to include the Belgian presence in the Congo. The "mother country" referred to throughout these chapters is England, and the term is used to highlight the dependence on England which was so much part of the colonial experience. I use the word "colonial" in reference to Naipaul and his work in the same manner in which Naipaul himself uses it:

to describe a state of mind and a way of looking at the world which has arisen out of the colonial experience. Although his own country, Trinidad, has been independent for almost thirty years, and the term postcolonial now more appropriately describes the world of V. S. Naipaul, he continues to see and experience the world as a colonial.

"Place" has, for all writers, varying degrees of importance. For the colonial writer it has been particularly complex. Just as the native of the colonies had for so long been described as the shadowy "other"in Western literature, his world was depicted as shapeless and barbaric. In an essay called "Conrad's Darkness" Naipaul describes what it is like as a writer to belong to a "peripheral" society:

> It came to me that the great novelists wrote about highly organized societies. I had no such society; I couldn't share in the assumptions of the writers; I didn't see my world reflected in theirs. My colonial world was more mixed and secondhand, and more restricted. The time came when I began to ponder the mystery -- Conradian

> word -- of my own background: that island in the mouth of a great South American river, the Orinoco, one of the Conradian dark places of the earth...(REP, 230).

For Naipaul, growing up in Trinidad while it was still a colony, there was no national literature in which he could see the society familiar to him reflected. He expresses his "indebtedness" to Conrad as "someone who sixty to seventy years ago meditated on my world, a world I recognize today." Indebtedness on my own part -- to Naipaul -- is one of the reasons I have chosen to write about him. His novel, A House for Mr. Biswas, was the first West Indian novel ever offered in a literature course when I was a high school student in the West Indies. The significance for me then, as now, was not in Naipaul's description of "externals" which were familiar and accessible, but his description of what was less accessible and less capable of being articulated -- the psychological realities of colonial life.

[1] V. S. Naipaul, A Bend in the River (New York: Vintage, 1980), p.142 (All subsequent quotations from V. S. Naipaul's books are from the editions listed in Primary Works).

[2] Hana Wirth Nesher, "The Curse of Marginality," Modern Fiction Studies, Autumn, 1984, p.531.

[3] Cited by Naipaul in The Overcrowded Barracoon (New York: Vintage, 1984), p.11

[4] Robert Hemenway, "Sex and Politics in V. S. Naipaul," Studies in the Novel, 14 (1982), p.199.

[5] Selwyn Cudjoe, V. S. Naipaul: A Materialist Reading (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1989), p.226.

[6] L. D. Nachman, "The Worlds of V. S. Naipaul," Salmagundi, 54 (1981), p.62.

[7] Cudjoe, V. S. Naipaul, p.6.

[8] Susan Sontag, "The Artist as Exemplary Sufferer" in Against Interpretation (New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 1967), pp 40-48.

1. East Indian West Indian: Colonial History and the Early Years of the Writer

> The history of the islands can never be satisfactorily told (MP, 29).

In an essay, "The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro," describing his trip to the Ivory Coast, Naipaul writes: "I go to places where people live restricted lives because my curiosity is still dictated in part by my Trinidadian background (FC, 90)." It is not immediately clear what we are to assume about this "Trinidadian background" or how such a background gives Naipaul a special empathy with those whose lives are "restricted." In an effort to understand the man behind the work, critics have come up with a variety of terms to describe him including "man without a society" and "transplanted Indian." What these terms capture is the powerful sense of alienation that prevails in Naipaul's work. A pertinent question then, in a study of Naipaul's life and work, is what precisely is it about his Trinidadian background that has given him this overwhelming sense of alienation.

The complexity of Naipaul's origins continues to be a rich, if unsettling, source of material for him as a

writer. In an article, "East Indian," he describes meeting a fellow-traveller, a man from India, in an airport lounge:

> "You are coming from -- "
>
> "Trinidad," I said. "In the West Indies. And you?"
>
> He ignored my question. "But you look Indian."
>
> "I am."
>
> "Red Indian?" He suppressed a nervous little giggle.
>
> "East Indian. From the West Indies (OB, 30)."

The words "East Indian" and "West Indian" together point to the duplicity of Naipaul's heritage: he is "West Indian," born in Trinidad and "East Indian," the descendant of Indian immigrants.

The words "East Indian" and "West Indian" also express something of the duplicity and intricacy of West Indian colonial history. The West Indian poet Derek Walcott writes: "...we live like our names and you would have / to be colonial to know the difference, / to know the pain of history words contain."[1] Walcott's words

pinpoint the underlying confusion in the exchange between Naipaul and the other traveller. The word "Indian" opens up onto a history of broken tradition and upheaval. "The pain of history words contain" also describes the sense of displacement inherent in the very words "West Indies." The late Prime Minister of Trinidad and historian, Eric Williams, had this to say about Columbus's discovery and naming -- or rather mis-naming --of the region:

> The idea that he had reached Asia became a veritable obsession with Columbus, who carried with him letters from the sovereigns of Spain to the Great Khan....The natives whose language he did not understand...he called 'Indians,' an appellation which has survived to this day to describe the aborigines of the New World, and the islands of the 'West Indies.'[2]

Naipaul takes a similarly ironic view: "So long as the real Indians remained on the other side of the world, there was little confusion. But when in 1845 these Indians began coming over to some of the islands Columbus had called the Indies, confusion became total (OB, 34)." Though his tone is whimsical here, Naipaul's typical attitude towards the

region's history is quite bitter and cynical. In The Middle Passage, he writes: "How can the history of this West Indian futility be told?...History is built around achievement and creation and nothing was created in the West Indies"(MP, 29). In his view it is a history of "brutality," and the words "East Indian" and "West Indian" together connote the painful uprooting of people.

Naipaul's homeland, Trinidad, is a small island, one-seventeenth the size of Ireland, lying off the coast of Venezuela. Its population consists of blacks of African descent, East Indians, Irish, Dutch, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Lebanese, and Syrian. South America's great Orinoco river cascades onto the island's western shore, and from many parts of the island one can see across to the mountains of the mainland.

Every European nation which participated in the conquest of the New World has left its mark on this tiny island. The names of towns like San Fernando and Port of Spain recall the days when the island was in the hands of the Spaniards and was a major stopping point for ships travelling between South America and Spain. Mon Plaisir and Blanchisseuse go back to the arrival of French settlers escaping from Toussaint L'Ouverture's revolution in Haiti. The English captured the island from the French during the Napoleonic War. Names like Mount Harris and

Jerningham Junction commemorate English governors. Sierra Leone Village and Congo Wood are links with the ancestral past for the people of Africa, as Malabar and Chandernagore are for the East Indians. And Tunapuna, birthplace of West Indian writer C. L. R. James, has had its Amerindian name since pre-colonial times.[3]

Out of this diverse collection of people, two races are dominant in Trinidad: black (43% of the population) and East Indian (36%).[4] The blacks are the descendents of slaves brought from Africa. The East Indians are descendents of indentured laborers brought to the islands after slavery was abolished. In 1845 when the Fatel Rozack, the first ship carrying Indian laborers, arrived in Trinidad, no one realized, as historian Donald Wood writes, that "a movement of people was being set in train that was to go on almost without interruption until 1917, and that the whole balance of ethnic forces ... was to be radically altered."[5]

Naipaul's great-grandmother travelled from Uttar Pradesh in Southern India with her infant son, Naipaul's grandfather. They were Brahmins, the highest caste, and Naipaul's great-grandmother was determined that her son would become a pundit (a holy teacher) in the new country. Naipaul's grandfather did in fact become a pundit.

"To leave India's sacred soil, to cross the 'black water' was considered an act of self-defilement" writes Naipaul, reflecting on the journey of his ancestors. "A hundred years ago the West Indies must have seemed like the end of the world (OB, 37)." Why did they go? What prompted an estimated half a million to leave their familiar villages for a world so distant and unknown? For most it was an escape from abject poverty and from the degradation of the caste system. When those of higher caste, like Naipaul's family, made the voyage, it was usually because they had committed a serious misdemeanor or broken a caste rule. Brahmins had to conceal their caste-origins to gain passage to the West Indies as they were considered unfit for agricultural work. The exact circumstances behind Naipaul's great-grandmother's departure are not known, but they must have been extraordinary. Naipaul writes that she "must have been deeply disgraced" -- a Brahmin woman alone with a child, boarding a ship for the West Indies (FC,52)."

Between 1845 and 1917, 145,000 Indians went to Trinidad to work on the sugar estates. They were not slaves, but in many ways the conditions of their indenture were comparable to the conditions of slavery. In some instances they were worse. They earned a weekly salary and were given food and clothing, but their housing conditions were deplorable.

The slave cottages with their small gardens gave way to wooden "barracks" with only a single room for an entire family. These barracks can still be seen in the sugar-growing areas of Trinidad, and Naipaul writes of them in A House for Mr. Biswas. The "Coolies," as the Indians came to be called, had to remain on the estates for the entire period of indenture -- usually 5 years. If found elsewhere without a certificate of leave they were imprisoned often with hard labour. Up until the early part of this century Trinidad blacks taunted East Indians with the question, "Slave, where is your free paper?"[6]

Naipaul attributes his "insecure past" and sense of displacement to this movement of his ancestors from India to the West Indies. Undoubtedly these first East Indians in Trinidad felt painfully alienated, confronting a strange, racially mixed society, a new language and a whole new landscape. However, as Keith Garebian observes in an article on Naipaul, displacement has been an experience common to all races in the West Indies:

> It is fallacious to think of the West Indies as a collection of societies whose landscapes have always formed an inseparable part of the inhabitants' consciousness and sensibility. The original landscape of Trinidad, for example, was

> an alien reality to all the African slaves, indentured Indian and Chinese labourers, and imported Europeans.[7]

Although it is true that Naipaul does not stand alone among West Indian writers in confronting a landscape to which he has no ancient connection, there is something Garebian does not take into account which distinguished the East Indians from all the others who came to the West Indies and which heightened their sense of displacement. Unlike the European settler and the African slave, the East Indian laborer came to the West Indies with a return passage to his homeland. So many returned when their indenture was over that the Colonial government offered them land to induce them to renew their contracts. Even then, though many stayed, they continued to think of themselves as only temporary residents and made no attempt to blend into colonial life. The possibility of return and its effect on East Indian attitudes towards Trinidad are things Naipaul takes into account when reflecting on his ancestry. "To my grandfather," writes Naipaul, "Trinidad was the interlude, the illusion (FC, 49)." His grandfather died in India on his way back to the village of Uttar Pradesh.

If on their part, the Indians made no attempt to become part of Creole Trinidadian society, Creoles, both black and white, looked upon the Indians as hopelessly out of place with their strange dress, language, customs and religions (both Hindus and Muslims went to the West Indies). Donald Wood writes in Trinidad in Transition:

> Concealed behind the term 'coolie,' with its derogatory undertone of ignorance and abject poverty, were men in a social system which had been touched only superficially by three and a half centuries of European influence....If Africans were regarded as clay which could easily be molded into a Christian and Western shape, the Hindus (and Muslims) of India were more like stone.[8]

About the "uprooting" of his ancestors Naipaul says, "It was less an uprooting than it appears. They were taking India with them. With their blinkered view of the world they were able to recreate Uttar Pradesh or Bihar wherever they went (OB, 37)." They did everything they could to preserve their identity. Their children were educated in Indian schools or not at all. Marriage outside the Indian community was strongly disapproved of, and still

is to some extent today. Hindu temples and mosques were built, marriages arranged as they had been in India, and religious ceremonies and festivals continued to be observed. "Living by themselves in villages," Naipaul writes, "the Indians were able to have a complete community life...it was a world of its own, a community within the colonial society... loyalties were narrow: to the family, the village (OB, 37)."

In An Area of Darkness Naipaul travels to India and contemplates the very opposite journey taken by his ancestors from India to Trinidad: "To me as a child the India that had produced so many of the persons and things around me was featureless, and I thought of the time when the transference was made as a period of darkness (AD,30)." Naipaul uses the word "darkness" also to describe the blindness of his ancestors in their attitude towards the New World. Naipaul says of his grandfather:

> [He] had made a difficult and courageous journey. It must have brought him into collision with startling sights, even like the sea, several miles from his village; yet I cannot help feeling that as soon as he had left his village he ceased to see....When he built his house he ignored every colonial style he

> might have found in Trinidad and put up a heavy flat-roofed oddity, whose image I was to see again and again in the ramshackle towns of Uttar Pradesh. He had abandoned India...he denied Trinidad...(AD, 30).

It was into this transplanted Indian society that Naipaul was born in 1932. He spent much of his childhood in his grandmother's house in Chaguanas, a rural, predominantly Indian, sugar-growing region. He speaks disdainfully of "the scattered nonentity" of being raised in a large extended family -- aunts, uncles, and cousins all under one roof. "Growing up in that sort of family" he says was "a crash course in the world," one that left him with "a lasting distaste for family life."[9] The family was ruled by Naipaul's maternal grandmother on whom the character of the matriarchal Mrs. Tulsi in A House for Mr. Biswas appears to be based. Like the large family in that novel who live in monumental disorder in "Hanuman House," the Naipauls lived with many branches of the family in Lion House. "It was a well known local 'big house,'" according to Naipaul, built in the North Indian style, with roof terraces and a main terrace decorated at each end with a statue of a lion. He describes it in An Area of Darkness:

> ...India lay about us in things:in a string bed or two, grimy, tattered no longer serving any function, never repaired because there was no one with this caste skill in Trinidad... in plaited straw mats;' in innumerable brass vessels... in brightly coloured pictures of deities on pink lotus or radiant against the Himalayan snow; and in all the paraphanalia of the prayer-room: the brass bells and gongs and camphor burners like Roman lamps...the images, the smooth pebbles, the stick of sandalwood (AD, 29).

Lion House was a world within a world. "To belong to that family," Naipaul writes "was to be in touch with much that was important to Indian life (FC, 63)." The Capildeos, his mother's family, were an orthodox Hindu family of importance in Chaguanas. One of Naipaul's uncles, Dr. Rudranath Capildeo, became the first leader of the predominantly Indian political party, the DLP.[10] The Capildeos were known advocates of Indian rights in Trinidad; they fought fiercely to preserve orthodox Hindu customs and fought within the Indian community for control over these matters. They became somewhat notorious in Chaguanas because of their involvement in feuds, vendettas,

bitter election battles, even murders.[11] During the 1940's and 50's when the nationalist movement was growing in Trinidad, the Capildeos, like many East Indians, showed allegiance neither to colonial nor nationalist factions but a continued allegiance to the "clan." In East Indians in Trinidad Yogendra Malik writes that the Indians saw the rise of nationalism with its popular black leaders as a threat to their own community.[12] Lion House was a boisterous center for local politics and also local news. When Naipaul's father became the Chaguanas correspondent for the Trinidad Guardian, he did not have to look far for a story. The Capildeos were so prominent and active in the community that, "Chaguanas news was often family news (FC, 63)."

The Chaguanas household was one world; Trinidad was another. Unlike his grandfather's generation, Naipaul says, "we who came after could not deny Trinidad (AD, 30)." These two worlds, the Indian world of Chaguanas and the rest of Trinidad, "were juxtaposed and mutually exclusive." He observes, "in one we existed as if in blinkers, as if in seeing no more than my grandfather's village" and in the other, "we were totally self-aware (AD, 35)."

As he moved in and out of both worlds, he became more aware of the incongruities. Not only was there the incongruity of being an East Indian in the West Indies, he

was also a Brahmin, and this made him "different" even within the Indian community. Though the caste system had for the most part broken down in the West Indies, it remained in attitudes to marriage and in the performance of religious rites. Naipaul describes how this caste difference affected him when he was growing up:

> ... occasionally, some devout Hindu...might wish to feed some Brahmins. We were at hand. We went; we were fed; we received gifts of cloth and money. We never questioned our luck. Luck indeed it seemed, for immediately afterwards, walking back home...we became ordinary boys again (AD, 32)."

The "ordinary boy" felt that his Brahmin privileges were "touched with fradulence." Naipaul describes these privileges and other orthodox Hindu rituals which continued to be observed in Trinidad as "the play of a people who have been cut off (OB, 35)."

Naipaul's empathy with those who find themselves alienated from their surroundings springs from a childhood of observing his own family in this light. Illustrating what he saw as the incongruity between the two worlds -- the East Indian world of his family and the Trinidadian

world outside -- he describes how his family once made "an open assault on the city":

> My grandmother wished to have a kattha said and she wished to have it said under a pipal tree. There was only one pipal tree in the island. It was in the Botanical Gardens. Permission was applied for. To my amazement it was given; and one Sunday morning we all sat under the pipal tree, botanically labelled, and the pundit read...bells were rung, gongs struck, conch shells blown. We attracted the silent interest of a small mixed crowd of morning strollers and the proselytizing attention of a Seventh Day Adventist. It was a scene of pure pastoral: aryan ritual, of another continent and another age, a few hundred yards away from the governor's house....For those of us at school at the time the public ceremony had been a strain. We were becoming self-conscious, self-assessing: our secret world was shrinking fast (AD, 32).

The picture Naipaul draws here is of a people who are as isolated in colonial Trinidad as the "botanically labelled"

pipal tree.

The scene also reveals a split in Naipaul's consciousness. He is himself a spectator of the family gathering and he is aware of being part of the spectacle. Not only is he doubly-aware; he is also doubly-alienated. Naipaul, as an "ordinary" Trinidadian schoolboy cannot fully participate in the ceremony. His feeling of unease among his own people is one kind of alienation. Then, as a member of the family he is cut off from the "mixed crowd of morning strollers" who represent Trinidadian society. He is alienated within a society which is itself alienated.

The sense of rootlessness one senses in Naipaul the writer comes not only from the upheaval and displacement of his Indian ancestors, but also from the domestic instability which marked his early life: "A problem for me was that my life had been very varied, full of upheavals and moves (FC, 18)." He recalls having lived in seven or eight different houses between his birth and the age of seven, and he says, "I think it is because one has lived this disordered life that I haven't been able to settle down even as an adult."[13]

Though Lion House remained the nucleus of the family and the center to which they kept returning, Naipaul's childhood was filled with moves back and forth from Chaguanas to the capital, Port of Spain, and also by moves

to many different houses within the capital. These domestic upheavals were very much like those described in A House for Mr. Biswas. As in the novel, these constant moves and family quarrels were a sign of the Hindu family tradition weakening under the pressure of a changing colonial world. "Inevitably this family life shrank" Naipaul writes, "the outside world intruded more (AD, 31,32)."

There were a few years of domestic tranquility when Naipaul's father moved the family away from "Lion House" to their own house in Port of Spain. Naipaul recalls this as the happiest period of his childhood. "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...the municipal order of each day: the early morning cleaning of the streets... (FC, 22)."

The move to Port of Spain was Naipaul's initiation into urban, working-class, multi-ethnic Trinidadian life, and it provided him with the material for his first book, Miguel Street. The section of town in which they lived was known as "Docksite." It was a gray, muddy, unpicturesque area of reclaimed land which had been dredged up from the nearby harbour. There was an American naval base and a brothel nearby, and "the Negro and GI life of its streets," as Naipaul describes it, provided rich and memorable images. There were fewer Indians in Port of Spain. For the first

time Naipaul was surrounded by people who were not part of the "clan" -- neighbors and familiar street characters who would be immortalized in Miguel Street. And after the broken Hindi-English of Chaguanas, Naipaul was daily immersed in the musical dialect of Trinidad.

But this pleasant sojourn in Port of Spain did not last long. After two years, Naipaul's parents were summoned back to the country by his grandmother to live and work on a cocoa estate she had acquired ("Short Hills" in A House for Mr. Biswas). This cocoa-growing adventure fell through, and they moved back to Port of Spain. But this time they were followed by in-laws and were squeezed into only a few rooms of the house. "There were desperate quarrels," Naipaul writes, "animosities and alliances shifted all the time." There were violent scenes, and his father's nerves deteriorated under the pressure of financial worries and the harrassment of living in the overcrowded house among his in-laws. Naipaul recalls his father, in one of his frequent rages, throwing a hot glass of milk across the room: "It cut me above the right eye; my eyebrow still shows the scar (FC, 27)."

Naipaul is stinging in his remarks about his early domestic surroundings. In an interview with David Levin he speaks with bitterness about the "barbarity" of his family. He says that there was one "civilizing" influence during

his childhood, his father who, despite his violent temper, was for Naipaul a figure of refinement:

> And then from another source within the family, I developed a feeling for things of beauty, for good manners, for writing, and I developed a fantasy, I suppose, of civilization as something existing away from this barbarity. The barbarity was double; the barbarity was my family and the barbarity outside.[14]

Naipaul's father, Seepersad Naipaul, was not a successful man. He was considered an eccentric and something of a pariah within the large extended family. He suffered from nervous breakdowns and violent fits of temper. The various jobs he took, first as a sign-painter and later as a journalist were never lucrative enough to enable him to support his family. So he "dangled all his life in a half-dependence" between a rich uncle and his wife's family. And from the latter, he had to put up with many indignities (FC, 21). He was, among other things, a fiction writer. His stories Gurudeva and Other Tales were published posthumously by V. S. Naipaul's publishers in England. During Seepersad Naipaul's lifetime they were published in Trinidad, but they did not bring him much

success or recognition. Colonial Trinidad had no place at that time for an Indian story-writer. And the family had little respect for his talent and what they considered his dilettante life-style. Like Mr. Biswas, in A House for Mr. Biswas the novel based on his life, Seepersad Naipaul felt himself to be painfully out of place in relation to his family and his society.[15] Alienated, mentally fragile, and intensely aware of the restrictions of his society, he appears to have been the model for the quintessential Naipaul character.

In the midst of all the disappointments and failures of his life, Seepersad Naipaul introduced his son, Vidiadhar, to the pleasures of writing and to literature. There was, first, a gift of English poems which he gave to him with the inscription: "Today you have reached the span of three years, ten months and fifteen days. And I make this present to you with this counsel in addition. Live up to the estate of man, follow truth, be kind and gentle, and trust God (FC, 71)." He read the works of Dickens and other writers aloud to him. Naipaul recalls his father reading Conrad's story, "The Lagoon," to him when he, Vidiadhar, was ten. He also remembers the stories of O. Henry as being among his father's favorites. There was a framed picture of O. Henry on the window sill above the bed where his father did much of his own writing.

For Naipaul's father to have been a journalist in colonial Trinidad during the 1930's and 40's was quite remarkable. Born in 1906 of poor agricultural workers, he was fortunate to have been educated in an English-run Christian school. Most children of Indian laborers if they were educated at all went to Hindu schools where they studied ancient Sanskrit texts. Many rural East Indians spoke only Hindi. As a journalist for the Trinidad Guardian (run at the time by an Englishman Gault MacGowan who took a particular interest in Indian life and an interest in developing Seepersad Naipaul's talent) Naipaul's father wrote about the Indian community and drew readers with his sensational headlines: CHAGUANAS MAN WRITES LINDBERGH -- "I KNOW WHERE YOUR BABY IS " -- and controversial ones -- TRINIDAD INDIANS ARE NOT SINCERE (FC, 57).

"The ambition to be a writer was given me by my father," says Naipaul, "as a fantasy of nobility."[16] It was during the excitement over the Trinidad publication of his father's stories, that it became settled "without any discussion...in my mind as well as my father's that I was to become a writer (FC, 30)."

His father's writing had an enormous effect on Naipaul. Along with encouraging him to pursue a writing career of his own, his father's stories influenced his own literary style. Anthony Boxill has written an extremely enlightening

article on the influence of Seepersad Naipaul's writing on his son's literary themes and style. He points out that the predominant themes of the Gurudeva stories are "entrapment and escape," themes which are also seen in Naipaul's work.[17]

The importance of his father's stories for Naipaul lay in their being the first stories in which he saw Indian life depicted, not romantically, but realistically. The people his father wrote about were poor agricultural labourers -- immigrants and the children of immigrants. There is very little plot, but much description of everyday life. Naipaul says that they "celebrated elemental things, the order of the working day, the labor of the rice fields, the lighting of the cooking fire in the half-walled gallery of a thatched hut (FC, 29)." In contrast to the works of English writers who described a world that was quite remote from his own, Naipaul saw his father's stories as "something of more pertinent virtue":

> [They] converted what I saw into "writing." It was through them that I began to appreciate the distorting, distilling power of the writer's art. Where I had seen a drab haphazardness they found order; where I would have attempted to romanticize, to render my subject equal with

> what I had read, they accepted. They provided a starting point for further observation (OB, 25).

Some years after his father's death, V. S. Naipaul found an unused passport among his father's belongings. The restrictions, unhappiness, and failure of his father's life were partly what convinced Naipaul to make a life for himself outside Trinidad.

At the end of Miguel Street, the young narrator describes leaving the island: "I left them all and walked briskly towards the aeroplane, not looking back, looking only at my shadow before me, a dancing dwarf on the tarmac (MS, 172)." In this picture of departure, a haunting image of what is being left behind "dances" before the narrator, almost taunting him. The "dwarfed" shadow suggests a life that is stifled and incomplete. Naipaul explains that the shadow is associated with times he and his father shared together in Port of Spain:

> That last line...wrote itself. It held memories of the twelve years, no more, I had spent with my father. The movement of the shadows of trees and houses across the street -- more dramatic to me than the amorphous shadows of Chaguanas -- was one of the first things I had noticed in

> Port of Spain. And it was with that sudden churlishness, a sudden access of my own hysteria, that I had left my father in 1950, not looking back. I wish I had. I might have taken away and might still possess some picture of him on that day. He died miserably...three years later (FC, 33,34).

"To become a writer, that noble thing" writes Naipaul in Finding the Center, "I had thought it necessary to leave. Actually it was necessary to go back (FC, 34)." Although Naipaul has now lived outside Trinidad for thirty years, in some sense he has never left; so much of his writing is based on the early experiences of his life. Even in his travel writings like An Area of Darkness and the recent Turn in the South, Naipaul constantly connects what he sees in new settings to his memories of colonial Trinidad: "I go to places which however alien connect in some way with what I already know (FC, 90)." In his recent book on Naipaul, Selwyn Cudjoe observes that in spite of Naipaul's "problematic and ambivalent relationship with his original home" it continues to be "the wellspring" of his art.[18]

If Naipaul is ambivalent in his feelings about the West Indies; West Indians are no less ambivalent in their

feelings about him. Derek Walcott writes: "Despite his horror of being claimed, we West Indians are proud of Naipaul, and that is his enigmatic fate ... that he should be so cherished by those he despises."[19] Walcott, Selwyn Cudjoe, and many West Indian critics and writers are strongly critical of what they consider Naipaul's limited, and according to some, racist, view of West Indian life. The Barbadian novelist, George Lamming, has been particularly harsh in his criticism of Naipaul's treatment of West Indian society. His criticism has received widespread attention, partly because of his own eminence as a West Indian writer and partly because Naipaul has responded to him. Of Naipaul's early novels about Trinidad Lamming has said, "His books can't move beyond a castrated satire."[20] And in his critique of A House for Mr. Biswas, he reproachs Naipaul for failing to reflect the cosmopolitan quality of West Indian society:

> Trinidad is the most cosmopolitan of the islands. Chinese, Indians, Negroes, Portuguese -- all native to this soil -- are involved in constant interplay of local forces. But Mr. Naipaul's world leaves us with the impression of one race surviving in isolation, insulated, as it were, within an unfamiliar landscape. One feels that he

> is particularly careful to avoid that total encounter which is the experience of any Trinidadian, whatever his race may be.[21]

Naipaul's response to Lamming is: "I can speak only of my own experience." He insists that the "total encounter" Lamming describes was not a feature of his childhood (AD,35).

Lamming raises a valid and important point. The Trinidad of Naipaul's childhood was not the Trinidad his grandfathers experienced. When Naipaul was growing up East Indians were not the isolated transient workers they had been in the nineteenth century but a significant force in colonial society. So one might ask, as Lamming does, why Naipaul's writing focusses so exclusively on Indian life and seems to exclude non-Indians. Does he like his grandfathers "deny Trinidad?"

I raise this issue because it brings to light the kind of writer Naipaul is and the things which are evidently most compelling to him as a writer. His preoccupation with Indian life as he experienced it in his early years in Trinidad confirms that his writing is an intensely personal response to the world. Not only is his writing highly autobiographical; it is confessional. It is an attempt to bring order to the disorder of his past. If he fails to

reflect a "total encounter" with society, it is because the pivotal thing in his memory and imagination is a sense of alienation: his own, his family's, and that of his Indian ancestors upon their arrival in Trinidad. Naipaul spent much of his early life in that transplanted Indian world of Chaguanas. The recurrence of particular incidents from his childhood in his writing indicates the powerful impression those Chaguanas years made on him.

One such incident which Naipaul has related both in his fiction and non-fiction illustrates my point. It concerns his father and occurred when Naipaul was an infant, and it has haunted him throughout his adult life.

Unlike the Capildeos -- the maternal branch of the family -- Naipaul's father was not orthodox in his views. In fact he sympathized with reformist Hindu groups and in doing so often antagonized members of his wife's family. Once he went too far. He wrote a satirical article criticizing the common practice of sacrificing a goat to the goddess, Kali. He received "anonymous" death threats from members of the family and was finally forced to perform in public the very ritual he had ridiculed. Shortly after this he had a nervous breakdown.

Years later when V. S. Naipaul was a well-known writer, Israel Shenker who knew him and had interviewed him for the New York Times sent him a clipping he had come across from the New York Herald Tribune dated June 24, 1933. The

headline read: WRITER KOWTOWS TO KALI TO ESCAPE BLACK MAGIC DEATH. Naipaul says he was staggered by the article. His father is mentioned by name and also referred to as "a native writer" of Trinidad. It explains how after being told he would die within three days unless he offerred a goat sacrifice, he "yielded to the entreaty of friends and relatives and made the demanded sacrifice." Naipaul remembered his father's breakdown and knew his father had always had a horror of the Kali cult, but until Shenker sent him the article he had not known the exact details of his father's humiliating experience.

The episode of the goat sacrifice is fictionalized in A House for Mr. Biswas and Naipaul also discusses it at length in Finding the Center. The incident illustrates among other things the insularity of the Indian family life Naipaul knew in Chaguanas, an insularity that George Lamming suggests was not a real or important feature of Trinidadian life. As Naipaul says, "Everything beyond our family had this quality of difference ... and the moment any intercourse threatened, we scented violation and withdrew (AD, 31)." The family's ability to break the spirit of his father and to do so over an antiquated Indian custom had a lasting effect on Naipaul. His father's breakdown, he says, is one of his earliest memories, and he associates it with his own "fear of extinction." He explains:

> I mean the fear of being reduced to nothing, of feeling crushed. It's partly the old colonial anxiety of having one's individuality destroyed. And it also goes back to the family...that sort of family is a microcosm of the authoritarian state ... I withdrew.[22]

Naipaul speaks here of withdrawal and fear; both these responses appear often in his writing. In his fiction, his characters withdraw from what they perceive as alien and often hostile surroundings. In A House for Mr. Biswas these reactions of fear and withdrawal are seen at their most extreme when Mr. Biswas begins having paranoid hallucinations about trees and snakes, projecting his estrangement from family and society onto the natural landscape. In Naipaul's non-fiction, especially in his travel writings, he describes his own withdrawal and fear. In his foreword to "The Crocodiles of Yamassoukro" he speaks of the "anxiety of arrival." The Ivory Coast that he describes is one of "scarred empty spaces" "unfriendly bush" "chaos and nullity." He moves mainly among ex-patriates and avoids the natives.

Paul Theroux describes Naipaul as "a homeless traveller" and says that because of this "a certain amount of futility, expressing itself as fear...steals into

Naipaul's mind usually at the moment of arrival at a destination."[23] It seems to me that it is not "futility expressed as fear;" it really is fear. When Naipaul says he feels threatened by the African bush, he means it.[24] And when Salim in A Bend in the River feels "unprotected" and ... like "an intruder" in the darkness of the African river and forest, again the insecurity is quite real. These fears which lead to withdrawal arise not so much from what the narrator sees around him as from his own sense of displacement. I agree that the anxiety goes back, as Theroux says, to Naipaul's own "homelessness," his early sense of displacement in Trinidad. In an interview he said: "I didn't... belong in the exotic world I was born into and felt I had to write about. The life I wrote about in Biswas couldn't be the true nature of my life because I hadn't grown up in it feeling it was mine."[25]

Naipaul's landscapes are always disturbing; if they do not hold terror, they hold, at the very least, frustration. Richard Kelly, titles one of the chapters of his book on Naipaul, "Landscapes of Fear."[27] Significantly, this disturbing relationship between character and setting occurs only when Naipaul writes about those "half-formed societies," namely the colonial and post-colonial Third World. He does not associate the English landscape with chaos and hostility. In The Enigma of Arrival Naipaul

describes the English countryside as "soothing" to his "raw colonial nerves (EA, 53)."

In The Country and the City Raymond Williams speaks of the importance of the British pastoral in the imagination of colonial writers.[28] Even before he left Trinidad, Naipaul thought of English society and the English landscape as the antithesis of colonial disorder. This idealization of the mother country was nurtured in him, as it was in all colonial children, by the colonial system of education. Summing up his early life in Trinidad as "disorder within, disorder without," Naipaul adds that the only order in his life came from the English colonial school which he attended.(FC, 27)

Derek Walcott, who grew up in St. Lucia, said that colonial education instilled in colonial children a reverence for the mother country which was "even fiercer than that of her true children's."[29] If Naipaul's alienation from Trinidadian society began with the isolation of his Indian family background, it was completed by his education. The school he attended, Queens Royal College, was, and still is, a prestigious high school for boys modelled after an English public school. Another Trinidadian writer, C. L. R. James, attended Queens Royal College and describes it in Beyond a Boundary: "As schools go, it was a very good school, though it would have been

more suitable to Portsmouth than to Port of Spain."[30] Naipaul entered the school after sitting a government-sponsored exam. This exam taken by hundreds of pupils enabled eight boys on the island to get free places into the two Secondary schools, Queens Royal College and the Catholic school, St. Mary's. Many of the Englishmen who taught there were graduates of Oxford and Cambridge. They were products of middle-class Victorian society and they inculcated in their students that society's rigid ideas about education and the greatness of the Empire. The students were taught European languages, European literature and European history. There was a sense in which as colonials they were receiving the best of Europe second-hand. In his autobiographical poem, Another Life, Walcott writes: "I entered the house of literature as a houseboy," and he speaks of glimpsing "as through the glass of some provincial gallery/ the stuffed dark nightingale of Keats."[31]

Franz Fanon, the Martinque-born psychiatrist and writer, explains in The Wretched of the Earth how colonial education encouraged West Indians to identify completely with European culture: "The black schoolboy in the Antilles, who in his lessons is forever talking about 'our ancestors the Gauls' identifies himself with the explorer, the bringer of civilization ...."[32] Fanon goes on to speak

about the effect this has on the colonial writer: "He will not be content to get to know Rabelais and Diderot, Shakespeare and Edgar Allan Poe; he will bind them to his intelligence as closely as possible."[33] This "binding" of oneself as a colonial to European culture is expressed by Naipaul In The Enigma of Arrival. He describes, for example, how he "studied" French film in Trinidad without ever having seen a single French film: "So much of my education was like that...like a man, denied the chance of visiting famous cities, learning their street maps instead (EA, 116)."

While colonials made every effort, as part of their education, to absorb the literature and history of the mother country, ideas about the native country remained unformed. "Art domesticates," Naipaul once said, "Societies don't exist until they have been written about."[34] In the same sense neither do landscapes; Wordsworth's lakes and daffodils were in some way more real to colonials than their native surroundings. "For no one had yet written of this landscape/ That it was possible..." Walcott explains.[35]

Colonial education did not only disregard the native culture; it imbued it with negative associations. In European literature of the empire, the native or colonial was often portrayed as brutal or stupid. Several West

Indian and African writers have discussed what they feel to be the negative portrayal of natives in works such as Forster's A Passage to India and Conrad's Heart of Darkness. Chinua Achebe goes so far as to call Conrad "a bloody racist" for depicting Africa as a land of "incomprehensible frenzy" and Africans as "rudimentary souls."[36]

The undermining or total disregard of native culture in the education of colonials deeply affected Naipaul. Recalling his early education, he says that the more he read and thought about becoming a writer, the more "despairingly conscious" he became of "the poverty and haphazardness" of his own society:

> I might adapt Dickens to Trinidad; but it seemed impossible that the life I knew in Trinidad could ever be turned into a book. If landscapes do not start to be real until they have been interpreted by an artist, so, until they have been written about, societies appear to be without shape and embarrassing (OB,25).

To be "embarrassed" by what appears to be the shapelessness of one's society is a paralyzing situation for an artist. Naipaul says his colonial education gave him

"a Bloomsbury idea" of being a writer, and "an alien vision" of society, and he discusses the inhibiting effect that this had on his growth as a writer:

> ... no writer, however individual his vision, could be separated from his society. The vision was alien; it diminished my own and did not give me the courage to do a simple thing like mentioning the name of a Port of Spain street (OB, 25).

It is not surprising that while still a student at Queens Royal College, Naipaul wrote a vow in the back of his Revised Latin Primer to leave Trinidad within five years (MP, 43). His father had nurtured in him the idea of being a writer as "a fantasy of nobility." Naipaul envisioned himself going to England "as going to some purely literary region where untrammelled by the accidents of history or background, I could make a romantic career for myself as a writer (EA, 130)." Six years after vowing that he would do so, he left Trinidad. He won an island scholarship enabling him to study in England, and he went with the primary intention of becoming a writer. In fact he carried a notebook and an "indelible pencil" with him on the plane, ready to begin his literary career in transit.

In a comparative study of the theme of exile in the writing of Joyce, Naipaul, and Edna O'Brien, Nancy Fitch writes: "The force which propelled them outwards remained in their consciousness and formed their art."[37] For Naipaul, like Joyce, there is a powerful dichotomy at the center of his life and his art: a bitter and necessary withdrawal from his homeland and a compelling need to return to it in an imaginative sense. Naipaul is aware of the dichotomy. In a London television interview he said: "One thought one entered a new world. One was making one's own life. Then you find that no, you're still a prisoner, a prisoner of the past."[38] There is a notable difference, however, between the self-exile of Naipaul and that of Joyce. Joyce did not set sail for England when he left Ireland but for non-English speaking Europe. Naipaul headed straight towards the seat of the empire.

Some critics rebuke Naipaul for his Anglophile and "imperialist" outlook. One critic calls him an "anachronism in Third World writing" because he has continued to live in England and has maintained his "observer-status."[39] Naipaul once responded quite sharply to this kind of rebuke: "They would not ask Hemingway why he left his provincial town, they would not ask Pound why he left the Middle West, but they will always ask the man from what they accept as an inferior society."[40] The defensiveness

of Naipaul's answer illustrates how close to the surface his own feelings about his society lie, how overwhelmingly conscious he is of being -- unlike the Americans, Hemingway and Pound -- from a remote corner of the British empire.

It is important to look at Naipaul's move to England in the context of the mass migration of West Indians to Britain following World War II. Some went for education, but most went for economic reasons. Like Naipaul, the majority of these emigrants did not return to the West Indies, and the islands which they left still remain colonial countries in their memories. Many share Naipaul's colonial outlook. Caryl Phillips, for example, a West Indian-born writer who is a generation younger than Naipaul and who emigrated to England with his parents as an infant, focusses, in his recent books The European Tribe and The Final Passage, on the cultural confusion of being both West Indian and English and on the relationship of ex-colonials to a now-collapsed empire.[41]

Naipaul is certainly not the first or the only West Indian writer to choose to live in England instead of in the West Indies. Kenneth Ramchand says in The West Indian Novel and its Background, that "London is indisputably the West Indian literary capital."[42] In the 1950's when Naipaul went to England, George Lamming, Samuel Selvon, Edgar Milttlehozer, Andrew Salkey, Una Marson, and

C. L. R. James were among a distinctive group of West Indian writers based in London. Hampstead was the center of this West Indian literary Renaissance. The poet, John La Rose, headed the Caribbean Artists Association and founded the New Beacon bookstore and publishing house which published and sold the work of many West Indian writers. In a 1988 interview shortly before he died, C. L. R. James spoke about the fact that West Indian writers came to England because they could not make a living as writers back home and he deplored the fact that this situation still existed.[43] George Lamming discusses the exodus of West Indian writers in The Pleasure of Exile:

> This was the sort of situation in which all of us grew up: On the one hand a mass of people who were either illiterate or if not, had no connection whatever to literature...and on the other hand, a colonial middle-class educated it seemed, to sneer at anything which grew on native soil.[44]

In a 1958 article in the Times Literary Supplement, Naipaul paints an equally dismal picture: "The writer or painter, unless he wins recognition overseas, preferably in England, is mercilessly ridiculed (OB, 9)."

One can easily understand Naipaul's need in 1950 to

leave an environment which he felt would restrict his creativity. It is perhaps less easy to understand Naipaul's psychological withdrawal from his homeland, his sense of himself as an exile which began even before he left Trinidad. In his novel The Mimic Men, the main character, Ralph Singh, says: "Shipwreck .... With my island background it was the word that always came to me (MM, 27)." It is the word that best describes Naipaul's sense of himself in relation to the world. He is in his own words "a man played on, worked on, by many things (EA, 103)." Many things lie behind his isolation: the history of a people's upheaval, the insular Hindu world of his family in Trinidad, and a colonial education that made alienation from the native land almost compulsory.

There is a single, continuously sounded note or theme running throughout this history: from Columbus's arrival in the "West" Indies, ready to deliver his sovereign's greetings to the Great Khan, to Naipaul's grandmother having a kattha said under the only pipal tree in Trinidad. This is Naipaul's history, a New World history rich with human error and tenacity. He imagined that in going to England he would escape the disorder of his colonial background, but England was where he would really begin to confront it. A young writer, alone for the first time, in the gloomy anonymity of London, he would have no refuge but the self and there would be no delaying self-discovery.

[1] Derek Walcott, "The Schooner Flight" in The Star Apple Kingdom (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979) p.12.

[2] Eric Williams, From Columbus to Castro (London: Andre Deutsch, 1970) p.19.

[3] Facts about Trinidad from Donald Wood, Trinidad in Transition (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) pp.14-31.

[4] Trinidad and Tobago Annual Statistical Digest no.38, 1988 (Port of Spain Central Statistical Office) pp.13-14.

[5] Donald Wood, Trinidad in Transition p.108.

[6] Yogendra Malik, East Indians in Trinidad (London: Oxford University Press, 1971). p.136.

[7] Keith Garebian, "V. S. Naipaul's Negative Sense of Place" Journal of Commonwealth Literature 10. no.1 (1975) p.24.

[8] Donald Wood, Trinidad in Transition p 110..

[9] David Levin, "V. S. Naipaul: A Perpetual Voyager" The Listener 23 June (1983) p.16.

[10] Dolly Hassan, V. S. Naipaul and the West Indies (New York: Peter Lang, 1989) p.22.

[11] Dolly Hassan, V. S. Naipaul and the West Indies p. 58; and V. S. Naipaul, Finding the Center p. 24;

[12] Yogendra Malik, East Indians in Trinidad p.29.

[13] "The Novelist V. S. Naipaul Talks to Nigel Bingham About HIs Childhood in Trinidad." Listener, Sept 7 (1972) p.306.

[14] David Levin, "A Perpetual Voyager" The Listener 23, June (1983)p. 16.

15 Themes of displacement and entrapment are found in Seepersad Naipaul's stories, Gurudeva and Other Tales, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1976); also Naipaul speaks of his father's alienation in Finding the Center.

16 Finding the Center p.20; and the Levin Interview, The Listener 23 June, (1983) p.16.

17 Anthony Boxill, "V. S. Naipaul's Starting Point" Journal of Commonwealth Literature 10 (1975) p.2.

18 Selwyn Cudjoe, V. S. Naipaul: A Materialist Reading (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989) p.223.

19 Derek Walcott, "The Garden Path" New Republic,April 27 (1987) p.30.

20 George Lamming, "A Trinidad Experience" Time and Tide 5 October (1961) p.1657.

21 Lamming, The Pleasure of Exile (London: Michael Joseph, 1960) p.225.

22 Charles Michener, "The Dark Visions of V. S. Naipaul" Newsweek November 16 (1981), p. 107.

23 Paul Theroux, V. S. Naipaul: An Introduction to his Work (London: Andre Deutsch, 1972) p. 77.

24 Michiko Kakuatani, "Naipaul Reviews his Past from Afar" New York Times December 1 (1980) C15.

25 Bhararati Mukherjee and Robert Boyers, "A Conversation with V. S. Naipaul" Salmagundi 54 (1981)p.8.

27 Richard Kelly, "Landscapes of Fear" in V. S. Naipaul (New York: Continuum, 1989).

28 Raymond Williams, The City and the Country discussed in John Cooke, "A Vision of the Land in Naipaul's Later Novels" Caribbean Quarterly, 25, iv (1979) p. 32.

29 Derek Walcott, Moon on Monkey Mountain (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970) p.18.

30 C. L. R. James, Beyond a Boundary (London: Stanley Paul, 1963) p. 36.

31 Derek Walcott, Another Life (New York: Three Continents Press, 1982) p.40.

32 Franz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (New York: Grove Press, 1967) p. 147.

33 _____, The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 1963) p. 218.

34 M. Banning Eyre, "Naipaul at Wesleyan" South Carolina Review v.14 (2) Spring (1982) p. 35.

35 Walcott, Another Life p.39.

36 Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa" Massachusetts Review Vol. 18 no.4, Winter (1977),p.786.

37 Nancy Fitch, "History is Nightmare: A Study of Exile in the Life and Works of James Joyce, V. S. Naipaul and Edna O'Brien" Ph.D. diss., Queens University, 1973 p.28.

38 Melvyn Bragg, Post Production Script "The South Bank Show -- V. S. Naipaul" London Television, March 8, 1987 p.33.

39 Helen Pyne-Timothy, "V. S. Naipaul and Politics" College Language Association Journal vol 28 no. 3 March (1985) p.247.

40 Israel Shenker, "Man Without a Society" Interview reprinted in Robert Hamner, Critical Perspectives on V. S. Naipaul (New York: Three Continents Press, 1977) p.50.

41 Caryl Phillips, The European Tribe (London: Faber and Faber, 1987) and The Final Passage (New York: Penguin, 1980).

42 Kenneth Ramchand, The West Indian Novel and its Background (London: Heinemann 1983) p.63.

43 C. L. R. James, Interviewed by me at his home in London, December, 1989.

44 George Lamming, The Pleasure of Exile (London: Michael Joseph, 1960) p.40.

The Comedy of Suffering: Naipaul's Colonial Vision of Trinidad in Miguel Street

> We lived in a society which denied itself heroes.
>
> (MP, 43)

Miguel Street was the first book that Naipaul wrote, but it was not the first to be published. The Mystic Masseur and The Suffrage of Elvira were published in 1957 and 1958, and Miguel Street in 1959. All three are set in Trinidad, and Naipaul refers to them as his "apprentice works."[1]

"Half a writer's work is the discovery of his subject," Naipaul writes in Finding the Center (FC,18)." As a young émigre writer in London, Naipaul found writing difficult and writing about his homeland even more so. As an Indian he had felt out of place in the West Indies; now in England he felt out of place as a West Indian. Adding to his confusion was the fact, as he says, that his colonial education had given him "a Bloomsbury idea of being a writer." When he arrived in England at the age of eighteen on a scholarship to Oxford, intent on becoming a writer, he searched for "metropolitan material":

> Metropolitan -- what did I mean by that?...I meant

> material which would enable me to compete with or match certain writers. And I also meant material that would enable me to display a particular kind of writing personality: J.R. Ackerley...making notes under a dinner table in India; Somerset Maugham... Aldous Huckley ...Evelyn Waugh ... (EA, 135).

"To be that kind of writer," Naipaul says, "I had to be false; I had to pretend to be other than I was (EA, 146)." He avoided confronting the "disturbance" of race: "It [the issue of race] was too frightening ... it was to be diminished as man and writer... [and it] formed no part of the material of the kind of writer I was setting out to be (EA, 127)."

By 1954 Naipaul had completed his studies at Oxford. He felt instinctively that London was the place to be; it was an important center for many colonial intellectuals and writers, many of them from the West Indies. But when he moved to London his feeling of estrangement became even more extreme:

> London was not the centre of my world. I had been misled; but there was nowhere else to go...I was thrown more and more into myself, fighting to keep

> my balance and to keep alive the thought of the clear world beyond the brick and asphalt and the chaos of railway lines ... in the big city I was confined to a smaller world than I had ever known. I became my flat, my desk, my name (AD, 42).

In a letter that Naipaul wrote in 1954 to Grenfell Williams of the BBC about a possible position there, he expressed his uncertainty about his future and his disturbing sense of alienation:

> One thing I certainly do not want to do: go back to Trinidad or any other island in the West Indies if I can help it. I very much want to go to India. But there are many difficulties. I cannot be employed on the Indian side because I am British, and on the British side, I cannot be employed because I am not English. I think it is almost impossible for me to do anything worthwhile in this country ....[2]

The sense that he had never belonged in Trinidad -- "I didn't ... belong in the exotic world I was born into"[3] -- was one reason for his early reluctance to write about his native country. Another important reason was that in his

colonial eyes, Trinidad seemed "small, remote, and unimportant." Trinidadian society appeared to him to be "shapeless" and lacking the strong framework of social conventions which he felt were necessary to produce a work of fiction:

> A literature can grow only out of a strong framework of social convention. And the only convention the West Indian knows is his involvement with the white world. This deprives his world of universal appeal .... The reader is invited to witness and not to participate (MP, 70).

All the doubts about himself, his society, and his subject brought him to Miguel Street, or, one could say, brought him back to Miguel Street. The world of Miguel Street is that other side of Trinidadian life: the urban, poor, racially mixed world of Port of Spain which had existed for Naipaul quite separately from the enclosed Hindu family life he had known in Chaguanas.

Why did Naipaul choose, for his first fictional work, to write about this aspect of Trinidadian life rather than the rural Indian life more familiar to him? The answer perhaps is that he was attempting to overcome his sense of

isolation in London. With his weakened and confused sense of identity, his only assurance lay in the phrase "from Trinidad" -- a phrase which he continues to use to describe himself on the covers of all his books. In England the distinctions between West Indians -- Barbadian, Jamaican, Trinidadian -- broke down and, more importantly for Naipaul, so did the distinctions of race that would have been more marked back home. Indian, black, and white West Indians felt themselves to be part of one colonial expatriate group, as the work of the racially diverse group of West Indian writers in England at the time suggests. Naipaul became acquaintanced with other West Indian writers like Andrew Salkey and John Figueroa and soon found himself part of a new emigre group of writers who were gaining a wide audience for themselves.

The Trinidadian writer, C. L. R. James, had by the 1950's become a recognized West Indian voice; his 1930's novel Minty Alley had been published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf and he had been well-received by the writers of the Bloomsbury circle, notably, E. M. Forster. Younger West Indian writers like Andrew Salkey, Una Marsden, and the playwright, Errol John, began gaining recognition for themselves in the post-war years. In the 1950's there was a large audience for West Indian literature among the growing population of West Indian immigrants, West Indian

and African students, and colonials who had served in World War II and had afterwards remained in England. A regularly broadcast BBC series called "Caribbean Voices" aired poems, stories, and plays by West Indian writers. During Naipaul's Oxford years, Figueroa and Salkey had broadcast some of his early (and still unpublished) writing. After Oxford, Naipaul began working with them at the BBC. They worked in a room they called "the freelance's room" at the Langley Hotel. The atmosphere, as Naipaul describes it, was that of an émigre writer's club, "chat, movement, the separate anxieties of young and youngish men below the passing fellowship of the room (FC, 12)." They produced short radio scripts for "Caribbean Voices." And it was there, in "the fellowship" of that room, that Naipaul wrote the first lines of Miguel Street:

> Every morning when he got up Hat would sit on the banister of his back verandah and shout across, "What happening there, Bogart.?"
>
> Bogart would turn in his bed and mumble softly, so that no one heard, "What happening there, Hat (MS, 9)?"

Naipaul has spoken of how important the camaraderie of the freelance's room was to him in the writing of those

first lines: "Without that fellowship, without the response of the three men who read the story, I might not have gone on (FC, 12)." The three men to whom he showed the first few pages were Andrew Salkey from Jamaica, Gordon Woolford from British Guiana, and an Englishman who was working on overseas programs, John Stockbridge. Salkey, Naipaul recalls, had always compared learning to write with trying to wrap a whip around a rail; after reading the first pages of Miguel Street, he told Naipaul that the whip had begun to "stick (FC, 13)."

The opening dialogue between Hat and Bogart in Miguel Street immediately establishes the very thing Naipaul had felt to be lacking in West Indian society: "a framework of social conventions." The greeting, part of a daily ritual between the two men, opens up a world where the characters recognize certain conventions, in this case, a bit of palaver, a style of greeting, "talk" that is no more than "talk" among men.

It is also interesting to note that Naipaul uses the Trinidadian dialect. To do so he had to overcome his fear of "regionalism," his anxiety about his work lacking "universal appeal." Brazilian educator and writer, Paulo Freire, explains that "dialects encode different world views."[4] Naipaul used dialect in Miguel Street because he was describing his colonial world from the inside and from

the distinctly colonial perspective of characters like Hat and Bogart.

Though we see from the very beginning of Miguel Street that it is a world where men have their own code of behavior and conventions, to Naipaul, the mixed, urban society of Port of Spain still appeared too shapeless and chaotic to depict in a novel. The lack of tight family units, the fragmented, incohesive history of the mixed races, and the lack of any long-established connection between the characters and their setting, seemed to demand a more episodic form. Miguel Street is like a novel in the sense that there is a single narrator -- a boy of Indian descent who lives on the street with his mother -- and the same characters keep reappearing from story to story. It is, however, a series of sketches about the different people who live on the street. It has been compared to Dickens' Sketches by Boz, and the caricature-like quality of the characters makes them reminscent of many of Dickens's characters. There is also in the characters a picaresque quality which many critics have noted; the pages are filled with rogues, madmen, and "saga boys" (dandies).

In writing Miguel Street Naipaul also drew on West Indian traditions, both oral and written. There are allusions to Trinidadian calypso throughout the book. Many of the stories in Miguel Street are based on true

stories of people living in Trinidad which had been turned to popular, local legend in calypsos.[5] Naipaul also seems to have drawn on the popular West Indian "Anansi" legend (Anansi is a spider/confidence man in West Indian folktales, derived from the West African Anansi tales). Another important influence in Miguel Street is "the literature of the yard," or "yard fiction," a naturalist movement in West Indian fiction and theatre which began in the 1930's (C.L.R. James' Minty Alley is an example) and which described urban, working class characters living together in the same tenement yard, alley, or street.

Though there is a single narrator present throughout the stories, what is more strongly felt is the collective point of view of those who live on the street: "A stranger could drive through Miguel Street and just say 'Slum!' because he could see no more. But we, who lived there, saw our street as a world (MS, 63)." The narrator uses the collective "we" throughout most of the book. His perceptions and values are inseparable from those of "the street," though as he grows older during the course of the book, his own voice gradually becomes more distinct. Reinforcing the collective vision is a pattern seen in many of the stories whereby the main character of the sketch, having been watched and talked about by the other street characters, ends up either the subject of a popular calypso

or the subject of a sensational newspaper article. In this way, Naipaul is not only describing his society but showing us the kind of storytelling that goes on in that society, the manner in which the society depicts and responds to itself.

On a visit to Trinidad in 1960 Naipaul noted:

> It was a place where the stories were never stories of success, but of failure: brilliant men, scholarship winners, who had died young, gone mad, or taken to drink; cricketeers of promise whose careers had been ruined by disagreements with the authorities.
>
> ...The threat of failure, the need to escape: this was the prompting of the society I knew (MP, 44-45).

It was "a society that denied itself heroes" Naipaul says, and adds that in Trinidad, "only a man's eccentricities can get him attention." Eccentricity, sensationalism, and buffoonery are all part of Miguel Street. The stories are "stories of failure" told not from a tragic but a comic point-of-view, the point of view of men who see their lives as small and peripheral in relation to the great world, who expect little of

themselves and end up mocking themselves. When the book came out Naipaul was criticized for making fun of Trinidadians. In Miguel Street the writer is not laughing at his society, but depicting a society that laughs at itself.

Miguel Street is a man's world. It is the men who set the standards by which success or failure is judged, and the stories are, for the most part, about men struggling to gain the respect of other men. Conscious of the fact that they are colonials living in an essentially powerless and dependent society and in "a borrowed culture" as Naipaul has said (MP, 73), the standards by which they judge themselves and each other are foreign. The war taking place in Europe (World War II) and the presence of an American naval base in Trinidad are important background forces in the stories. For the people of Miguel Street, these two -- the war in Europe and the American base -- are a contrast to their own unheroic lives. The men speculate among themselves about the war -- "as soon as they make Lord Anthony Eden Prime Minister the war go end -- drawing attention to how remotely the war touches their lives and how peripheral their own role seems in world events. In Miguel Street it is not the mother country which touches off their fantasies and forms their expectations so much as America with its GI's, movies, and magazines, promoting

strong images of masculinity, wealth, and power.

Naipaul makes us strongly aware of the presence of the GI's in the background, though there is only one short scene where an American is actually present. To the children the GI's are a source of bubble gum; to the older characters, the Americans hold the keys to the "Yankee dollar" and Hollywood-style heroism. In the first story of the book "Bogart" Naipaul shows how a man, striving to deny what he is, and to become what he is not, ends up alienating himself.

The narrator explains how the character, Bogart, got his name:

> I don't know if you remember the year the film Casablanca was made. That was the year when Bogart's fame spread like fire through Port-of-Spain and hundreds of young men began adopting the hard-boiled Bogartian attitude (MS, 9).

Although Miguel Street's Bogart does virtually nothing -- he has never worked, "never told a story," and "never laughed audibly", he is the most popular man on the street. "He smart as hell that man." Hat says of him. Bogart plays cards all day and has "a captivating languor." The narrator says, "He was the most bored man I

ever knew (MS, 9)."

There is no plot to speak of in "Bogart" yet the story ends on quite a sensational note when Bogart is arrested for bigamy. The fact that we are not told the story surrounding his arrest until the last few lines, shows that the primary concern of the narrative is not the character's actions but the internal structure of his life which inevitably collapses and is followed by his public downfall. This is not to say that it is a psychological drama. There is no interior monolgue; we are never told Bogart's thoughts, and the characterization is one-dimensional. Through the collective point of view of the street, Naipaul shows us gradual changes in Bogart's outward appearance and attitude which express his internal struggle.

Everyone notices that Bogart is taking on more and more "Bogartisms," small gestures that project a tough, mysterious stance. But, as long as he continues to pick up his cue from Hat each morning -- "What happening there, Bogart?" -- "What happening there, Hat?" -- everything is considered to be normal. But he disappears and returns to Miguel Street even more Bogart-like than before: "Bogart was hardly opening his mouth when he spoke. His mouth was twisted a little and his accent was getting slightly American (MS, 12)." At first this impresses everyone, and

it brings out the "Rex Harrison" in Hat: "'Damn it, Bogart,' Hat said, and he became very like Rex Harrison... (MS, 13)." But Bogart's self-alienation sets off his alienation from those around him. The narrator notices the relationship between the two friends eroding, and soon there is a new morning exchange between them:

> "Bogart!
>
> "Shaddup, Hat! (MS, 13)"

Bogart goes from being the most popular man to being "the most feared man in the street (MS, 13)." His accent becomes completely Americanized. Like the GI's, he gives away bubble-gum and Coca-cola to the "kids," as he begins to call the children, and he appears increasingly "tough" and mysterious, disappearing for long periods of time. When he is suddenly arrested, and there is "a little stir in the papers," his story becomes known to everyone on the street:

> "You see," Hat said on the pavement that evening, "the man leave his first wife in Tunapuna and come to Port of Spain. They couldn't have children. He remain here feeling sad and small. He go away, find a girl in Caroni and he give she a baby. In Caroni they don't make joke about that

sort of thing and Bogart had to get married to the girl (MS, 15)."

When the narrator asks Hat why Bogart also left his second wife, Hat answers, matter-of-factly: "To be a man, among we men (MS, 14)." His crime and imprisonment bring no shame to Miguel Street. No more was expected of him than that he be "a man among men." Beneath his tough appearance, his "Bogartisms," Bogart felt "sad and small" because he had not fathered a child. Naipaul shows in this first story the importance of a show of virility in this poor, urban society. For the men of Miguel Street, Bogart's Hollywood-style of manliness is impressive because they, like him, have accepted an alien or foreign vision of what it means to be a man. Here and in the other stories the need to hold onto an illusion of manliness and not lose face among the men is a pivotal theme. But it is an illusion -- and ultimately, a delusion -- because always, as in Bogart's case, this show of manliness entails some kind of fraudulence or mimicry.

Mimicry -- the idea that colonials are playing a role that is false to them and adopting the values of another culture -- is a recurring theme in Naipaul's books about Trinidad. In fact, the title of one of his books is The Mimic Men. In an article on Naipaul called "Variations on

the the Theme of Mimicry," Harveen Mann observes that "Naipaul's 'mimic men' populate Miguel Street," and she says that the theme of mimicry in his writing suggests "an awareness of the difficulty of discovering and verifying identity in any emergent country."[7] Although this theme does have universal significance, and although it is true that it goes hand in hand with the colonial problem of identity, mimicry in Naipaul's writing has a cultural meaning that is specific to West Indian colonial life, and not to "any emergent country." In contrast to Miguel Street, Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart describes a world where there is a distinct code of masculine behavior that is completely Nigerian and based on deep-rooted tribal and ancestral customs. There are no "mimic men" there. The problem of identity and the pattern of mimicry in Miguel Street arises out of the lack of any strong indiginous culture in the West Indies. The people in the stories are not only colonized; they are a transplanted, racially mixed people with no long-established traditions. There are no ancient warriors, heroes, or legends to fall back on for the men of Miguel Street as there are in Achebe's African novels. There is, as Naipaul sees it, only the distant glamor and power of England or the United States.

Bogart's gestures and speech are those of a man who

has assumed a false persona, who looks at the world and at himself, through someone else's eyes. In Black Skin White Masks, the Martinique-born psychiatrist Franz Fanon analyzes this kind of behavior among black colonials and describes it as a "situational neurosis" leading to self-alienation. In the colonial, he says, "there is a constant effort to run away from his own individuality, to annihilate his own presence."[8] Bogart runs away from himself, not only in assuming an American style, but also in marrying two women and leaving both, and in his constant mysterious disappearances from Miguel Street. Behind his "captivating languor" he is in more than one sense "a man on the run" unable to face his true self and what he believes to be the weakness and failure of his life.

In Miguel Street the struggle to be "a man among men" is depicted as futile because it takes place within an essentially cynical society. The cynicism is of the kind Naipaul expresses when he says in The Middle Passage that "nothing was created in the West Indies (MP, 29)." And it is the same cynical colonial outlook Walcott describes in the foreword to one of his plays: "Colonials we began, with this malarial enervation: that nothing could be constructed among these rotting shacks, barefooted backyards and moulting shingles."[9] In Miguel Street everything that men in the colonial society attempt is

expected to fail. Initiative, creativity, and success of any kind are associated with knavery. The idea that "nothing [can be] created in the West Indies" comes from the fact that for colonials, living in a non-manufacturing, underdeveloped country, all things do appear to be created abroad. The feeling that nothing of value can be achieved by colonials and that all stories are "stories of failure" is constantly expressed by the characters in contemptuous remarks such as: "Well, what you expect in a place like this (MS, 62)?"

In the stories "The Thing Without a Name," "The Pyrotechnist" and "The Mechanical Genius" Naipaul describes the atmosphere of futility and cynicism surrounding the men's efforts to achieve some dignity through their labor.

In "The Thing Without a Name" Popo, a carpenter, is described at the outset as a happy man, busily making "the thing without a name." The narrator says, "I thought he was a poetic man." Naipaul makes it clear that Popo is not "poetic" but chronically unemployed. Everything begins to change for him when a woman comes into his life. After a while, the woman becomes disenchanted and runs off with another man. Popo takes to drink. He searches all over Trinidad for the woman. A calypso is made up about him and sung in "the road march for the Carnival": "A certain carpenter feller went to Arima / Looking for a mopsy called

Emelda (MS,19).

The calypso makes Popo somewhat legendary and this is said to be a "great thing for the street." He returns with his Emelda and the people of Miguel Street witness incredible changes taking place in Popo's life. The light is seen on in his workshed at all hours of the night, new furniture appears, vans come and go depositing and taking away things. The narrator asks him what he is so busily doing, and he replies as before, that he is making "the thing without a name." At the end of the story, the Miguel Street crowd find out the truth about Popo in the newspaper. The headline reads: "Calypso carpenter jailed." We are told that he has been stealing and remodelling furniture. For Popo, success seems possible only through fraud. His is another "story of failure."

"The Mechanical Genius" and "The Pyrotechnist" are also stories of failure. Both have strong political overtones in that they highlight even more sharply than "The Thing Without A Name" the way men in underdeveloped countries view themselves with respect to their labor. In both stories a contrast between the developed and underdeveloped countries is implied as the stories center on machinery and technical skills. In an interview Naipaul once expressed his feelings about the importance of technical achievement in underdeveloped colonial and post-colonial societies:

> The machine is the great humanizer of those societies.It gives men whose labours have been very petty a new idea of themselves and their skills .... Men have got new ideas of themselves not through philosophy ... but through using a wonderful machine which produces lovely goods, which makes them admire and regard themselves more highly.[10]

In "The Pyrotechnist" and "The Mechanical Genius" technical accomplishment is associated with dignity and self-respect. The role of women in both these stories is more defined than in the others. Their boasting about the abilities of their husbands supports the men's illusions about themselves, and in the case of Mrs. Morgan, the pyrotechnist's wife, her withdrawal of support and public ridiculing of her husband at the end of the story signals his downfall. The stories are linked through the bantering and competitiveness between the wives which serves as a background to the men's actions in both stories. Mr. Morgan, the "pyrotechnist," makes fireworks, but he is best known in Miguel Street as a sort of local clown or comedian. The narrator says, "He was the sort of man who having once created a laugh by sticking a match in his mouth and trying to light it with his cigarette...does it

over and over again (MS,63)." Mr. Backhu, who fancies himself a "mechanical genius," is forever buying new cars, and spending all his time under them, taking their engines apart. The wives insult one another routinely:

> "How you husband this morning, anyway? He fix any new cars lately?"
>
> "I not going to dirty my mouth arguing with you here...He know how to fix his car. Is a wonder nobody can tell your husband where he can fix all his so-called fireworks (MS, 126)."

Mrs. Backu, the narrator tells us, always refers to her husband by the subject pronoun "he," reinforcing his illusions about himself. In her eyes, he is a mechanical genius.

We know at the outset that "The Mechanical Genius" is another story of failure. It opens with the comic situation of Mr. Bhacku stuck under a car which has fallen on him and Mrs. Bhacku running to Hat for help: "Hat, come quick. A whole motor-car fall on he." Underlying the comedy of Bhacku's attempts to fix cars and earn a living is a sense of futility seen in the repeated failures and repeated catastrophes. At one point in the story, having once again taken apart a car which he finds himself unable

to put back together, he calls for help -- once again -- from a "real" (and by now quite harrassed) mechanic. The mechanic's assessment of the situation reflects the society's cynical attitude about itself. It also expresses the colonial way of looking at oneself and one's society always in contrast to "the great world." The (real) mechanic says in regard to Bhacku's disastrous work: "When you have all sort of ignorant people messing about with a engine the white people make with their own hands, what the hell else you expect (MS,120)."

Mr. Backhu ends up -- having tried his hand at everything else -- becoming a pundit. Once again Naipaul suggests that success can only come through some form of knavery. The narrator ends on a sarcastic note: "I was haunted by thoughts of the dhoti-clad Pundit Bhacku, crawling under a car, attending to a cranck-shaft, while poor Hindus waited for him to attend to their souls (MS, 127)."

"The Pyrotechnist" like "Bogart" and "The Thing Without a Name" ends with a headline in the newspaper: "Pyrotechnist turns Pyromaniac." The men of Miguel Street have long felt sorry for their street comedian. They realize he is unhappy and lacks self-respect. In Miguel Street wife-beating is the norm. But Morgan's wife is much bigger than he is and she beats him. To salvage his

pride, he becomes a "pyrotechnist," learning everything there is to know about making fireworks, but we are told that his foreign competitors get all the contracts, and he is unable to make a living. To compensate for his sense of failure and also to compensate for being hen-pecked, he ritually beats his children -- in full view of the public, and he sleeps with other women. When his wife finds him one day with another woman, she carries him out naked into the street for everyone to ridicule. In revenge he sets all the fireworks off in his house that night, setting the house on fire in the process and giving Miguel Street the greatest fireworks show in everyone's memory. The narrator writes: "For the first time everybody saw the astonishing splendour of Morgan's fireworks...I have seen nothing to beat the fireworks show in Morgan's house that night (MS, 72)."

The fireworks are an important motif, not only because they express Morgan's pent-up anger, but in the sense that they are designed for spectators. Naipaul proves in the dramatic ending of "the Pyrotechnist" that "only a man's eccentricities can get him attention." The fact that the fireworks, which are the source of Morgan's pride, are used to set his own house on fire expresses the sense of futility and frustration in the lives of these men. The effort to be "a man among men," backfires in self-contempt

and self-destruction.

Gordon Rohlehr, writes that a major theme of the book is "the nature and complexity of laughter in Miguel Street." He points out that there is a certain "propriety about the street's laughter" seen for instance in the number of times Hat thrashes the younger character, Boyee, for laughing at someone's misfortune. Rohlehr says that "limits are placed on cynicism" and that "Miguel Street comes across...not merely as a jungle, but a place where people in the face of insuperable frustration still preserve an intimacy and humour which is almost a new type of maturity."[11]

Rohlehr takes a humanist approach to the laughter in the book and grasps its complexity. There is so much laughter in Miguel Street that it seems more than a theme; it is the framework within which the characters' triumphs and failures are weighed by the collective point of view. In each story the narrator clarifies for the reader the kind of laughter that is going on. He also makes a point of letting us know when there is no laughter at all, as in the story "The Maternal Instinct." In "The Pyrotechnist" when Mr. Morgan tries to gain attention for himself by turning the beating of his ten children into a kind of public entertainment, the narrator writes that "the joke misfired," and that "he got none of the laughter he

expected ... nobody ran up to him and clapped him on the back." Hat, the street spokesman remarks: "Nah, nah, man, you can't make fun of your own self and your children that way (MS, 68)." On the other hand when the pyrotechnist's wife shames him in front of the whole street after finding him in bed with another woman, everyone laughs at him. Laughter is part of the code of the street, and it expresses the values of the society. It makes a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. If a man cheats on his wife it is expected that she might find out and all hell will break loose. A calypso might even be written about it. But, as Hat says, a man is not expected to make fun of himself and his children.

In one story, "The Coward," the narrator chooses not to laugh when the rest of Miguel Street is laughing. It is when the character, Big Foot, loses a boxing match to an Englishman. Only the narrator knows Big Foot's secret: that he is really a coward. At the end of the fight he cries publicly in the ring, and the sight of the big, strong man crying like a child makes everyone laugh. The narrator's choice not to laugh is a sign that he is forming his own values apart from those of his society.

Suffering is what is being laughed at in these stories, another's suffering, or weakness, or failure, or shame. Laughter is the way the people in Miguel Street respond to their own stories of failure. But how does the writer

himself view his society's suffering and failure? And how does he intend the reader to respond? The stories are funny and are obviously meant to be so. Naipaul's clipped style, the short sentences and one-line paragraphs, are painfully mocking and tongue-in-cheek. And then there are the slap-stick and cartoon-like situations like those in "The Mechanical Genius." Yet these are stories of entrapment, futility and despair.

Naipaul has been accused of laughing at his own society. George Lamming said of Naipaul's early books that they could "not move beyond castrated satire" and rebuked him for being "ashamed of his background."[12] Naipaul admits that he has problematic feelings about his homeland. Shortly after the book was published, he said that he had taken "refuge in humor."[13] The word "refuge" suggests a painful relationship with his subject. Naipaul takes refuge in humor in exactly the same way his characters do in Miguel Street. His detachment is not the detachment of an outsider; rather he expresses the detachment that is part of the colonial society's sense of its own powerlessness. The voyeurism on the part of the crowd in Miguel Street, their readiness to turn catastrophe and humiliation into calypso, the callous sensationalism of the newspaper headlines, and the ready laughter are all ways in which the characters detach themselves from their surroundings and

try to cope with their powerlessness. Naipaul is not the only West Indian writer to capture his society's inclination to turn suffering into comedy. Derek Walcott has expressed the view that among colonials, this laughter at their own suffering is a form of self-contempt and that it arises out of the sense that they are living in a restricted, peripheral society:

> ...casual about commitment, ashamed of their speech, they [colonials] were moved only by the tragi-comic and farcical. The tragi-comic was another form of self-contempt. They considered tragedy to be, like English, an attribute beyond them.[14]

Comedy has always been associated with powerlessness. According to Aristotle comedy shows the frailities of the low-born as distinct from tragedy which exhibits the misfortunes of the great. If the stories in Miguel Street are all stories of failure and if this failure is viewed by the characters themselves as comic, it is because they see their lives as small and insignificant in relation to "the great world." They see nothing heroic in themselves; they see buffoonery, knavery, and cowardice. The complexity of their laughter and the sense that it is a form of self-

contempt, is expressed at one point in the story "The Pyrotechnist" by the character, Hat: "When a man start laughing at something he fight for all the time, you don't know whether to laugh or cry (MS, 66)."

There are instances when the prevailing cynicism is overcome by the power of human suffering and human dignity. In two stories, "The Maternal Instinct" and "The Blue Cart," arranged one beside the other in the collection, Naipaul presents an atypical response to another's suffering and shame on the part of the Miguel Street onlookers. The stories complement each other. Both involve the birth of an illigitimate child, but in "Maternal Instinct" Naipaul ends on a note of pure despair whereas in "The Blue Cart" the same cause for despair becomes a cause for triumph.

"The Maternal Instinct" opens in the usual comic vein, with the narrator describing the main character, Laura:

> I suppose Laura holds a world record.
> Laura had eight children.
> There is nothing surprising in that.
> These eight children had seven fathers.
> Beat that!(MS, 84)

The style here at the beginning, with its short terse lines resembling a verse of calypso, establishes Laura as a

comic figure.

Following the pattern seen in the other stories, we learn about Laura through the gossip of the men on the street. They make fun of her many pregnancies but do so in pleasant terms. They like Laura because she is "gay" and "vivacious" and because she can curse like a man. Hat says: "Man, she like Shakespeare when it come to using words (MS, 85)."

Laura goes along in her happy, non-chalant way, having babies, cursing, getting and throwing out lovers, until the day her eldest daughter comes home from school and says: "I going to make a baby."

The narrator says:

> ... for the first time I heard Laura crying. It wasn't ordinary crying. She seemed to be crying all the cry she had saved up since she was born; all the cry she had tried to cover up with her laughter ... Laura's
> crying that night was the most terrible thing I had heard. It made me feel that the world was a stupid, sad place, and I almost began crying with Laura.
>
> All the street heard Laura crying (MS, 90).

The word "cry" or "crying" is repeated until it begins to sound like an echo, filling the street's silence and its missing laughter.

Laura changes; her house becomes "a dead silent thing," and everyone notices that she is too bitter even to reproach her daughter. When Boyee, Hat's nephew, says: "I don't see why she so mad about that. She does do the same," Hat beats him. Without any discussion among them, the men of Miguel Street, feel an instinctive pity for Laura. Where their laughter and teasing used to be the background of her ribaldry, their silence is now the background of her weeping. Her situation is part of a profound sense of futility they all feel. The narrator makes a point of saying: "There were no jokes about it in the street." And Hat's only comment is "Life is a helluva thing (MS, 91)."

The story ends with a newspaper report of "just another weekend tragedy, one of many" when Laura's pregnant daughter drowns at the beach (MS,91). The understatement of "just another" and "one of many" reinforces the sense of futility.

"The Blue Cart" also begins in the usual comic tone:

> ...Eddoes was a real 'saga-boy'. This didn't mean that he wrote epic poetry. It meant that he was a 'sweet man,' a man of leisure, well-dressed, and

keen on women.

Hat used to say, "For a man who does drive a scavenging cart, this Eddoes too clean, you hear (MS, 92)."

At the very beginning Naipaul seems to be setting things in place for Eddoes' downfall. He dresses in a fancy style. He boasts about the important people for whom he picks up rubbish. He is a man of great pride; even the people of Miguel Street take their cue from Eddoes and begin calling the junk in his blue scavenging cart, his "materials." Based on the other stories we naturally expect fraudulence or madness to surface in Eddoes; we expect the usual laughter and calypso, and we expect Hat to say something like "What you expect in a place like this?"

There is fraudulence, but Eddoes is the victim and not the culprit. A woman claims he is the father of her baby. Hat shrugs the whole thing off when Eddoes tells him: "Is the sort of thing that does happen to anybody (MS, 97)." Hat's view is typical of the men in Miguel Street; Eddoes isn't expected to assume any responsibility. When he sinks into despair over the situation, no one understands why he is reacting in such an unusual manner: "Eddoes behaving as though he invent the idea of making baby (MS, 97)." And when the baby is brought to Miguel Street, everyone

realizes that Eddoes is not the father. As the narrator says: "One glance ... made us know she couldn't be Eddoes baby." And Boyee, Hat's tactless nephew, whistles the popular calypso:

> Chinese children calling me Daddy!
> I black like jet,
> My wife like tar-baby,
> And still--
> Chinese children calling me Daddy!
> Oh God, somebody putting milk in my coffee
> (MS, 99).

Hat cuts Boyee short and -- to everyone's surprise -- remarks to Eddoes: "She is a good-looking child Eddoes. Like you (MS, 99)." The other men immediately follow suit; they all complement Eddoes on his fine daughter, and assure him that the baby looks like him. "Pleasure," the baby-girl, becomes the "street baby," and all the women help to look after her. The story ends with Eddoes "proud of his job, his junk; and now, proud, too of Pleasure (MS, 100)."

Again, as in "The Maternal Instinct," the narrator points out that everyone has refrained from the usual jokes and laughter. This time it is not because of the depth of suffering, but because Eddoes' dignity in dealing

with the situation brings out the dignity in everyone else. The calypso is only "whistled," so that the meaning behind the words, the idea that Eddoes has been tricked by a woman, is only an innuendo.

"The Blue Cart" is the only story in the collection that is not a "story of failure." It is a glow of light without which the stories of failure would seem a shapeless condemnation of the society. Without "The Blue Cart," it would seem that Naipaul saw no possibility whatsoever for acts of dignity in the colonial setting and no end to the society's cynical view of itself.

Hand in hand with the cynicism in Miguel Street is the theme of entrapment. Most of the stories end with the character's imprisonment. Other characters continually express the need to escape, to go to America, England or Venezuela, but such escape is seen in the book as virtually impossible. In one story, "Caution," Naipaul shows how a man's attempts first to overcome and then finally to escape the restrictions of the society end in despair. The interconnected themes of entrapment and futility in "Caution" are themes Naipaul develops in the later novels, in particular in A House for Mr. Biswas.

In many of the stories, and especially in "Caution," the comic trickster is a recurrent image. Behind the image is the idea that success in this poor, colonial setting is

only an illusion, that ultimately this illusion will be destroyed and the character's knavery will be revealed. In many of the stories, characters are either conniving or suspected of conniving -- Popo (who makes the things without a name), the mother of Eddoes' baby in "The Blue Cart," and Mr. Bhacku, "the mechanical genius" who at the end becomes a fake pundit. Naipaul speaks in The Middle Passage about "the picaroon delight in trickery" that exists in Trinidad (MP, 79). The comic trickster, or "Anansi-figure" in West Indian folklore, is a dominant figure in West Indian literature, music and theatre. "So intricately woven is Anansi in Jamaican life" Leanord Barrett writes in a study of African roots in the Jamaican folk tradition "that his cunning has become part of the Jamaican personality stereotype."[15] In "Caution" an important variation on the theme of the comic trickster occurs: the comic trickster is the colonial setting itself and the characters are its victims. That the characters see their own setting and their society as wicked and cunning, heightens their sense of entrapment.

In "Caution" Bolo, a barber, is described at the beginning as a complete cynic:

> It was not until 1947 that Bolo believed the war was over. Up till then he used to say, "Is only a

> lot of propaganda. Just lies for black people (MS,128).

The narrator tells us that Bolo was not always cynical. The story, "Caution," is about how he came to be this distrusting of his society.

He buys and reads all the newspapers available on the island and in particular the Guardian because it features a "Missing Ball" competition. A photograph of a football game is printed with the ball erased, and the object is to put an X in the exact space of the "missing ball." Bolo becomes so obsessed with this game that people in Miguel street begin to call him "Missing Ball." Finally in his frustration over not winning, he decides that there was no ball to begin with and violently attacks an editor of the newspaper.

It is at this time that he begins to think everyone is out "to get all the black people money (MS, 131)." This cynicism about his society reflects his own lack of self-worth. A black man himself, he asks the rhetorical question: "How black people so stupid? (MS, 129)" For all his cynicism, however, he falls for a hoax. He invests hundreds of dollars in a co-operative housing project which he reads about in the newspaper and loses it when the "developers" disappear from the country with everyone's

money. He announces that he will never read a newspaper again as long as he lives: "If even I learn Chinese, I ain't go read Chinese papers ... You musn't believe anything you read in the papers (MS, 133)."

He decides to leave Trinidad for Venezuela because "is only a lot of damn crooks here (MS, 133)." Hat, the chief spokesman of the street, reaffirms this idea of the society as comic trickster: "people really treat poor Bolo bad in this country. I don't blame him for leaving (MS, 133)." Bolo gives away his box-cart and other belongings, bids farewell to everyone and leaves.

The very next day, everyone sees him back in Miguel Street. Bolo says:

> "Trinidad people! Trinidad people! I don't know why Hitler don't come here and bomb all the sons of bitches it have in this island. He bombing the wrong people you know."

And the full story comes out:

> "When I get my hands on the good-for-nothing thief who take my money and say he taking me Venezuela ... You know what the man do? He drive around all night in the motor-launch and then put

> we down in a swamp, saying we reach Venezuela. I see some people. I begin talking to them in Spanish, they shake their head and laugh. You know is what? He put me down in Trinidad self, three four miles from La Brea (MS, 135)."

Hat's response reveals him to be even more cynical than Bolo; he says Bolo is lucky they only stole his money: "Some of these people woulda kill you and throw you overboard, man (MS, 135)."

In Bolo's misfortunes and in Hat's response Naipaul expresses the colonials' negative view of their own society. That Bolo is outwitted in his attempt to leave the country, that he ends up in the same place from which he started, is the ultimate sense of his being trapped. He and the others have no means of escaping the web of deceit and dissapointment which they despairingly see as life in Trinidad. After the failure of his Venezuela adventure, Bolo loses face among the men. Secretly, he has the narrator play the sweepstakes for him over the course of three years, while keeping up the pretence among the men of being a hardened skeptic.

One day, he wins. When the narrator tells him, he flies into a rage and tells him: "You musn't believe all you read in newspapers." The narrator checks with the officials in

order to prove to Bolo that he has won. "These Trinidad people does only lie, lie, lie" is Bolo's response. In the end, he becomes so enraged, thinking the whole street is ridiculing him ("Ay Bolo, you win a sweepstake then") that he tears up the sweepstake ticket in front of everyone. His view of his society --that it is filled with liars and cheats -- finally results in his alienation within that society. He ends up living alone in a room, rarely leaving and rarely speaking to anyone.

Within this overall sense of cynicism and futility the men of Miguel Street, paradoxically, find themselves with nothing but their illusions. Popo fools himself into believing he is a carpenter; Eddoes is a "saga boy," who calls the junk he collects in his scavenger cart, his "materials;" Bogart models himself against a Hollywood movie-star, and in story called "B.Wordsworth" a man thinking himself the "black Wordsworth" tries to sell the narrator a poem for four cents.

In Mimesis Eric Auerbach says of Don Quixote: "the fact that Sancho is playing a rogue's game and that Don Quixote is enmeshed in his illusion does not raise either of them out of his everyday existence." Auerbach says that "the everyday scene" in Don Quixote "remains unharmed because the persons and events of everyday life are constantly colliding with his [Quixote's] madness and come

out in stronger relief through the contrast."[16] Similarly, in Miguel Street the illusions of Naipaul's madmen, rogues, and eccentrics never rise above the mundane reality of colonial life, and it is the collision or contrast of the two -- the illusion and the reality -- that creates the sense of farce. It also creates the bitter sense of entrapment because we see that no matter how the characters may try to transcend their reality, they will always fail in the attempt and end up having to face the truth about themselves.

The sense of everyday reality in Miguel Street is expressed through the strong collective vision and voice of the street, in men like Hat and Boyee and also in the women, the narrator's mother in particular. When the narrator, who is fascinated by B. Wordsworth, goes to his mother and asks for four cents so that he can buy one of B. Wordsworth's poems, the mother's reply contrasts sharply with the illusion shared by the narrator and B. Wordsworth: "Tell, that blasted man to haul his tail away from my yard (MS, 46)." And Boyee's knack of finding the right calypso to sum up any situation is part of the street's firm grounding in reality.

In the story, "Man-Man," Naipaul shows us what happens when the street as a whole loses its grip on reality, when they fall for an illusion and a piece of roguery. Man-Man

is the street's lunatic. But because he is also somewhat scheming and vindictive, even a fairly sound character like Hat, finds himself wondering "whether the man really mad (MS,41)."

One day, after taking a bath, Man-Man sees God. The narrator says: "this didn't surprise many of us. Seeing God was quite common in Port of Spain, and indeed, in Trinidad at that time (MS, 41)." Man-Man begins wearing long robes and preaching. As a preacher he proves to be immensely moving, and the narrator has nightmares whenever he comes home from one of Man-man's sermons. Inevitably, Man-Man states that he is the new Messiah and is to be crucified. He has quite a following on the Friday morning when he sets out to Blue Basin with his cross. Not only the Miguel street crowd but also people from far-away places come to stone him; Man-Man orders them to:

> Some men put up the cross, and tied Man-Man to it.
>
> Man-Man said: "Stone me brethren."
>
> The women wept and flung bits of sand and gravel at his feet.
>
> Man-man groaned and said, "Father, forgive them. They ain't know what they doing." Then he screamed out "Stone me, brethren!"

> A pebble the size of an egg struck him on the chest.
>
> Man-Man cried "Stone, stone, STONE me, brethren! I forgive you (MS, 44)."

At this point one of the Miguel Street characters, Edward, turns to another and says: "The man really brave (MS, 44)." They are all now participating in Man-Man's delusion. What does Naipaul do to reassert the sense of everyday reality? He writes:

> People began flinging really big stones at Man-man, aiming at his face and his chest.
>
> Man-Man looked hurt and surprised. He shouted, "What the hell is this? What the hell you people think you doing? Look, get me down from this thing quick, let me down quick, and I go settle with that son of a bitch who pelt a stone at me."
>
> From where Edward and Hat and the rest of us stood, it sounded like a cry of agony.
>
> A bigger stone struck Man-Man; the women flung the sand and gravel at him.
>
> We heard Man-Man's shout, clear and loud, "Cut this stupidness out. Cut it out I tell you. I finish with this arseness, you hear." And then he

> began cursing so loudly and coarsely that the people stopped in surprise (MS, 44).

Naipaul turns everything on its head. The society has lost its grip on reality, so the madman regains his. In doing so he reveals himself to be another of Miguel Street's frauds and ends up the way most of the characters do, institutionalized. Naipaul writes at the very end: "The authorities kept him for observation. Then for good (MS, 44)."

The fact that the people are taken in by the illusion and that the word "bravery" is used, though in a deluded sense, expresses the thirst for heroism. But Naipaul's cynicism about his society emerges more strongly than ever in this story. Man-Man's two-facedness concerning his "crucifixion" suggests that everything, even insanity and mysticism, is tinged with fraudulence. Nothing about colonial society is authentic. It is a society without saviors or heroes.

The narrator of Miguel Street is a child when we first meet him and he grows to manhood in the course of the book. His maturation involves those things he comes to understand about manliness and heroism in his society. He is much more than a witness to the events in Miguel Street and plays a much more active role than that of being the commentator

and the pair of eyes through which we view the street. He not only reports, he refines what he sees and hears -- not for the reader's sake, but amongst the characters themselves. In "Caution" he is the go-between in a struggle between two characters Eddoes and Bolo who are having a feud over a box-cart, and in carrying inflammatory remarks from one to the other, he attempts to ease the misunderstanding:

> Eddoes said: "You see why black people can't get on in this world. You was there when he give it me with his own two hands and now he want it back. Take it back to him and tell him Eddoes say he could go to hell."
>
> I told Bolo, "Eddoes say he sorry and he send back the box-cart (MS, 135)."

The sympathy the narrator shows for the characters, while he is still a boy, shows an innocence and hopefulness about the society. He accepts all the illusions, the pompous talk and bravado which the older men use to hide their weakness. And as he grows older and becomes privy to the less than heroic truths of some of the men, the cowardice of Big Foot and Bolo's addiction to the sweepstakes for instance, he guards their secrets from the

rest of Miguel Street.

Gradually, his ideals are deflated. He learns that the man who makes "the thing without a name" is not making anything at all; mad people are mad, and jail is jail. When Hat, his hero and a sort of father-figure, ends up going to jail, the narrator says, "something in me died." The story of Hat's downfall is the second to last one in the book, and the narrator's story -- "How I left Miguel Street," follows after. The way Naipaul gradually paces the narrator's growth and changing views, so that he goes from innocence to disillusionment, gives the book a clearly defined narrative movement which makes it more like a novel than a collection of stories.

Though it is easy to assume throughout the book that Naipaul bases the narrator on himself, it is only in the last few lines that the reader feels Naipaul's intrusion: "I left them all and walked briskly towards the aeroplane, not looking back... (MS, 172)." Up until this point, we have seen Miguel Street through the warm eyes of a participant. Suddenly, that sympathetic voice which has engaged us throughout the book becomes the voice of an outsider's: cold, unforgiving and estranged.

The ending expresses a sense of anxiety in the colonial character as he leaves his familiar setting to go into "the great world." If Naipaul had difficulty "returning" to

Trinidad --in the sense of making it his subject -- he has also had difficulty "leaving." Miguel Street with its painful and severe ending captures Naipaul's ambivalent feelings about his homeland, a mixture of contempt and nostalgia, the need to be detached and at the same time the realization that his life as a writer is inseparably linked to his native background. The contempt in the words at the end "not looking back" is comparable to Bolo's "I leaving this island for good" in the story "Caution." Although the narrator does not look back, he sees his shadow before him --"a dancing dwarf on the tarmac (MS, 172)." The image suggests that Naipaul cannot truly dissociate himself from his colonial background and history anymore than his characters are able to escape from the world of Miguel Street. At the end of all the laughter, at the end of this comedy of suffering, the narrator's self-enforced detachment expresses the writer's own painful relationship to that society. It is reminscent of Quentin Compson's impassioned words about the South at the end of Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom: "I don't hate it...I don't hate it...I don't. I don't!"[17] The ending of Miguel Street with its pained atmosphere of departure actually represents a starting-point; it hints at the themes of exile and displacement which Naipaul explores in his later books.

1 Bernard Levin, " A Perpetual Voyager: The Levin Interviews,: The Listener, 109 (23 June, 1983) p.17.

2 Letter to Grenfell Williams, May 17, 1954, BBC Written Archives Centre.

3 Bharati Mukherjee and Robert Boyers, "A Conversation with V. S. Naipaul," Salmagundi, 54 (1981) p.8.

4 Paulo Friere, from Pedagogy of the Oppressed quoted in an interview in Omni magazine, March (1990) p.93.

5 John Thieme, "Calypso Allusion in V. S. Naipaul's Miguel Street,"Kunapipi (1981), 3 (2) p.19.

6 Cited by Naipaul in the Overcrowded Baraccon (New York: Vintage, 1984) p.11.

7 Harveen Sachdeva Mann, "Variations on the Theme of Mimicry," Modern Fiction Studies, 30 (1984), p.485.

8 Franz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (New York: Grove Press, 1967) p.60.

9 Derek Walcott, "What the Twilight Said: An Overture" in Dream on Monkey Mountain (new York, Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1970) p.4.

10 Levin Interview, p.16.

11 Gordon Rohlehr, "The Ironic Approach: The Novels of V. S. Naipaul," in Critical Perspectives on V. S. Naipaul ed., Robert D. Hamner (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1977) p. 182.

12 George Lamming, The Pleasure of Exile (London: Michael Joseph, 1960) p. 232.

13 Levin Interview, p. 17.

14 Walcott, "What the Twilight Said," p.18.

15 Leonard Barrett, The Sun and the Drum: African Roots in Jamaican Folk tradition (Kingston: Sangsters in Association with Heinemann, London, 1976), p.32.

16 Eric Auerbach, Mimesis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp.342-343.

17 William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom! (New York: Vintage, 1972), p.378.

3. "An Unaccommodating World": The Absurd Hero in A House for Mr. Biswas

> "...to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated."
>
> (HMB, 14)

Naipaul describes A House for Mr. Biswas as the book closest to him: "It is the most personal, created out of what I saw and felt as a child."[1] The protagonist, Mr. Biswas, is based on Naipaul's father; the indomitable Tulsi family is based on the Capildeos, the maternal side of Naipaul's family which played such a prominent role in his childhood. A House for Mr. Biswas is the novel Naipaul felt could not be written. He once said: "the great novelists wrote about highly organized societies. I had no such society (ROEP, 230)." His past, he felt, had been "too varied and full of upheavals" and his society too "shapeless" and "haphazard" to be described in a novel.

When the novel came out in 1961, it was praised by other West Indian writers for its vivid and realistic portrayal of Indian life in the West Indies. The Barbadian writer, Edward Braithwaite wrote: "Before Mr. Biswas, the West Indian East Indian was without form, features or voice." And he picks up on Naipaul's own earlier fears about West Indian society, again praising the achievement

of Naipaul's novel and adding that "the Negro West Indian cannot really expect novels like Biswas until he has a strong framework of social convention from which to operate."[2]

A House for Mr. Biswas does provide a rich, memorable picture of Indian family life in the West Indies. Considering Naipaul's early doubts in regard to writing about his background, the strong portrayal of family and society in this novel can be seen as an artistic and personal triumph over the disorder of the past. But the novel, which spans the lifetime of a single character and depicts a way of life which has since changed, offers more than history and social realism. It offers us the colonial setting as a background of existential despair. Like other characters in Naipaul's fiction, Mr. Biswas is tormented by a sense of displacement brought about by his colonial history. What sets him apart from these other characters is not the cause of his suffering but the way in which he suffers. Colonial life with its feeling of restriction and alienation, and its sense of "otherness" is the background against which Mr. Biswas explores the very meaning -- and meaninglessness -- of his life.

In "An Absurd Reasoning" Camus defines the "absurd":

> ...in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels alien, a stranger. His

> exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. The divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of the absurd.[3]

"Exile... without remedy" is a condition suffered by many of the characters in Naipaul's fiction and also by the writer himself. And exile is for Naipaul, as it is for Camus, more of a psychological than physical reality. Mr. Biswas is not exiled in any literal sense; he has a home and a country -- colonial Trinidad. But against the realistic setting of family, home, and society, Biswas senses an encroaching darkness and experiences a type of isolation similar to the darkness and isolation depicted by Camus in the passage above.

In a particularly striking passage of A House for Mr. Biswas, the character recalls a scene which haunts him. It is a scene which, to my mind, expresses the existential themes of the novel:

> Once years before, he was conducting one of Adjoha's motorbuses that ran its erratic course to remote and unsuspecting villages. It was late afternoon and they were racing back along the ill-made country road. Their lights were weak and

> they were racing the sun. The sun fell; and in the short dusk they passed a lonely hut set in a clearing far back from the road. Smoke came from under the ragged thatched eaves: the evening meal was being prepared. And, in the gloom, a boy was leaning against the hut, his hands behind him, staring at the road. He wore a vest and nothing more. The vest glowed white. In an instant the bus went by, noisy in the dark, through bush and level sugar-cane fields. Mr. Biswas could not remember where the hut stood, but the picture remained: a boy leaning against an earth house that had no reason for being there, under the dark falling sky, a boy who didn't know where the road, and that bus, went (HMB, 190).

The "house that had no reason for being there" comes to represent for Mr. Biswas the unresolvable mystery of his own life and the absurdity of human efforts. Houses -- in particular the unending quest for "a house for Mr. Biswas" -- are the most important motif in the novel. The boy leaning against the hut and staring at the road is a newly awakened consciousness; he is aware of the road but does not know where it leads. And the noisy bus speeding along the road represents the passage of time, the past and the future, and the randomness of events in time. There are

two contrasting elements in this picture. Behind the boy, there is the glowing light of the hut, the light here showing the limited field of his awareness; the hut is all he knows. There is a sense of stillness and domestic order suggested by the smoke rising as the evening meal is being prepared. Ahead of him, is the darkness out of which the idea of the unexplored "great world" suddenly breaks into his consciousness in the form of the chaotic, noisy bus. To Biswas, who is on the bus and glimpses the quiet scene in a matter of seconds, the boy and hut are like a moment of self-reflection in which his life, like the "house that had no reason for being there," strikes him as fundamentally absurd.

The glow of light from the hut in contrast to the surrounding darkness is part of a pattern of light and darkness in the novel that is thematic as well as structural. Naipaul describes several kinds of alienation in the novel; there is Biswas's alienation within his family and within the Indian community; there is the alienation of the Indians from the society at large, and alienation in the form of the loss of ancestral traditions, the severance of ties with India. All these are like concentric circles spreading out into darkness with Mr. Biswas at the center, struggling to make sense of the encircling void.

There is a paradox in the life of Mr. Biswas: he is both "unaccommodated" and he is trapped. He drifts from house to house, spurned and ridiculed. But as a drifter he is far from free. He is painfully restricted within the colonial setting, through marriage, poverty, and the conventions of Hindu family life. "Trap. Trap," he constantly mutters throughout the novel, and he blames his wife for his failures and frustrations: "You and your family have got me trapped in this hole (HMB, 377)!"

But Mr. Biswas is trapped in an even larger sense. In an article on A House for Mr Biswas Keith Garebian eloquently describes Mr. Biswas as "a prisoner of his own passage on earth."[4] From the day he is born to the day he dies Biswas is a condemned man. Auspicious signs at his birth -- he is born with six fingers and born upside down -- bring warnings of catastrophe from the mid-wife: "Whatever you do this boy will eat up his father and his mother (HMB, 16)." And the pundit predicts, based on the time of birth, that "the unfortunate boy" will be "a lecher and a spendthrift. Possibly a liar as well (HMB, 16)." The scene of Mr. Biswas's birth is absurd and comical because the lecher, spendthrift and murderer is only several minutes old. "The gravest sin of man is to be born," writes the Spanish dramatist, Calderon.[5] This seems to be true in the case of Mr. Biswas. Underlying the humor of the birth

scene is a foreshadowing of suffering. Biswas is doomed because he has been born.

Naipaul calls the first chapter "Pastoral." In an article in the New York Review of Books, he discusses his use of the word:

> ...I was writing of things before my time. The transplanted Hindu-Muslim rural culture into which my father was born early in the century was still a whole culture, close to India. When I was of an age to observe, that culture had begun to weaken; and the time of wholeness had seemed to me as far away as India itself, and almost dateless ....
>
> So the present novel begins with events twice removed, in an antique "pastoral" time, and almost in a land of imagination.[6]

"Pastoral" also suggests innocence and an idyllic, peaceful prelapsarian world. The fact that Biswas is clearly not innocent -- he is said to be "unfortunate" from birth -- alludes to the original sin and man's fall. Prohibitions set by the pundit at Biswas's birth reinforce this allusion. Biswas's parents are told to keep the child away from trees and water. At this point, Naipaul's "pastoral" seems a parody of the Garden of Eden with its forbidden tree.

The prohibition also makes the world a restricted place for Mr. Biswas. The fact that it is impossible to avoid water and trees on an island like Trinidad establishes Biswas's alienation within his own natural surroundings.

From the start Mr. Biswas is at odds with his "pastoral" setting. His birth can be seen as a sort of rupture. On one level, his birth signals social and historic change, a change in the life of Indians in Trinidad. He is a first generation Trinidadian, part of the generation which will weaken the ties to India and also the ties to the "pastoral" world of Indian agricultural workers in rural Trinidad. On another level, the rupture is psychological, part of the existential sense of hoplessness. Mr. Biswas is modern man cast out into a chaotic world, "a universe...divested of illusions and lights" as Camus says, a world without God.

Naipaul begins the novel in a highly satirical vein. The epic grandness of the mid-wife's prediction with its Oedipal allusion (Biswas will "eat up his father and his mother") next to the hocus-pocus advice of the pundit gives the whole scene of Biswas's birth a mock-heroic tone. Not only does everything go wrong at his birth (the six fingers and his being born upside down), but also the Hindu naming ceremony accompanying the birth is conducted in an atmosphere that is slip-shod and "touched with fraudulence (AD, 32)." The pundit's astrological almanac is brown with

age and musty smelling. The cheaper coconut oil is substituted for the traditional mustard-seed oil. And the most important part of the ceremony is forgotten, the naming of the child. When the pundit is reminded, he is only able to come up with one syllable, "Mo." The family calls the child "Mohun."

Naipaul undermines the Hindu ritual surrounding the birth of Biswas to point out the incongruity of the old Indian ways in the new colonial setting. The pundit's "dismissing manner," his forgetfulness during the ceremony, and his obvious pleasure at the florin he receives in payment puts the ancient traditions in an almost grotesque light; the old customs have lost their meaning in the new world. Biswas is born in this period of transition and is caught between the old and the new. That the pundit almost forgets to name him, and then produces only part of a name suggests that there is no place assigned to him in the old order. Nor does he have a place in the new. That he is called Mr. Biswas throughout the novel suggests that he is perpetually a stranger to all.

In the early stages of his life, Biswas is depicted as a comic figure. He is a clown in the classic sense that even his most trivial acts result in chaos. The midwife's predictions come true. While still a child, Biswas indirectly causes his father's death. And it is a death by water. One day while tending a neighbor's calf, Mr. Biswas

finds himself gazing in fascination at a school of fish in a pond. The calf gets lost. Mr. Biswas decides to hide until the calf is found in order to escape punishment. The villagers and his family are convinced that both the boy and the calf have fallen into the pond. Mr. Biswas's father dives in to recover his son and drowns. Biswas's role in his father's death is an appropriate beginning to a life which is seen as absurd. Whether his role in such disasters is active or passive is hard to distinguish, and Naipaul implies that the distinction is not important. The important thing is that he be seen as in some way responsible -- whether accidentally or deliberately -- for his own orphaned, desolate state. That he is both the victim and generator of tragedy belongs to the central paradox of his existence: he is unaccommodated and trapped, he is "in a free state" and he is condemned. It is the paradox Sartre speaks of in Existentialism: "Man is condemned to be free. Condemned because he did not create himself, yet, in other respects is free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does."[7]

After his father's funeral, Biswas's family is split up and their hut is sold to a neighbor. It is the first in a series of houses which Mr. Biswas will either leave voluntarily or be forced to leave. It marks the first phase of alienation, and one might say the first kind of

alienation, he experiences -- the separation from family. Naipaul writes: "And so Mr. Biswas came to leave the only house to which he had some right. For the next thirty-five years he was to be a wanderer with no place he could call his own (HMB, 40)."

The next phase of Biswas's alienation occurs when he is expelled from the house of Pundit Jairam where he has been sent to learn the old sacred traditions. Naturally, in keeping with his role of clown and buffoon, he creates havoc. Again, a fairly trivial and innocent act sets off a series of catastrophic circumstances ending in total misfortune. It begins when Mr. Biswas helps himself to a banana from a large bunch the pundit has received as a gift or payment. To punish him, the pundit forces him to eat all the bananas at one sitting. This creates a further problem for Mr. Biswas in that the excessive quantity of fruit makes him lose control of his bowels. Frightened of going outside to the latrine during the night he relieves himself in a handkerchief which he disposes of by dropping it outside the window. The handkerchief falls onto the pundit's cherished and sacred oleander tree. "Never again" Naipaul writes, "could its flowers be used at the puja." When Pundit Jairam admonishes him he brings up the earlier warnings of Pundit Sitaram at the time of Biswas's birth: "Sitaram particularly warned me to keep you away from trees (HMB, 43)."

The reminder of Sitaram's warning points to the pattern of misfortune emerging in the novel. Once again, Biswas's misfortune is linked to the natural surroundings: to bananas, a native fruit of Trinidad and to the oleander tree. Biswas, like Adam, eats the forbidden fruit; he touches what was prohibited at the time of his creation -- a tree. The scene of Biswas leaving the village "clad in dhoti, with his bundle slung on his shoulder," with all the villagers watching, is a scene of exile faintly suggesting Adam's expulsion from Paradise. The picture of Biswas in the traditional "dhoti" carrying a bundle also recreates the stereotypical Indian beggar or wandering holy man. The scene marks Biswas's alienation from the early "pastoral" life of Indians in Trinidad. No longer is he part of the simple rural life. That he is sent away by a pundit also marks the severance of his ties with the orthodox Hindu ways.

From this rural world Biswas moves on to the modern colonial setting. Here he proves to be as much of a misfit as before. And once again he unwittingly finds himself in unfortunate circumstances. He is trapped into marriage.

The scene in which Mr. Biswas is snared into the Tulsi family reveals the underlying complexity and nuances of West Indian colonial society. Biswas is hired as a sign painter in one of the Tulsi's stores. While working there he becomes attracted to Shama, one of Mrs. Tulsi's

daughters, who works behind the counter. One day he manages to secretly give her a note. He decides almost at once that he has made a fool of himself and thinks about taking back the note. While he hesitates a customer, "a fat Negro woman," comes into the store and asks Shama for "flesh-coloured stockings." Shama shows the woman a pair of black cotton stockings. The woman is insulted and creates a disturbance in the store. Old Mrs. Tulsi, Shama's mother, appears, and in the midst of all the commotion, Mr. Biswas's note is exposed on the counter. Later that evening, Mrs. Tulsi sends for Mr. Biswas and before he knows it he and Shama are to be married (HMB, 83-91).

As an Indian from the prosperous merchant class, Shama is used to dealing with creoles (Trinidadians of black or mixed race). She is therefore aware of the trouble she is causing by showing the woman black stockings when asked for flesh-coloured. She is mischievously playing on the sense of inferiority and shame about colour existing among Trinidadian creoles. At the same time she is shrewdly taking advantage of Hindu conventions which forbid an exchange of affection between unmarried men and women. She is also aware and taking advantage of the class difference between herself and Mr. Biswas; she is secure in her role as a member of the Tulsi household while he is a homeless Indian of peasant extraction and a hired hand. In one stroke Naipaul exposes several layers of colonial society.

In this web of social conventions and feminine manipulation, Mr. Biswas is helplessly trapped. Or so it appears on the surface. There is another way of interpreting the scene. Mr. Biswas does, after all, write the incriminating note. It is possible that Shama becomes so distracted on receiving it that she absentmindedly shows the woman the wrong stockings. And in fact that is the excuse she gives her mother: "I wasn't thinking, Mai." In any event, here as in the earlier scene with pundit Jairam, Mr. Biswas is the one who sets off the events which heap misfortune upon him. Both scenes are highly comical in that the consequences so far outweigh the simple act. The world becomes entirely mechanical with Biswas a comic figure in the Chaplin sense, unable to halt the conveyer-belt rapidness of events which he unwittingly sets going.

It is upon his marriage to Shama that Mr. Biswas becomes conscious of his fate: "The world was too small, the Tulsi family too large. He was trapped (HMB, 91)." Entrapment here is more than a domestic bind. The Tulsis represent a powerful economic and social force which is more colonial than it is Indian. In marrying into the family, Mr. Biswas is initiated fully into the colonial world. Biswas's relationship with the Tulsis takes up more than two-thirds of the novel. It is in this relationship that we see the character's sense of displacement in the colonial setting. Naipaul's picture of Indian life in

colonial Trinidad is of a restricted, self-enclosed, clautrophobic society. This world becomes the main setting for the character's struggle and despair. The description of Hanuman House, the Tulsi home, is of an imposing physical structure, a monumental display of colonial wealth and material greed. Mr. Biswas immediately finds it sinister and oppressive:

> Among the tumbledown timber-and-corrugated-iron buildings in the High Street at Arwacas, Hanuman House stood like an alien white fortress. The concrete walls looked as thick as they were, and when the narrow doors of the Tulsi store were closed the House became bulky, impregnable and blank. The side walls were windowless, and on the upper two floors the windows were mere slits in the facade (HMB, 80).

Naipaul sets the house among the poorer "tumbledown" buildings to establish the wealth and importance of the Tulsis in the community. In their privileged position, however, they are "alien" and the word "fortress" suggests both the power and self-enclosure of the clan. The word, "House," is always capitalized in the case of the Tulsi home, again illustrating the family's importance. That the House becomes "impregnable and blank" when the

store is closed suggests that the family's life centers on business, and its only connection with society is mercenary. The word "facade" connotes hypocrisy. And the overall impression of the House with its "narrow doors" and "windowless," "thick" walls is that of a prison.

Mrs. Tulsi rules the family which is comprised of her daughters, their husbands, their children, and Mrs. Tulsi's two spoiled, over-protected, over-fed sons. The large extended family living under one roof is not -- in the Tulsi's case -- a traditional Hindu arrangement. It departs quite radically from Hindu conventions in its matriarchal style. Traditionally daughters leave the parents' home to become part of the husband's clan. With the Tulsi's the reverse occurs. The daughters are the caretakers of the numerous Tulsi grandchildren and their husbands are "workers" or "managers" on Tulsi lands or in the Tulsi stores. Uncle Seth, Mrs. Tulsi's brother, oversees -- or overseers --the workers/family. This hierachical system has little to do with Hindu tradition and much to do with the colonial plantation system which existed in the days of slavery. In his article on the novel, Gordon Rohlehr describes Hanuman House as "a slave society erected by Mrs. Tulsi and Seth who need workers to rebuild their tottering empire." Mrs. Tulsi and Seth "exploit the homelessness and poverty of their fellow-Hindus and reconstruct a mockery of the clan which

functions only because they have so completely grasped the psychology of a slave system." Rohlehr continues:

> Like the West Indies, Hanuman House is constructed of a vast number of disparate families, gratuitously brought together by the economic need of a "high-caste" minority. Men are necessary here only as husbands for the Tulsi daughters and labourers on the Tulsi estates. To accept Hanuman House is to acquiesce in one's slavery.[8]

Rohler's analysis of the Tulsi family as colonial exploiters who have assumed the qualities of the old plantocracy is exactly the way that Mr. Biswas sees the situation. Mr. Biswas is aware of the family's plans to exploit him. He thinks to himself:

> ...They had married Shama to him simply because he was of the proper caste, just as they had married the daughter called C to an illiterate coconut-seller.
>
> Mr. Biswas had no money or position. He was expected to become a Tulsi.
>
> At once he rebelled (HMB, 97).

"There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn" wrote Camus.[9] At first, Mr. Biswas's way of rebelling against the Tulsis is by maintaining a scornful, detached view of the family. His scorn turns to a physical revulsion of everything connected to the Tulsis. He is unable to eat the Tulsi "bad food," and the objects in the Tulsi home never once take on a domestic familiarity in his eyes. The description of things and of people in the house gives an overwhelming sense of a cluttered, sordid world filled with distinct Tulsi smells -- Vicks Vaporub, candles, Bay Rum, garlic; Tulsi sounds -- children being chastized and beaten, "the eaters" noisily chewing at the communal table; and Tulsi sights -- "the sleepers" on unfolding beds in every room, lotus flowers on the pale green walls, and restaurant-size tins of soda crackers at every meal. As Kenneth Ramchand points out in "The World of A House for Mr. Biswas," Naipaul's repetition and constant allusion to "Tulsi" sounds, sights, and smells "consolidates our first impression of the crowded, noisy, ritualized life and single-attribute people."[10] The repulsive quality which people and things take on for Mr. Biswas also heightens his alienation from his surroundings and increases the sense of the absurd.

Biswas's scorn for the Tulsi family is also expressed in his sarcasm and mockery. Immediately upon moving into the House, he invents names for members of the family: Mrs.

Tulsi is the "old queen," Seth is the "Big Boss" and the two spoiled sons are "the Gods." He also invents group terms: "the eaters" "the sisters" and "the sleepers" confirming our impression of the overcrowded, exploitative atmosphere of Hanuman House. These names and this mocking of the Tulsis he shares with Shama when they are alone. His open contempt for her family is his only way of asserting his independence. After a while the name-calling sessions take on a ritualistic significance for them. Shama begins to play her own part and finds herself enjoying it. It is only in such scenes that there is any hint of sexual intimacy between them, as though the verbal display of defiance is the only means by which Biswas can prove himself a man:

> "I got another name for one of your brother-in-laws" he told Shama that evening..."The constipated holy man."
>
> "Hari?" she said, and pulled herself up, realizing that she had begun to take part in the game.
>
> He slapped his yellow flabby calf and pushed his finger into the flesh. The calf yielded like sponge.
>
> She pulled his hand away. "Don't do that .... You should be ashamed, a young man like you, being

so soft."

"That is all the bad food I eating in this place." He was still holding her hand. "Well, as a matter of fact, I have quite a few names for him. The holy ghost. You like that?"

"Man!"

"And what about the two gods? It ever strike you that they look like two monkeys?...They could just call this place monkey house and finish. Eh, monkey, bull, cow, hen. The place is like a blasted zoo, man."

"And what about you? The barking puppy dog?" ... By now Shama's head was on his soft arm and they were lying side by side (HMB, 120).

Shama's word, "man," spoken to Biswas becomes a term of affection, her way of showing that she accepts him as her man.

Why does Mr. Biswas rebel against the Tulsis? They have provided him with a place to live and food to eat, and Shama is an attractive, companionable wife for him. He asks himself the same question. Shortly before his marriage he contemplates:

After all the girl was good-looking. And there would be a handsome dowry. Against this he could

> only set his fear,
> and a regret he could explain to no one: he would be losing romance forever, since there could be no romance at Hanuman House (HMB, 93).

To Biswas, "romance" means his dreams. Throughout the novel he often wistfully reflects on "romance" and longs for life to "yield its sweetness to him." Hanuman House is the antithesis of romance with its rigid hierachy and materialism, its communal eating table, communal children, crowded rooms, and its unspoken dissapproval of privacy.

What Biswas fears and struggles against is "being reduced to nothing."[11] This is the phrase Naipaul himself uses in describing his childhood in a large extended family. He also speaks of the "scattered nonentity" of growing up in that kind of family. To Biswas, becoming a Tulsi is like being a nonentity. In order to be "something" rather than "nothing," he alternately plays the rebel and the buffoon. He tries and fails more than once to leave Hanuman House and set up his own home. He joins Hindu reformist groups in order to anger the Tulsis. He wears "comic make-believe clothes" and allows himself to be made fun of. But his rebellion is futile. His sarcasm and ridiculous behaviour even gain him a kind of acceptance at Hanuman House.

Biswas's realization that nothing he does matters to anyone fills him with despair. Even before moving to Hanuman House, in his early days with Pundit Jairam and his wanderings from one family member to another, Biswas felt himself to be irrelevant. The Tulsis only heighten this sense of irrelevance. At one point when he is considering leaving Hanuman House he realizes: "There was room for him... if he stayed. If he left he would not be missed (HMB, 304)." And at another point when he looks back over his life he thinks, "He had lived in so many houses. And how easy it was to think of those houses without him! (HMB, 131)" The feeling that one is irrelevant or merely in the way is a predominant theme in existentialist writings. In Nausea, Sartre describes Roquentin's feeling of irrelevance:

> In the way: it was the only relationship I could establish...In the way, the chestnut trees there opposite me... And I -- soft, weak, obscene, disgusting, juggling with dismal thoughts -- I too was in the way.[12]

Biswas, like Roquentin, is also "soft, weak, obscene." He is often seen pinching and poking his flesh with a mixture of disgust and fascination. His physically grotesque appearance further isolates him and make him a

figure of ridicule. As an infant his skin is full of "sores that swelled and burst and scabbed and burst again, until they stank (HMB,22)." As an adult his skin is described as soft, flabby and yellow. His stomach is "distended, not fat." The more Biswas senses that his actions have no effect on anyone around him the more he turns inward to self-ridicule and self-mutilation:

> ...there were whole weeks when he devoted himself to some absurdity. He grew his nails to an extreme length and held them up to startle customers. He picked and squeezed at his face until his cheeks and forehead were inflamed and the rims of his lips were like welts. When his skin became pitted with little holes, he studied these with interest and found the perfection of their shape pleasing. And once he dabbed healing ointments of various colors on his face and went and stood in the shop doorway, greeting people he knew (HMB, 184).

These are gestures of despair. Biswas is a clown, laughing on the outside and crying within. In his actions there is a hidden emphasis on growth, destruction, and recovery -- growing his nails to bizzarre lengths, disfiguring his face, studying the scars and the healing

process, and using "healing" ointments. He displays a morbid fascination with the biological facts of his existence, the persistence of the outer body in spite of inner fragmentation. On the brink of madness, doubting the reality of his existence, his exhibitionism is a way of testing reality. ""Greeting people he knew," he challenges their knowledge and perception of him. The bizzarre painting of his face in "different colors" is significant. Colors depend on the interplay of our perceptions and light in order to come into existence. When Biswas puts colors on his face and stands in the light of the doorway it dramatizes the questioning of his own existence, the measuring of inner against outer reality.

In The Politics of Experience R. D. Laing speaks of "men who feel called upon to generate even themselves out of nothing, since their underlying feeling is that they have not been adequately created or have been created only for destruction."[13] Biswas's grotesque actions -- from the wearing of clownish clothes to the growing of his nails to shocking lengths -- arise from a sense of nothingness and a need to "generate" himself. His strangeness at birth (the six-fingers) and the predictions of the midwife and pundit send him into the world with a sense of being "badly-made" or, as Laing puts it, being made "only for destruction."

The book's title, A House for Mr. Biswas and the character's continual quest for a home throughout the novel remind us that the main cause of Biswas's unhappiness is his lack of a place in the world. "Place" has more than one meaning in this novel as it does in all of Naipaul's work. That Biswas has no place is partly due to his being caught between two worlds. One is the world of his forefathers, for whom, as Naipaul puts it, the idea of India was "whole," a world where religion and tradition gave one a sense of "dharma," a particular role and destiny. The other is the New World with its uprooted people who have lost touch with ancestral beliefs and traditions, a world where every man creates his own role or destiny. Naipaul shows us that the colonial society is itself still trying to create its own destiny out of a chaotic history. It is a confused and retricted society. Biswas reflects that confusion and restrictiveness, and he reflects the society's state of transition. He cannot return to the old world of his forefathers, and he is restricted from moving ahead in the new. In his book on Naipaul, Richard Kelly expresses this idea when he says (borrowing a line from Matthew Arnold) that "A House for Mr. Biswas is Naipaul's elaborate bridge between two worlds, one dying and the other powerless to be born."[14]

There are other dimensions to these polarities of old and new, place and displacement. Naipaul's allusion earlier

in the novel to man's expulsion from the Garden of Eden (particularly in the scene where Biswas eats "forbidden fruit") suggests that place and displacement can also be perceived in allegorical terms as before and after man's fall. Then too, Naipaul's constant use of words like "void" and "hole" to express Biswas's anguish, points to an existentialist concern: once man had a secure sense of his place in a universe watched over by a caring God; now he sees himself alone and unsheltered in an uncaring universe governed by chance.

Whether one focusses on the social or psychological implications, Biswas's effort to acquire a house represents his effort to create something meaningful out of what he perceives as the meaninglessness and futility of life. The chapter in which he presents his daughter, Savi, with a doll's house poignantly dramatizes both the effort and the futility.

The doll's house is a symbol of what Biswas strives for, a place of his own and a meaningful life. It is described as exquisitely crafted: "Every room...was daintily furnished. The kitchen had a stove such as Mr. Biswas had never seen in real life (HMB, 216)." He is himself shocked at the extravagance of the present; it costs him over a month's wages. The gift creates quite a stir among the Tulsis. Naipaul writes:

> At Hanuman House they knew about the doll's house even before it arrived. The hall was packed with sisters and their children. Mrs. Tulsi sat at the pitchpine table patting her lips with her veil.
>
> The children exclaimed when the doll's house was set down, and in the hush that followed Savi came forward and stood near it proprietorially.
>
> "Well, what you think?" Mr. Biswas asked the hall, using his quick high-pitched voice.
>
> The sisters were silent (HMB, 216).

The mention of "the hall" and the presence of Mrs. Tulsi and "the sisters" turns the father-daughter scene into a confrontation between Biswas and the Tulsi clan. The family presence is a reminder of the stifling communal atmosphere of Hanuman House. The Tulsis are reminding Biswas that Savi is a Tulsi child. His first victory is in seeing her step forward from the other children; he is "pleased when the children acknowledged Savi's ownership by asking her permission to open doors and touch beds." But anything suggesting individuality, not to mention individual ownership, is anathema to the Tulsis. What occurs is the very thing Biswas fears and struggles against, the family's power to reduce the individual to nothing:

"What have you brought for the others?"

It was Mrs. Tulsi.

"Didn't have room," Mr. Biswas said gaily.

"When I give, I give to all," Mrs. Tulsi said. "I am poor, but I give to all. It is clear, however, that I cannot compete with Santa Claus."

Her voice was even...but when he looked at her he saw that her face was tight with anger (HMB, 217).

Mrs Tulsi is like the head of an authoritarian government admonishing a wayward citizen for putting the individual before the state. As soon as she shows her disapproval, Naipaul describes "the sisters" all moving at once, shouting at their children to come away from the doll's house and in the process ostracizing Shama and her children: "The affronted sisters drew closer together, and Shama stood alone. Her eyes were wide with dread. She stared accusingly at Mr. Biswas (HMB,217)."

Mr. Biswas goes away, and when he returns to Hanuman House, Savi comes to meet him distraught. "They break it up," she says, then explains, "Ma mash it up." The ruined doll's house is described as it is seen by Mr. Biswas:

...A broken door, a ruined window, a staved-in wall or even roof -- he had expected that. But

> not this. The doll's house did not exist. He saw only a bundle of firewood. None of its parts were whole. Its delicate joints were exposed and useless. Below the torn skin of paint, still bright and still in parts imitating brickwork, the hacked and splintered wood was white and raw (HMB, 219).

Shama explains to Mr. Biswas that she had to break the doll's house to make life bearable for herself and her children. The Tulsis' reaction to the doll's house is typical of their reaction to Mr. Biswas's efforts to acquire a real house of his own. Mrs. Tulsi chooses the occasion of Biswas's gift of the doll's house to comment sarcastically: "Shama, I hope you will have the grace to give me notice before you move to your mansion." Behind their mocking is the hope that Biswas will fail. In fact, Seth and Mrs. Tulsi continue to show patronizing good humor and tolerance towards him as long as he keeps failing. In the sense that the family represents colonial society, the destruction of the finely crafted doll's house represents the restraints placed on the individual by the small, self-enclosed society. The smashed doll's house is a blow aimed directly at Mr. Biswas's efforts to make something of his life; it is his own family, his own society, making his struggle pointless.

It is soon after the doll's house incident, that Mr. Biswas has a nervous breakdown. In Naipaul's choice of the setting for Biswas's mental collapse, the metaphorical importance of houses in the novel becomes clear. Biswas's breakdown begins at the Barracks and climaxes in the unfinished house he has been building at Green Vale.

The Barracks are an appropriate setting for Biswas's mental disintegration. Historically, "barracks" were originally built for the Indian indentured labourers who arrived on the island to work on the estates. These cramped wooden quarters represent a particular kind of colonial despair: the displacement of people, their isolation and cultural loss. The buildings themselves -- which can still be seen in Trinidad -- uniform, unattractive, suggestive of enslavement or imprisonment, reduced the Indian laborer to something less than human, a factor of production. And it is in this historically painful setting that Biswas begins to feel himself defeated in his struggle against nothingness: "he was falling into the void, and that terror, known only in dreams, was with him as he lay awake at nights hearing the snores and creaks, and occasional cries of babies from the other rooms (HMB, 227)."

He leaves the barracks and moves to the unfinished house. "It was a positive action... a confident, defiant gesture," Naipaul writes. But the hallucinations he had

begun having in the barracks grow worse. He sees snakes everywhere; he tries to scrape them up off the floor and to cut them down from the ceiling but they continue to multiply. One night he feels one fall on him and looking up at the ceiling he sees "the parent snake, waiting to release some more (HMB, 282)."

Not only does he feel there is much to fear inside his room, the world outside becomes equally sinister: "The trees could conceal so much (HMB, 282)." Remembering that Biswas was prohibited from water and trees at his birth, we see that the world which was at first merely restrictive for him has finally become threatening and hostile. In his article, "A Vision of the Land in V. S. Naipaul's Later Novels," John Cooke writes: "the land rather than offering a sense of place discloses that alienation is inevitable." At this point, Biswas's aliention from his family and society is complete and so is his alienation from the natural surroundings.[15]

Biswas has a complete nervous breakdown in his unfinished house at Green Vale. To go back to R. D. Laing's idea about men who feel they must generate themselves into being, the house without proper roof or floors symbolizes Biswas's borderline state between being and non-being, his sense of failure and incompletion. The unfinished house also depicts him more clearly than ever as "unaccommodated man."

In the description of Biswas's mental collapse, there are similarities to the storm scene in King Lear. In the first place, there is a storm and it pulls the house down around him. Biswas becomes one of the "unhoused heads' Lear speaks of in his mad ravings. Like Lear, Biswas's mental agony makes him impassive to the storm ("Where the greater malady is fix'd/ The lesser is scarce felt," cries Lear [III,iv,7-8]). During the storm, Biswas lies on a bed chanting the Ramayana. Also like Lear, Biswas has been sent out into the storm by his family who do not want him. Lear is not alone, he has the Fool with him and later, Poor Tom. Similarly, Biswas is not alone; his son, Anand, remains with him after Shama and the others desert him.

A remarkable stylistic change occurs in this section. As Biswas's mental state worsens, there is a subtle change in the point of view . We begin to see things from Anand's perspective.

It is very likely that Anand is based on Naipaul himself. Kenneth Ramchand points out how closely all the events and chronology of the novel resemble those real events Naipaul has discussed in interviews and his autobiographical writing.[16] Naipaul has talked about his father's mental breakdown as one of his, Naipaul's, earliest memories. The stylistic changes in this section of the novel can be seen as a the writer's way of handling what was very personal and highly emotional for him. It can

also be seen as Naipaul's way of handling something that is hard to describe under any circumstances --madness. Up to this point in the novel we have seen the world grow more and more distorted through the eyes of Mr. Biswas. As he loses his entire grip on reality and withdraws, Naipaul's only way of rendering the scene to us, whole and undistorted, is through an outsider, Anand.

Naipaul does another unusual thing in this section that is worth noting. He shifts not only the point of view, but the focus of the whole scene. While the storm rages, shaking the house, blowing sheets of corrugated iron from the roof and sending wind and water into the room, Biswas chants in Hindi: "Rama Rama Sita Rama." Our attention is suddenly drawn away from him when Anand notices something else:

> Something fell near him. It was a winged ant, its wings collapsed and now a burden on its wormlike body. These creatures came out only in heavy rain and seldom lived beyond it. When they fell they never rose again (HMB, 288).

Biswas continues chanting; he also begins to rock from side to side. The storm becomes more terrifying. But both his father and the storm become peripheral as Anand begins to see more and more winged ants, "enjoying the last minutes

of their short life." Naipaul describes their final agony in detail: "Their small wings, strained by large bodies, quickly became useless, and without wings they were without defence. They kept on dropping. Their enemies had discovered them (HMB, 289)." Biswas is heard in the background chanting more rapidly; "a fresh cycle of rain" begins; and Anand watches "columns" of black ants like "stately undertakers," carry the winged ants away. They are still alive and Naipaul writes: "they wriggled and squirmed, but did not disturb the solemnity of their bearers. Bodiless wings were also being carried away." Then the storm finally tears apart what is left of the house around them:

> ... there was a roar that overrode them all ... the window burst open, the lamp went instantly out, the rain lashed in, the lightening lit up the room and the world outside, and when the lightening went out the room was part of the black void.
>
> Anand began to scream.
>
> He waited for his father to say something...
>
> But Mr. Biswas only muttered on the bed, and the rain and wind swept through the room with unnecessary strength and forced the door to the

> drawingroom, wall-less, floorless, of the house Mr. Biswas had built (HMB, 292).

The shift in our attention from Biswas to the winged ants allows Biswas to merge into the background and become one with the fragile house and violent storm. The winged ants and black ants seem to perform a "danse macabre" as a prelude to the storm's destruction and Biswas's mental disintegration. The dying winged ants also symbolize Biswas's helplessness; through them his suffering becomes universal.

Anand watches the winged ants die because he cannot watch his father go to pieces. Similarly, perhaps Naipaul writes of the winged ants because he cannot write about Biswas, who is based on his father, going to pieces. Though this is the book closest to him, he says that he has not looked at it since 1961.[17] I share Peggy Nightingale's view of this; she writes in Journey Through Darkness that Naipaul seems "unwilling to expose himself again to the emotions that lay behind the comedy."[18]

Mr. Biswas is taken to Hanuman House where he is nursed back to health. Hanuman House seems to represent not so much a place of recovery as one of surrender. He feels "secure to be only a part of Hanuman House, an organism that possessed a life, strength and power to comfort which

was quite separate from the individuals who composed it (HMB, 302)." John Theime writes in "V. S. Naipaul's Third World: A Not So Free State" that Hanuman House represents "the Hindu's dependent status as a member of the extended family.[19] The destruction of Biswas's own house in the storm can be seen as a metaphor for the destruction of his will. The struggle is over. He is carried back to Hanuman House like a child in the arms of one of the brothers-in law.

Hanuman House can also be looked at as kind of second womb out of which Mr. Biswas is reborn. There is felt to be an atmosphere of birth in the house the morning after his arrival: "It was like the morning after a birth in the Rose Room (HMB, 296)." With this sense of being reborn, Biswas decides to leave the Tulsis and go out into the greater world: "the past was counterfeit, a series of cheating accidents. Real life, and its especial sweetness, awaited; he was still beginning (HMB, 305)." He has no idea where he is going, and he leaves with no words of parting. No one notices or cares. He realizes: "His children would never starve; they would be sheltered and clothed. It didn't matter if he were at Green Vale or Arwacas, if he were alive or dead (HMB, 304)."

Naipaul writes:"to the city of Port of Spain ... Biswas came by pure accident (HMB, 307)." Actually, the way Biswas ends up going there is linked to an earlier scene,

creating a sense of things coming full circle. After leaving Hanuman House, he stands on the road with his suitcase looking north then looking south, unable to decide which direction to take:

> And it was while he was trying to decide...that a bus, its engine partially unbonneted, its capless radiator steaming, came to a stop inches away with a squeal of brakes and a racking of its tin and wood body, and the conductor, a young man, almost a boy, bent down and seized Mr. Biswas's cardboard suitcase, saying imperiously, impatiently, "Port of Spain, man, Port of Spain (HMB, 307)."

The scene is reminiscent of that earlier scene of the boy leaning against a hut in the darkness as a bus passes along the country road. Now, in this later scene, Mr. Biswas is the boy who "didn't know where the road, and that bus, went (HMB, 190)." I said earlier that Biswas's glimpse of the boy leaning against the hut was a moment of self-reflection for him, and that the boy looking at the bus represented an awakened but limited consciousness. Biswas is again like that boy, awakened but unsure, but the fact that he gets on the bus suggests the important new step in his development as he leaves Hanuman House for the nation's capital. Both this and the earlier scenes give the sense of

there being only random, indifferent forces involved in the interplay between man and his setting, man and his fate -- the hut "that had no reason to be there," the impatient bus conductor. Mr. Biswas continues to be an absurd hero, the driving force of his life is chance, not his dharma or destiny.

In Port of Spain Mr. Biswas fulfills two dreams: he becomes a writer for the Sentinel and he acquires a house of his own. These, however, are described as limited achievements and they fit into the absurd pattern of his life.

The stories he writes for the Sentinel are stories of the grotesque; he interviews "Trinidad's richest, poorest, tallest, fattest, thinnest, fastest, strongest men ... men with unusual callings: thief, beggar, night-soil remover, mosquito killer ... one-armed, one-legged, one-eyed men (HMB, 352)." Biswas is obssessed with the lead: "Amazing Scenes Were Witnessed;" he repeats the phrase to himself constantly. He enjoys moderate fame for a short while, roaming the country as a reporter under the name "The Scarlet Pimpernel." In the role of journalist, Biswas is therefore called upon to re-enact the bizzarre behaviour, exhibitionism, and voyeuristic detachment he has developed in his life among the Tulsis.

The house on Sikkim Street which Mr. Biswas buys is a joke of a house. After he and the family move in they

discover they have been cheated. Doors don't close; windows don't open; the ceiling seems about to collapse; there is no drainage, and the stairs are broken and dangerous. They also discover that there is no back door -- a symbolic touch as Mr. Biswas is to die in this house. Keith Garebian suggests that the acquisition of this house is a sort of Pyrrhic victory for Mr. Biswas: "So exhausted is Biswas by the time he acquires his own house, and so crippled by paranoia, that he becomes a passive voyeur faced with the spectacle of his own empty achievement." [20] It is true that Biswas becomes somewhat passive once he has moved in to his house, and that he appears world-weary. And it is significant that Biswas, the man who vehemently expressed his scorn and anger throughout the book, is silent about the house, his most precious achievement. Yet it seems to be because of its supreme importance that Biswas is so reticent about the house. By the time he moves to Sikkim Street he has already lived in nine different places, all of which represent various kinds of upheaval and frustration. This last house, his own, is the sum of all the struggle and effort of his life; in this sense he and the house are one. We know more about the response of Shama and the children. Just as Naipaul shifted the point of view from Biswas to Anand during Biswas's nervous breakdown, he again shifts it the children:

> Soon it seemed to the children that they had never lived anywhere but in the tall square house in Sikkim Street. From now their lives would be ordered, their memories coherent ... And rapidly the memories of Hanuman House, The Chase, Green Vale, Shorthills, of the Tulsi house in Port of Spain would become jumbled, blurred; events would be telescoped, many forgotten. Ocassionally a nerve of memory would be touched...and a fragment of forgotten experience would be dislodged, isolated, puzzling. In a northern land, in a time of new separations and yearnings, in a library grown suddenly dark, the hailstones beating against the windows, the marbled endpaper of a dusty leatherbound book would disturb: and it would be the hot noisy week before Christmas in the Tulsi store: the marbled patterns of oldfashioned balloons powdered with a rubbery dust ... So later, and very slowly, in securer times of different stresses, when the memories had lost the power to hurt, with pain and joy, they would fall back into place and give back the past (HMB, 581).

This beautiful passage expresses the sense of order which the house brings to the chaotic history of the

family. There is also an underlying suggestion that writing the novel has brought a sense of order to the chaotic memories of the writer.

The mention of a "northern land" alludes to England and to Naipaul himself. This personal reference to the writer's life in London, to "new separations and yearnings," is an indication of what compelled Naipaul to write A House for Mr. Biswas. He was not present when his father died nor present at his funeral. As a student in England, Naipaul's primary link to Trinidad had been his father, and he says that after his father's death the link was broken.[21] He wrote the novel in 1960 after visiting Trinidad for the first time since he had left it in 1950. Patrick Parrinder comments on the "narrative self-consciousness" in A House for Mr. Biswas:

> The inventory of the house at the beginning connects naturally with the resume of Biswas's career and memories at the end. The absent space between end and beginning is that in which we can imagine Anand, Mr. Biswas's scholarship-winning son, revisiting the 'empty house' after his father's death and finding there the midden-heap that enables him to reconstruct the past; from Anand's point of view, the novel is (as one or two

> brief passages intimate) an almost Proustian recovery of lost time.[22]

In its "recovery of lost time" and its ability to "give back the past" this novel may well be seen as "a house for Mr. Naipaul." In another novel, The Mimic Men, Naipaul expresses the need to write in order to give shape to the otherwise formless past: "For there is no such thing as history nowadays ... And it must also be confessed that in that dream of writing I was attracted less by the act and the labour than by the calm and order which the act would have implied (MM, 32)."

This novel is perhaps the most significant among Naipaul's works in regard to his concern with place and displacement. Here, the character's displacement as a result of the confusion of colonial history touches a universal note of despair. Between the writing of Miguel Street and A House for Mr. Biswas Naipaul's ideas about colonial man in relation to the world seem not to have changed but deepened. The comic stereotypes of the early writing suceeded in expressing the colonial sense of being merely "other" and the idea that real experience, truth, the richness and complexity of life belonged to the greater world outside. A House for Mr. Biswas begins with this sense of "otherness." And like Naipaul's earlier work, its tone is at first mock heroic and satirical. Biswas appears

clownish, and the disastrous results of all his actions are comical. Here, as in Miguel Street, Naipaul suggests that in the colonial setting there can be no stories of triumph, only those of failure; all struggle becomes ludicrous. But there is a heroic dimension to Biswas's struggle. He does not end up as the characters of Miguel Street do as the subject of a one-time calypso. His end, after the auspicious signs of his birth, is quite anticlimactic. There is a brief headline in the newspaper he once worked for -- JOURNALIST DIES SUDDENLY -- and his funeral becomes another Tulsi occasion.

Biswas's death, like his life, is that of the quintessential "little man." He is for most of his life "unneccessary and unnaccommodated." Towards the end he is, like Prufrock, aware of the unheroic, mediocrity of his life. That he is cheated out of a decent house, loses his job at the Sentinel, and dies worrying about his debts is in keeping with the pattern of aborted dreams and unrewarding struggle that is his life. It is from this very pattern of repeated failure that Biswas's life takes on a tragic meaning.

In "The Myth of Sisyphus" Camus describes Sisyphus in the underworld, having to repeatedly push a heavy rock uphill and watch it roll back down again -- a punishment that will last unto eternity:

> At the very end of his long effort measured by skyless space and time without depth, the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments toward that lower world whence he will have to push it up again toward the summit. He goes back down again to the plain.
>
> It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me .... That hour like a breathingspace which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness.[23]

Camus goes on to say: "If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious." Biswas begins as a comic figure, unaware of his own absurdity. In the course of the novel he comes to have a heightened awareness of the futility of his life, and he becomes tragic.

The modern colonial world of Mr. Biswas is an appropriate setting for the absurd. Its twilight point in history makes it a world of disturbing paradoxes; it is a world both captive and free, both formed and unformed; the empire it belongs to is disintegrating and yet autonomy is not in sight. The colonial, as Naipaul depicts him, is a castaway. What makes Biswas heroic is that he is aware of his predicament and yet never ceases to struggle. He does not become reconciled to his fate. His last two letters to his son, Anand, show that his great fear of being reduced

to nothing torments him to the very end. The first letter is "a hysterical, complaining, despairing letter (HMB, 588)." In the second --and last -- he writes of his garden: "He had got a Butterfly orchid. The shade was flowering again; wasn't it strange that a tree which grew so quickly could produce flowers with such a sweet scent? (HMB,589)" This is the flip side of Mr. Biswas's existential despair, the need to squeeze the romance, the sweetness, out of life.

1 V. S. Naipaul, "Writing a House for Mr. Biswas," New York Review of Books, November 24 (1983), p.22.

2 Edward Braithwaite, "Roots," quoted in Kenneth Ramchand, The West Indian Novel and its Background (London: Heinemann, 1983), p.201.

3 Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus (new York: Vintage, 1955) p.5, trans., Justin O'Brien.

4 Keith Garebian, "The Grotesque Satire of A House for Mr. Biswas," Modern Fiction Studies, 30 (1984), p. 492.

5 Pedro Calderon De La Barca, Life is A Dream, I,ii.

6 Naipaul, "Writing a House for Mr. Biswas," p.22.

7 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism" from Existentialism in The Norton Reader, Sixth Edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1984) p.1196.

8 Gordon Rohlehr, "Character and Rebellion in A House for Mr. Biswas," in Critical Perspectives on V. S. Naipaul ed. Robert Hamner, (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1977) p.90.

9 Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 90.

10 Kenneth Ramchand, The West Indian Novel and Its Background (London: Heinemann, 1983), p.197.

11 Charles Michener, Interview: "The Dark Visions of V. S. Naipaul," Newsweek, November (1981) p.117.

12 Jean-Paul Sartre, Nausea (New York: New Directions, 1959), pp. 171-172, trans., Lloyd Alexander.

13 R. D. Laing, The Politics of Experience (New York: Ballantine, 1967), p.42-43.

14 Richard Kelly, V. S. Naipaul (New York: Continuum, 1989), p.53. Kelly borrows the phrase from Matthew Arnold's "Stanzas From the Grande Chartreuse."

15 John Cooke, "A Vision of the Land in Naipaul's Later Novels," Caribbean Quarterly, 25, iv (1979), p.32.

16 Ramchand, The West Indian Novel and Its Background p.191.

17 Peggy Nightingale, Journey Through Darkness (Queensland Australia: University of Queensland Press, 1987) p. 41.

18 Ibid.

19 John Thieme, V. S. Naipaul's Third World: A Not So Free State"Journal of Commonwealth Literature 10 (1975) p.14.

20 Garebian, "Grotesque Satire" p.494.

21 Nigel Bingham, Interviewing V. S. Naipaul,Listener, September 7 (1972) p.307.

22 Patrick Parrinder, "V. S. Naipaul and the Uses of Literacy,"Critical Quarterly, 21, ii (1979), p.9.

23 Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus p. 89.

4.Areas of Darkness: The Colonial Traveler

> One of the greatest and most intrepid travellers of all time, Marco Polo ... spent twenty years in the court of Kublai Khan in China. On his return to Venice he set down ... his impressions .... There are at least two extraordinary omissions in his account. He says nothing about the art of printing unknown as yet in Europe but in full flower in China....But even more spectacular was Marco Polo's ommission of any reference to the Great Wall of China nearly 4000 miles long and already more than 1000 years old at the time of his visit .... The Great Wall of China is the only structure built by man which is visible from the moon! Indeed, travellers can be blind.
>
> Chinua Achebe[1]

"'You've been reading the wrong books,' the business man said. But he did me an injustice. I had read any number of books...which he would have considered right" -- this is how An Area of Darkness begins, and it is an apt beginning to a travel book about India in which the writer sets out to explore "feature by feature the East one had read about (AD, 11)."

An Area of Darkness (1964) marks the beginning of a period of transition for the writer between his early colonial fiction and the later post-colonial fiction. Between A House for Mr. Biswas (1961) and Guerrillas (1975) there were only two short works of fiction, a novella, Mr. Stone and the Knight's Companion (1963), set in England, following close on the heels of Biswas, and In A Free State (1971), a novella and short stories in one volume. For roughly ten years no novel was written. Naipaul was travelling during these years and writing about his travels. The Middle Passage, An Area of Darkness, The Loss of El Dorado, India: A Wounded Civilization, and The Return of Eva Peron were all written during this transitional period and are based on his travels in the Caribbean, South America, Africa and India. If this was a period of transition for the writer, it was no less so for the world of the writer. "To be colonial" wrote Naipaul, "was to know a kind of security; it was to inhabit a fixed world (ROEP, 233)." That "secure" colonial world began to change radically during the 1960's and 70's. Several islands in the Caribbean including Trinidad became independent from Britain as did many African states. The postcolonial restructuring of their societies was often chaotic and violent. Naipaul's journeys during these years were really journeys of self-exploration. With the world of his

childhood fast disappearing, he was feeling more and more like a writer without a society, and this created new difficulties and new concerns:

> ... in my fantasy I had seen myself coming to England as to some purely literary region, where, untrammeled by the accidents of history or background, I could make a romantic career for myself as a writer. But in the new world I felt the ground move below me. The new politics, the curious reliance of men on institutions they were yet working to undermine, the simplicity of beliefs and hideous simplicity of actions, the corruption of causes, half-made societies doomed to remain half-made: these were the things that began to preoccupy me. They were not things from which I could detach myself (ROEP, 233).

He felt compelled to travel "as a colonial among colonials," and to explore that very world upon which his "security" as a colonial had depended.

Naipaul went to India for the first time in 1962. He spent a year there, and An Area of Darkness is an account of that year. He says that travelling is the thing that "took him out of [his] colonial shell (FC, x)." India

presented a challenge to him as "a colonial travelling among colonials" because of his special relationship to the country as a West Indian of Indian descent:

> ...for two hundred years there had been any number of English travelers' accounts...I could not be that kind of traveler. In travelling to India I was traveling to an un-English fantasy, and a fantasy unknown to Indians of India: I was travelling to the peasant India that my Indian grandfathers had sought to recreate in Trinidad, the India that was like a loose end in my mind where our past suddenly stopped. There was no model for me here, in this exploration; neither Forster nor Ackerly nor Kipling could help. To get anywhere in the writing I had first of all to define myself very clearly to myself (EA, 154).

One expects, from such claims as these, that this journey would involve a dramatic confrontation of some sort between the writer's present and past, that the writer would perhaps shatter the Anglo-imperialist fantasy of India and show us a way of looking at the East that was new and distinct. But none of this happens. Ironically, in An Area of Darkness, the India Naipaul explores and describes

is that same Anglo-India written about by Kipling, Ackerly and Forster. This imperialistic view of India appears to be as deeply entrenched in Naipaul's imagination as "the peasant India" his grandfathers tried to recreate in Trinidad. As for "peasant India" -- the Indian poor are treated with the utmost scorn throughout the book; they are faceless, dark figures shrouded in dhotis barely distinguishable from the stereotypical background of Indian misery and poverty. Far from breaking out of his colonial shell on this journey, Naipaul takes refuge in being colonial and makes every effort to find those images of India which fit his colonial preconceptions. In this sense, the colonial seeking to affirm his own colonial experience, the journey fulfills his expressed need for self-definition. We learn very little about India and much about Naipaul's problematic relationship to place and his troubled sense of himself as a colonial.

The journey we read about in An Area of Darkness could be described as "an internal adventure of anxieties" -- the words Naipaul used to describe a journey taken by another colonial, Gandhi. Gandhi on his way to England, as Naipaul describes him, was so obssessed with maintaining a sense of his identity that he barely noticed anyone or anything around him. Naipaul is not quite so self-obssessed, but he comes fairly close. Theroux puts Naipaul in a special class of travellers that he calls "homeless travellers." Their

homelessness, says Theroux "is a particular source of pain" and is expressed during their journeys as anxiety, futility and fear.[2] These responses, anxiety, futility, and fear, are seen in An Area of Darkness. While still on his way to India, Naipaul describes "the tedium of the African ports," and as he draws nearer to India, he writes:

> The physique of Europe had melted away .... Men had been diminished and deformed; they begged and whined. Hysteria had been my reaction, and a brutality dictated by a new awareness of myself as a whole human being and a determination, touched with fear, to remain what I was (AD, 13).

One senses that on this first journey to India, Naipaul had not fully reconciled himself to homelessness. At the beginning of An Area of Darkness, he writes: "London was not the center of my world; I had been misled." In travelling to "the mythical land of [his] childhood," he was seeking that elusive "center" that would bring to an end his sense of displacement.

That the past -- not the ancestral past but the more recent past of his childhood in Trinidad -- is the underlying focus of this journey is immediately clear in the first chapter, titled, "A Resting Place for the

Imagination." Here, Naipaul reminisces on his childhood and describes the India of his early life in Trinidad: "More than in people, India lay about us in things," in brass vessels, and string beds and "the paraphanalia of the prayer room (AD,29)." He describes the transference of Indian customs and beliefs to Trinidad and their gradual dissolution in the new society, and he reminisces about people and events that had seemed to him, as a boy, the relics and fragments of a culture that had been brought to Trinidad whole. The "area of darkness" is for Naipaul that place where the past suddenly stops and where his ignorance about India begins:"

> To me as a child the India that had produced so many of the persons and things around me was featureless, and I thought of the time when the transference was made as a period of darkness, darkness which also extends to the land, as darkness surrounds a hut at evening, though for a little way around the hut there is still light. The light was the area of my experience in time and place (AD, 30).

Though he claims to be an "unbeliever," one who had "rejected tradition," Naipaul nevertheless feels a certain

reverence for those Hindu customs and rituals he remembers from his childhood. He says, "How can I explain my feeling of outrage when I heard that in Bombay they used candles and electric bulbs for the Diwali festival, and not the rustic clay lamps, of immemorial design, which in Trinidad we still used (AD, 36)?" His contradictory feelings about Indian traditions is part of the central paradox of his life and work: detachment from and yet dependence on his colonial background.

Naipaul distinguishes between what he calls the "real India" and the India of his childhood which he describes as "an area of the imagination." He carries the fragmented memories of his childhood with him on this journey like a man bringing the ashes of his loved one to a final resting place. It is perhaps because of this -- this obsession with the past and with restoring the past -- that the writer seems closed to the new, and closed also to the "real India." He looks for those features of India which are linked to his own colonial experience as if to make that experience more authentic for himself. One of the high points of his journey is his pilgrimage to the Himalayas. He does not see these mountains as one seeing something for the first time, but rather cherishes the experience for what it brings back to him of the past:

> In so many of the brightly colored religious pictures in my grandmother's house I had seen these mountains, cones of white against simple, cold blue. They had become part of the India of my fantasy. It would have astonished me then, in a Trinidad remote from places worthwhile and real because fully known, to be told that one day I would walk among the originals of those mountains (AD, 167).

The colonial experience had seemed somehow false; Trinidad was "remote from places worthwhile." And yet, Naipaul can only relate to the more "worthwhile and real" place, India, by psychologically re-orienting himself in that colonial past. It is not the first or only time Naipaul will speak of being in "the original" of something he had experienced in a remote and indirect way in Trinidad. The word "original" suggests, by way of contrast, the peculiar colonial sense of being "other" and the sense that everything experienced in the colonial world is only a "copy" of something to be experienced in a more authentic way elsewhere.

Naipaul experienced difficulties and some confusion over what he calls his "role" as a travel writer. Again this goes back to his colonial background and to the sense

of being "other" or peripheral:

> I knew and was glamoured by the idea of the metropolitan traveler, the man starting from Europe. It was the only kind of model I had; but ... I could not be that kind of traveler, even though I might share that traveler's education and culture and have his feeling for adventure. Especially I was aware of not having a metropolitan audience to "report back" to. The fight between my idea of the glamour of the travel-writer and the rawness of my nerves as a colonial travelling among colonials made for difficult writing (EA, 153).

In An Area of Darkness this "fight," as he calls it, between his idea of "the metropolitan traveler, the man starting from Europe" and his idea of himself as a colonial traveler emerges as a central theme and can be seen as a conflict between two different voices and two ways of seeing.

The outcome of this conflict is ultimately a kind of colonial "mimicry." I use the word in the same way Naipaul uses it in his novel The Mimic Men and in other works where he describes colonials assuming a role based on the culture

of the mother country. Like characters in his own fictions, Naipaul as traveler in An Area of Darkness becomes, a "mimic man" to some degree. His tone is that of an alternately languid or shocked Victorian English traveler. He not only ends up following those "metropolitan" models he sought to discard, but takes the role to such an extreme that he often seems like a parody of that sort of traveler. His attitude to the Indian climate for instance is that of someone who had never known anything but mild English weather. He appears to have forgotten that he comes from a tropical, Third World country:

> To be in Bombay was to be exhausted. The moist heat sapped energy and will ... I stood in the shade of Churchgate station and debated whether I had it in me to cross the exposed street to the Tourist Office. Debate languished into daydream; it was minutes before I made the crossing. A flight of steps remained. I sat below a fan and rested (AD,16).

No "metropolitan traveler" ever had it so hard. I cannot imagine Kipling, for instance, going on and on in this way. The reader -- and Naipaul too perhaps --forgets

the writer's starting point. He takes on the tone and concerns of a man starting out from the center of the empire; the West is the main point of reference against which everything that is seen in the new country is measured. Of the Taj Mahal, Naipaul writes: "transported slab by slab to the United States and re-erected, it might be wholly admirable. But in India it is a building wastefully without a function; it is only a despot's monument to a woman, not of India, who bore a child every year for fifteen years (AD, 206)." Similarly, he says of Indian railways -- "a service so complex and fine deserves a richer country, with shining cities organized for adventure (AD, 221)." Naipaul is so busy comparing India to the West that he loses sight of his expressed desire to penetrate that "area of darkness" which is his Indian past. If anything, the past appears darker and even more impenetrable. When one considers that Naipaul's grandfathers made a dangerous and difficult journey on an overcrowded boat from Calcutta to Port of Spain, Naipaul's overwhelming concern with late trains, lost luggage and hot weather seems to widen the gulf between his Western outlook and his Eastern heritage.

Naipaul is appalled at the Indians he sees "squatting" and "defecating everywhere." He devotes a good portion of the book to these squatters and to his disgust, so much so

that one critical essay on the book is titled "Between Two Stools."[3] "Indians defecate everywhere," writes Naipaul. "They defecate, mostly, beside the railway tracks. But they also defecate on the hills; they defecate on the river banks; they defecate on the streets; they never look for cover (AD, 70)." Naipaul's intention in focussing on these squatters is to prove that he is seeing the "real" India. "Indians do not see these squatters" he says emphatically, using italics (AD, 70). In a similar way, he claims, Indians do not see the Indian poor, the beggars. They ignore "the obvious." Only the outsider, like himself, looks at India truthfully. According to Naipaul, the only Indian who ever looked at his own country with the clear, undistorted vision of an outsider was Gandhi who was able to do so, Naipaul concludes, "because he was in part a colonial." Like Naipaul, Gandhi had the experience of seeing "an Indian community removed from the setting of India" -- when he spent some time in South Africa. Naipaul says that on returning to India, Gandhi never lost "the critical, comparing South African eye" and "the colonial directness of his vision (AD,73,74)."

What exactly is this "colonial directness of vision?" In Gandhi's case, according to Naipaul, it is "critical" and it is "comparing." It is also a way of looking that has been learned outside one's own culture -- in Gandhi's case -- South Africa at the turn of the century. "Colonial

directness of vision" seems to amount to little more than "colonial mimicry," the imposing of the values and aesthetics of one society considered superior on another which is considered inferior. The way Naipaul sees India is similar to the way he sees Trinidad -- "haphazard and chaotic," a society which he once described as "embarrassing."

Unlike the true "metropolitan traveler" Naipaul travels without the assurance of a "center," a fixed world from which he departs and to which he returns. This goes back to what Theroux says about his being a "homeless traveler." Theroux observes that a sense of "futility ... steals into Naipaul's mind usually at the moment of arrival at a destination when he decides to give up the journey and not go any farther."[4] Futility is expressed in no uncertain terms, here, for instance, when he arrives in Delhi:

> To step out of the third class air-conditioned coach on to the smooth hot platform was to feel one's shirt instantly heated, to lose interest, to wonder with a dying flicker of intellectual curiosity why anyone in India bothered, why anyone had bothered with India (AD, 83).

"Why anyone had bothered with India" suggests the writer's remorse and anxiety over having embarked on the journey; one could read "why had he, Naipaul, bothered?" The annoyance over late trains, his disgust at the sight of "defecating" Indians, his complaints about the heat, and worry over luggage -- they are all expressions of great discomfort, and underlying his discomfort there is a panic over his identity. Naipaul is not from India and yet because of his ancestry he cannot detach himself from what he sees around him as easily as a European traveler and writer could. He strains to keep intact his identity as "visitor" and "outsider" and expresses his terror of losing his "distinctiveness":

> ...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 .... In Trinidad to be an Indian was distinctive. To be anything there was distinctive; difference was each man's attribute. To be an Indian in England was distinctive ... 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 ... I was faceless. I might sink without a trace into that Indian crowd. I had been made by Trinidad and

> England; recognition of my difference was important to me. I felt the need to impose myself, and didn't know how (AD, 43).

The sense of "difference" which Naipaul says is part of his reality is also the source of his anxiety. What he expresses in this passage is that distinctly colonial form of self-consciousness seen in his other writings where everything around oneself reflects one's feeling of "otherness." This sense of "otherness," which Naipaul calls his distinctiveness," is not only colonial; it relates to circumstances specific to West Indian history. M. B. Angrosino discusses the colonial West Indian problem of identity in "V.S. Naipaul and the Colonial Image":

> Unlike Africans and Indians who re-possessed their ancient homelands once the imperialists left, the West Indian ... is a complete invention of Empire .... With the disappearance of the imperial design, there could be no sense of "homeland" redeemed; rather, there is a sense of drifting. It is not even a sense of loss; worse, it is a sense of never-having-had.[5]

This sense of "never-having-had" a native culture or native traditions is what Naipaul refers to when he says

that the only convention the West Indian colonial knew was his "Britishness" or his "involvement with the white world (MP, 73)." All this explains why Naipaul experiences confusion over his identity in India. To be colonial in Trinidad or in England, as he points out, is to know where one stands as "other." As an Indian West Indian travelling in India that sense of himself as "other" is challenged.

Naipaul takes refuge in nostalgia. He tries to rescue his diminishing sense of identity by seeking in India those things which are linked to his Trinidadian past. However, this search for confirmation of his own colonial experience more often than not ends in disappointment and a more pronounced sense of displacement:

> Looking for the familiar, I had again, in spite of myself, become an islander: I was looking for the small and manageable ... The landscape was harsh and wrong. I could not relate it to myself: I was looking for the balanced rural landscapes of Indian Trinidad. Once, near Agra, I had seen or made myself see such a landscape; but the forlorn wasted figures reclining on string beds in the foreground were not right. In all the striking detail of India there was nothing which I could link with my own experience of India in a small town in Trinidad (AD, 140-141).

Naipaul's use of words like "foreground" and "details" and his repeated use of the word "landscape" seem more appropriate to a description of pictures than to a real setting. And one remembers that he is in fact looking for the "original" of those pictures of India, imaginary and real, that he had grown up with in Trinidad. The language reinforces the feelings of loss, emptiness, and separation which are part of the narrator's response to India. At those times when he discovers -- or rather rediscovers -- those things which are linked to his "childhood myth of India," the real and the mythic become almost indistinguishable as here, for example, in his description of a sadhu spotted in Kashmir:

> At the end of the valley, where the ice, less protected, was partly broken, one remembered picture came to life: a sadhu, wearing only a leopard skin, walking barefooted on Himalayan snow, almost in sight of the god he sought ... He was a young man of complete, disquieting beauty. His skin had been burned black and was smeared with white ash; his hair was reddish-blond; but this only made unnatural the perfection of his features .... Some days before the pilgrimage I had seen him in Srinagar, resting in the shade of a chenar, languid genitals arrogantly exposed.

> He had seemed out of place, an idler, an aboriginal come to town. His ash-smeared nudity, implying an indifference to the body, had made his beauty sinister (AD, 168).

The beauty of An Area of Darkness lies in these "pictures" of the landscape and architecture. Buildings, mountains, lakes, seem to belong less to the actual surroundings than to the writer's memories, expectations, or fears. There is often an empty, ghostly aspect to Naipaul's descriptions, reminiscent of a De Chirico painting:

> All creation in India hints at the imminence of interruption and destruction. Building is like an elemental urge, like the act of sex among the starved ... at Mahabalipuram near Madras, on the waste sand of the sea shore, stands the abandoned Shore Temple, its carvings worn smooth after twelve centuries of rain and salt and wind (AD, 205).

And in the Himalayas, Naipaul writes: "Out of the shadow of the valley the broad pyramidical slope of Amaranth burst upon us, rock-strewn, quivering white in sunlight; and the cave to which it led rose black and still, taller and wider

than I had imagined it, yet now after so much expectation, oddly obvious, like a cave in a simple religious picture (AD, 168)."

It is not that memory influences his observations, but that his observations are made to serve his memories:

> Kashmir was coolness and colour: the yellow mustard fields, the mountains, snow-capped, the milky blue sky in which we rediscovered the drama of clouds. It was men wrapped in brown blankets against the morning mist, and barefooted shepherd boys ... it was dust in sunlight, the disorder of a bazaar, a waiting crowd, and a smell in the cold air of charcoal, tobacco, cooking oil... Grass grew on the mud-packed roofs of cottages -- and at last it was clear why, in that story I had read as a child in the West Indian Primary Reader, the foolish widow had made her cow climb up to the roof (AD, 96).

The repetition in the phrases -- "Kashmir was..." "It was men..." "it was dust..." gives an elegiac tone to the description and adds to our sense of the writer trying to fit what he sees before him to something already clearly pictured in his mind.

It is the portrayal of humans that is most wanting in An Area of Darkness. Naipaul seems to go to some length to prove the stereotypical to be true. There are the "faceless poor;" there are the semi-fictional characters like "Bundy the box-wallah" in the chapter titled "Degree,"where Naipaul gives us a series of anecdotes depicting the caste-system; and there are the few named individuals with whom Naipaul interacts, like Mrs. Mahindra who is "craze just craze for foreign," -- stereotypes of middle-class Indians. It is ironic that in this book written by a colonial, the native is portrayed as he often is in the earlier literature of empire, as a shadowy, one-dimensional figure against which the narrator explores his own culture and identity.

When Naipaul visits the village of his grandfather, he is initially moved by the fact that the villagers remember his grandfather. He seems particularly touched by the old woman whose face "was cracked like drying mud," who weeps recalling his grandfather whom she had known both in Trinidad and in India. She speaks to him both in "Trinidad English" and in Hindi and shows him photgraphs with "the purple stamp of the Trinidad photographer ...still bright against the fading sepia figure." But his initial response turns quickly to defensiveness and scorn. "Colonial prudence," he says, makes him refuse offers of food and water and forces him to maintain an attitude of detachment.

He explains: "I felt overwhelmed; I wished to extricate myself at once (AD, 262)." When one of the villagers appears before him wearing clean clothes and carrying his "bundle" in the hope that Naipaul will give him a lift into town, Naipaul says to his interpreter, "Let the idler walk." These are the last words he speaks in his ancestral village. The scene which began so poignantly ends on this note:

> We drove off. I did not wave. The headlamps of the jeep shot two separate beams into the day's slowly settling dust which made turbulent again by our passage, blotted out the scattered lights of the village.
>
> So it ended, in futility and impatience, a gratuitous act of cruelty, self-reproach and flight (AD, 263).

In another instance, Naipaul has a similarly disturbing response to a beggar. He writes: "I had converted fear and distaste into anger and contempt; it plagued me like a wound. I went to him and gave him some money. How easy it was to feel power in India (AD,205)!" The underlying reasons for Naipaul's intense and complicated response to the people of India can possibly be found in his own words -- "fear," "distaste," and in the phrase "I felt

overwhelmed." The response to the people is part of Naipaul's complex response to the country itself. It is the homeland that cannot be a home for him. At one point, he writes: "It is well that Indians are unable to look at their country directly, for the distress they would see would drive them mad (AD, 201)." Like an outsider, he is able to look at India in a detached, objective way; but as an Indian he feels their distress as part of his own colonial reality. He fears involvement, fears becoming "one of the Indian crowd;" but he rebukes himself for his scorn and detachment: "The ugliness was all mine (256)." Naipaul feels that Indians "ignore the obvious" and that it takes an outsider like himself to truly <u>see</u> Indians. But Naipaul does not go beyond the obvious in his observations of the Indian people, beyond the poverty and distress -- which apparently shatters him. It is perhaps telling that to date he has not written a novel set in India with an Indian narrator. The Indian narrators of his fiction are always, like himself, outsiders in other countries. It is as if the Indian idea of himself and his world is as impenetrable to Naipaul as it was to Kipling who wrote in 1899 of "the silent sullen peoples."[6]

The disturbing quality of Naipaul's response to the Indian people seems part of what Peggy Nightingale calls "the ultimate loneliness of the colonial."[7] Even more than the landscape, the people serve to remind him of his

homelessness. Although, on one hand, he feels that he "might sink without a trace into that Indian crowd (AD, 43)," history, the upheaval of his ancestors in the nineteenth century, alienates him.

Keith Garebian writes in "V. S. Naipaul's Negative Sense of Place" that "India and England are the two poles facing the "placeless Caribbean man."[8] In India, Naipaul experiences this double sense of alienation, the sense of neither belonging to England or to India. Exploring "British India" -- the district clubs and old British army residences, the houseboats on the Dal Lake with their china, and "polished furniture of another age, even faded invitations to the weddings of English officers" -- he feels like "an intruder." He says "it was the British presence which seemed hardest to accept (AD, 98)." Faced with India's "teeming millions" on one hand, and the relics of British colonial India on the other, Naipaul is as "placeless" as ever. As a West Indian, he realizes, "I was not English or Indian; I was denied the victories of both (AD, 98)." "Hysteria" -- a word Naipaul uses --is often his response to the Indian people, especially to that overwhelming "faceless" poverty. But this hysteria seems more than anything else to be a heightened sense of his alienation. India brings Naipaul face to face with the essential paradox of his life: a past to which he is inextricably tied, a past which has made him an exile.

Naipaul travels not in order to examine different societies and settings but to continue examining the concern which lies closest to his heart, displacement. The title of one book testifies to this -- Finding the Center. In a travel essay in that book, Naipaul writes "I go to places which, however alien, connect in some way with what I already know (FC, 90)." The word "connect" is significant. For Naipaul, India is a point of connection with the past. He does not go to India with the open mind of an ordinary traveler, a detached observer; he is not struck by what is new or different; every place and every thing in India is examined for the purpose of recovering the past. Ironically, because of this, Naipaul does not really see India in An Area of Darkness any more than his grandfather from Uttar Pradesh was able to "see" Trinidad. Both were obsessed with the past, and in both cases their obsession has blinded them. The "darkness" of An Area of Darkness is that inability or refusal to see: "And even now though time has widened, though space has contracted and I have travelled lucidly over that area of darkness, something of darkness remains ... (AD, 30)."

Some critics, many of them Indian, have been outraged by Naipaul's attitude toward India. In "Between Two Stools," P. C. David calls the book "an artistic failure" and rebukes Naipaul for conforming his narrative "in an

abnormal degree to his preconceived notions":

> A tension between imagination and reality is a strong feature of ... An Area of Darkness. Such a tension would perhaps be a valid artistic device in any other form of writing but it wreaks havoc in a travelogue which is expected to be a faithful reproduction of verifiable experience.[9]

Another critic, Madhusudana Rao, connects Naipaul's negative world-views to his psychological state as an the artist. In his analysis of Naipaul's writings on India, both An Area of Darkness and India: A Wounded Civilization, Rao concludes: "Naipaul seems himself to be a wounded artist whose wasteland world-view connects all his writings."[10]

What David and Rao both seem to be criticizing is Naipaul's extremely subjective approach in a genre where this is not expected. In my view, it is not Naipaul's subjectivity which is questionable; it is his withdrawal. This is noticeable in all his travel-writing. He does not interact with the natives of the countries he visits; in fact, he seems terrified of such interaction and involvement. In An Area of Darkness this withdrawal is clearly seen in the description of his abrupt departure from his grandfather's village. In a travel book of the

West Indies, The Middle Passage, Naipaul speaks to only two people in Jamaica: a radical rastafarian politician and the American owner of the most expensive hotel on the island, neither of whom pose any challenge to his preconceived ideas. On trips to Africa he moves among ex-patriates. On a trip to the American South, Naipaul interviews those who share his obsession with the past: old, white Southerners who still burn with resentment over the Civil War and genteel old, black Southerners who remind him of Trinidad's history of slavery. Even rednecks somehow serve to bring back memories of his Trinidadian childhood. In fact, there is not anything in A Turn in the South that does not remind Naipaul of Trinidad. "Too many truisms, too few confrontations with reality," wrote Caryn James in The New York Times in a review titled "Nimble Travel Writer Stumbles Over South."[11] The title suggests that it has not occurred to the reviewer that in the past Naipaul may not have been as "nimble" a travel-writer as many have felt, that his observations of other countries may have been as limited as his observations of life in the American South. The "truisms," the lack of "confrontation with reality," and the withdrawal from people are all part of "the internal adventure of anxieties" Naipaul experiences as a traveler, and they confirm the fact that he travels in order to verify things about his own past.

One expects truth of non-fiction. The truth that emerges in An Area of Darkness is not about the country but about the writer. The book describes, as the best travel-writing does, the special relationship between the writer and the country he visits. That relationship undergoes a change in An Area of Darkness. The hope that India would prove to be the "center," and that his shattered past would be made whole again, is ruined. It is not until his second visit to India, described in A Wounded Civilization that Naipaul really comes to terms with the loss that India represents for him:

> India, which I visited for the first time in 1962, turned out to be a very strange land...It has taken me so much time to come to terms with the strangeness of India, to define what separates me from the country; and to understand how far the "Indian" attitudes of someone like myself, a member of a small and remote community in the New World, have diverged from the attitudes of people to whom India is still whole. In India I know I am a stranger; but increasingly I understand that my Indian memories, the memories of that India which lived on into my childhood in Trinidad, are like trapdoors into a bottomless past (IWC, ix & xi).

That very strangeness he felt in India in 1962 which shocked him, also served him as a writer. It defined him as a colonial and as an outsider, as a man neither of India nor England, but from a world much less whole and less secure.

During the 1970's Naipaul travelled again to India; he travelled also to Africa and South America. The writing of this period is noticeably different from that of his earlier travel-writing. It is more journalistic, less self-absorbed and less given to nostalgia. It is the travelling done during this period which seems to have taken Naipaul out of his colonial shell, and that was probably due to the fact that the countries in which he was travelling were themselves changing. Naipaul explored and wrote about this changing post-colonial world: the 1976 State of Emergency in India, the return of Peron in Argentina, communist and black nationalist movements in the West Indies, and Mobutu's fanatical rule in Zaire. In India: A Wounded Civilization he reflects on the fact that for "all of us who are over forty and were colonials, subject people who had learned to live with the idea of subjection...disturbance, instability, development lay elsewhere." Suddenly "disturbance, instability and development" were part of Naipaul's world. The colonial life he had known was disappearing, not just in Trinidad

but everywhere, and the idea of displacement took on a universal significance for him.

Yet Naipaul continues to be a colonial traveler in his outlook (in recent years he has sometimes added the prefix "ex" to the word "colonial"). And as a colonial in a post-colonial world he is even more of an outsider. Edward Said wrote in a review of Among the Believers that Naipaul "carries with him a kind of half-stated but finally unexamined reverence for the colonial order. [There is] a deep emptiness in Naipaul the writer, for which Naipaul the social phenomenon is making everyone pay."[12] Said is right about the emptiness; but I would say that the deep emptiness in Naipaul the man fills Naipaul the writer. The emptiness is his sense of displacement, and that is his subject. His "reverence for the colonial order" is not "half-stated;" it is clearly and fully articulated. It is the order that was so important to his childhood and remains important to him. The colonial order is the antithesis of every postcolonial "landscape of fear." Naipaul is not merely a writer from the colonies. He is a colonial writer. The world that formed him as a writer has diminished, but he carries its loss within him. In An Area of Darkness we see in the traveler's anxieties, expectations, and disappointments that colonialism is more than a historical and social reality; it is a way of seeing.

1 Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa," Massachusetts Review, Vol. 18. no.4, Winter (1977), p.792.

2 Paul Theroux, V. S. Naipaul (London: Andre Deutsch, 1972), p.77

3 P. C. David "Between Two Stools: Naipaul's An Area of Darkness," in Alien Voice: Perspectives on Commonwealth Literature (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1982) pp.228-234.

4 Theroux, V. S. Naipaul, p.77.

5 M. B. Angrosino, "V. S. Naipaul and the Colonial Image," Caribbean Quarterly, 21, iii (1975), p.2.

6 Rudyard Kipling, "The White Man's Burden," in The Literature of England (New York: Scott, Foresman & Co., 1953) p.1044.

7 Peggy Nightingale, Journey Through Darkness (Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1987) p.83.

8 Keith Garebian, "V. S. Naipaul's Negative sense of Place," The Journal of Commonwealth Literature 10, no.1 (1975), p.28.

9 P. C. David "Between Two Stools," p.231.

10 Madhusudana Rao, Contrary Awareness: A Critical Study of the Novels of V. S. Naipaul (Guntur, South India: Saradhi Publications, 1982) p.205.

11 Caryn James, "Nimble Travel Writer Stumbles Over South," New York Times reprinted in Arizona Republic, March 12, 1989, F10.

12 Edward Said, "Expectations of Inferiority," New Statesman October 16 (1981) p.22.

5."My Late Helmsman": The Postcolonial Setting of A Bend in the River and Naipaul's Vision of Africa

In Heart of Darkness Conrad describes the death of the African helmsman who had been accompanying Marlow on his journey by boat into the heart of the Belgian Congo. It is a pivotal scene in the novel and in literature concerned with colonialism.

The boat is attacked by "savages" hurling arrows and spears from the bank, and the helmsman is killed during the attack and dies at Marlow's feet. Before the helmsman is fatally wounded, Marlow speaks of him as "the most unstable kind of fool," "that fool-helmsman," "the fool-nigger" and "that mad helmsman." When he falls with the spear in his side, he becomes simply "the man." Marlow recalls: "the man stepped back swiftly, looked at me over his shoulder in an extraordinary, profound, familiar manner, and fell at my feet."[1]

In life the helmsman was part of the "black and incomprehensible frenzy" of Africa. In death, he becomes Marlow's equal; his humanity is suddenly acknowledged. There is another noticeable change, a spatial rearrangement that suggests a new relationship between the two men: the helmsman who was usually steering and whom

Marlow remembers as always "being at my back," changes place with Marlow shortly before being wounded. He has left the wheel. He looks over his shoulder at Marlow. And the look he gives Marlow before falling dead at his feet is "profound" and "familiar." Conrad introduces the idea of a complex emotional bond between the African and the European in the midst of their violent confrontation with one another. What follows is one of the most remarkable moments in literature written by non-Africans about Africa:

> We two whites stood over him, and his lustrous eyes and inquiring glance enveloped us both. I declare it looked as though he would presently put to us some question in an understandable language; but he died without uttering a sound, without moving a limb, without twitching a muscle.Only in the very last moment, as though in response to some sign we could not see, to some whisper we could not hear, he frowned heavily, and that frown gave to his black death-mask an inconceivably somber, brooding, and menacing expression (HD, 119).

A closer look at this scene will lead directly into a discussion of Naipaul's A Bend in the River -- also set in

the Congo and bearing noticeable similarities in its plot, structure and characters to Heart of Darkness.

The death of the helmsman is important for several reasons, first because Conrad himself felt it important enough to reflect on over a number of pages. Why is the helmsman -- a minor character -- so important to Conrad? Marlow answers this question:

> I missed my late helmsman awfully .... Perhaps you will think it passing strange this regret for a savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara. Well, don't you see, he had done something, he had steered .... It was a kind of partnership ... and thus a subtle bond had been created, of which I only became aware when it was suddenly broken. And the intimate profundity of the look he gave me when he received his hurt remains to this day in my memory -- like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment (HD, 124).

When Marlow lifts the dead helmsman in order to throw his body overboard, Conrad writes the memorable lines: "Oh! he was heavy, heavy; heavier than any man on earth, I should imagine."

The profound look, the helmsman's falling at Marlow's

feet, the weight of the body, all suggest the European's burden of guilt for the imperialist crimes committed in the Congo. King Leopold II of Belgium personally owned most of the country, and an estimated five million natives were tortured and killed in the "trade" of ivory and rubber between 1878 and 1908. But more than guilt is suggested here. There is a sense of fateful complicity, an unspoken understanding, between the African and European. As Marlow says, there was a "partnership." The typical roles of "imperialist" and "native" are transcended; the European is not a detached observer and the native is not merely part of what is observed. The helmsman's eyes dominate the description; he has become the observer. His "inquiring glance enveloped" Marlow.

It is one of the rare instances in the imperialist literature of the nineteenth century when a native has been given consciousness. He is not given the opportunity to voice his thoughts, but the idea that he had a dying message haunts Marlow and no doubt made an impression on the nineteenth century European reader. But why doesn't Conrad let the native speak? His silence, I think, has to do with Conrad's way of presenting the truth in Heart of Darkness. As Marlow says, "the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze ... (HD, 68)." The helmsman's unspoken words become a

halo of mystery around him and this opens rather than closes the door on the native character. The unfathomable question behind the "lustrous eyes" of the dying man is one with the "mysterious stillness" of Conrad's Africa, "a stillness ... that did not in the least resemble peace."

Naipaul writes in his essay, "Conrad's Darkness": "Conrad...had been everywhere before me. Not as a man with a cause, but a man offering ... a vision of the world's half-made societies as places which continuously made and unmade themselves (ROEP, 233)." The sense of futility in these words is Naipaul's, not Conrad's. And it is this sense of futility more than anything else that distinguishes Naipaul's vision of Africa from Conrad's.

A Bend in the River takes place in the same setting as Heart of Darkness three quarters of a century later. The Belgian Congo is by this time the independent state of Zaire. Naipaul follows Conrad into the heart of Africa, borrowing from Heart of Darkness. Not only is the setting the same, the narrator, like Marlow, journeys from the coast upriver into the heart of the country. And like Marlow he is an outsider. Although Salim, the narrator of A Bend in the River, is born in Africa, he is not African. He is an Indian, brought up in an enclosed Muslim community. Both works present a highly charged political atmosphere, and both are concerned with the psychological

aspects of colonialism.

What is the fate, metaphorically speaking, of the African helmsman in Naipaul's vision of Africa? How do the main players -- the outsider, the African, the threatening landscape -- differ after seventy years? It is interesting to see where Naipaul's novel departs from Heart of Darkness now that the setting is postcolonial and the writer is himself a colonial.

Naipaul is drawn to Africa partly because of Conrad. "He is someone who sixty to seventy years ago meditated on my world ... I feel this about no other writer of the century." writes Naipaul (ROEP, 236). In The Mythology of Imperialism Jonah Raskin writes: Kipling's walls hide the truth of imperialism. Conrad broke them down. He dragged the colonial world onto center stage of English fiction."[2] Naipaul's admiration for Conrad as one who went before him into "the dark places of the earth " is one reason he is drawn to Africa. It is, like India, a place connected to childhood stories and myths. Naipaul not only grew up in the British empire; he grew up on the literature of empire. The stories of Conrad were read to him at an early age, and they made him "ponder the mystery ... of [his] own background (ROEP, 231)." In keeping with his tendency to go to places which have some connection to his early colonial years, he goes to Africa as to an already known world, known in the sense that it

has occupied an important place in his literary imagination.

No doubt Heart of Darkness has much to do with Naipaul's attraction to Africa as a setting for his novel. In "Conrad's Darkness" he writes about a particular section of Heart of Darkness which made a deep impression on him and says that it "answered something of the political panic [he] was beginning to feel (ROEP, 233)."

It is where the steamer is going upriver and a hut is sighted on the bank. It is empty but contains one book, sixty years old, An Inquiry into Some Points of Seamanship, tattered but "lovingly stitched afresh with white cotton thread." Naipaul writes:

> And in the midst of nightmare, this old book, 'dreary...with illustrative diagrams and repulsive tables of figures' but with its 'singleness of intention,' its 'honest concern for the right way of going to work,' seems to the narrator to be 'luminous with another than a professional light'(ROEP, 232).

For Naipaul the scene is one of heightened incongruity. The Seamanship book represents the order and stability of one world, and such order seems "luminous," almost grotesque, in contrast to the "nightmare" of

Africa. "Panic" is Naipaul's response to the incongruity between the two worlds and to the incongruity between self and world. And in Naipaul's vision of Africa in A Bend in the River incongruity replaces Conradian mystery. The following passages one from A Bend in the River and the other from Heart of Darkness show the difference in the characters' feelings about the African landscape, one senses incongruity, the other mystery and wonder:

> In the darkness of river and forest you could be sure only of what you could see -- and even on a moonlight night you couldn't see much. When you made a noise -- dipped a paddle in the water -- you heard yourself as though you were another person. The river and forest were like presences, and much more powerful than you. You felt unprotected, an intruder (BR, 8).

> Not the faintest sound could be heard. You looked on amazed, and began to suspect yourself of being deaf -- then the night came suddenly, and struck you blind as well. About three in the morning some large fish leaped, and the loud splash made me jump as though a gun had been fired (HD, 108).

The two passages are remarkably similar. Their differences reflect the political realities of their respective times. The African landscape does not hold mystery for Naipaul; it holds a real threat. The character feels "unprotected." And like all Naipaul's landscapes, this is an alien landscape, where the character feels himself to be "an intruder." When Naipaul wrote this in the late 1970's, a non-African would have felt himself "an intruder" in many parts of Africa. In 1971 Amin expelled all Asians from Uganda, and in 1974 Mobutu nationalized foreign-owned businesses in Zaire. When Conrad wrote Heart of Darkness at the end of the nineteenth century, Africa was still new to Europeans, still a place to explore; Stanley had visited the Congo for the first time in 1877, and the British had only recently established a protectorate in East Africa. If Africa is "incomprehensible" to Marlow, it is also a country awaiting discovery. He is so "amazed" by his surroundings that he doubts his own perceptions --"you...began to suspect yourself of being deaf...the night came...and struck you blind as well."

That Naipaul chose Zaire as a setting for his novel is significant. Both geographically and historically no region in Africa could better suit his colonial vision and concerns. Its great river which captured the imagination

of Conrad leads right to the very center of the continent. Like the Nile it has been both a boon and a curse; without it, African and European history would be different. This is where colonial history, "the scramble for Africa," was most luridly played out. The heated arguments over "the Congo Question" at the turn of the century reflected disturbing, new ideas Europeans were beginning to have about themselves and their achievements. All the major ideas and movements of the century -- Darwin's theory of evolution, capitalism, marxism, the anti-slavery movement, imperialism -- weighed in the outrage felt over the killing of millions of Africans in Central Africa. Mark Twain's King Leopold's Soliloquy (1905) was among many writings which questioned Europe's role in the Congo. Red Rubber, The Curse of Central Africa and The Truth About the Congo were others. Three quarters of a century after the "Congo Question" had been laid to rest, Naipaul travelled to Zaire, and found it still to be a land of horror.

Naipaul spent three months in Zaire in 1975 and wrote about his visit in an essay called "A New King for the Congo." Many of the descriptions and ideas from this essay can be found, almost word for word, in A Bend in the River. From the essay it would seem that Naipaul went to Zaire in search of the brutality and madness he had read

about in Heart of Darkness. He looks for his own Kurtz, and he finds him -- at "the bend in the river," Stanleyville:

> Seventy years later, at this bend in the river, something like Conrad's fantasy came to pass. But the man with "the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear" was black, and not white; and he had been maddened not by contact with wilderness and primitivism, but with civilization (ROEP, 210).

He is speaking about Mobutu, president of Zaire. According to Naipaul, he is "the great African nihilist" and his political methods are summed up as "nihilistic assertion." In A Bend in the River, he is parodied as Big Man. The narrator Salim, never comes into actual contact with Big Man as Marlow does with Kurtz. But Big Man looms ominously in the background of the novel; his fanatical speeches come over the radio ("the Big Man's mishmash"); photographs and statues of him are placed everywhere, and rumors about his excesses abound. He is a stereotype of the psychopathic Third World dictator.

Naipaul's language in the passage above -- his use of the word "fantasy," his reliance on Conrad's words, and

his resorting to an abstraction like "primitivism," a word too easily associated with Africa -- suggests that he had a set and perhaps limited idea of what he wanted to find in Africa. "The West has always used Africa as a mirror," writes Judy Clain in an article on African wild-life photographer Dianne Blell, "When Westerners look at Africa they have seen not the place itself, but images of themselves that the continent reflects."[3] Isak Dinesen's solitude took on a particular sharpness because she was a white woman alone on an African farm. And Naipaul's panic about displacement takes on a magnitude in the African setting that is unequalled in any other setting. In India, Naipaul felt he could merge into the Indian crowd; in Africa, the Indian narrator is distinctly an outsider. Like Trinidad, Africa is predominantly black and it has a history of colonialism; so for Naipaul, Africa, with its great size and physically challenging landscape, becomes a background against which his colonial concerns can be projected on a grand scale. All Naipaul's Third World settings are "landscapes of fear," as Richard Kelly points out.[4] But Naipaul's Africa is more than a "landscape of fear;" it is apocalyptic.

"Africa has no future," Naipaul said in an interview with Elizabeth Hardwick.[5] In "A New King for the Congo" he speaks of "the African sense of the void" and "the vacancy of river and forest." In A Bend in the River

everything about the landscape suggests waste, ruin, and destruction. Salim drives past the Domain, which was at one point the Big Man's showplace and a center of learning and is now a run-down settlement with bush sprouting everywhere, and he thinks:

> This piece of earth -- how many changes had come to it! Forest at a bend in the river, a meeting place, an Arab settlement, a European outpost, a European suburb, a ruin like the ruin of a dead civilization, the glittering Domain of new Africa, and now this (BR, 260).

Even the river which should offer a way out suggests entrapment and doom. Water hyacinths suddenly begin to grow and spread in the river, symbolizing the threat of violence and destruction contained in the land itself:

> The tall lilac-coloured flower had appeared only a few years before, and in the local language there was no word for it. The people still called it "the new thing" or "the thing in the river," and to them it was another enemy. It's rubbery vines and leaves formed thick tangles of vegetation that

> adhered to the river banks and clogged up waterways. It grew fast, faster than men could destroy it with the tools they had. The channels to the villages had to be constantly cleared. Night and day the water hyacinth floated up from the South seeding itself as it travelled (BR, 46).

A number of critics have spoken of Naipaul's "fear of the bush." [6] He uses the word "bush" constantly when referring to Africa and Africans. In A Bend in the River the word "bush" and the frequently used phrase "return to the bush" express the backwardness and futility Naipaul sees in postcolonial Africa. That Naipaul fears the bush, that he feels an imminent threat in postcolonial society, was revealed in his now infamous statement to Michiko Kakutani of the New York Times :

> I do not have the tenderness more secure people can have towards bush people ... I feel threatened by them. My attitude and the attitude of people like me is quite different from people who live outside the bush or who just go camping in the bush on weekends ... These people [West Indians and Africans] live purely physical lives, which I find contemptible ... It makes them interesting

> only to chaps in universities who want to do compassionate studies about brutes.

He goes on to describe his "fear of being swallowed up by the bush, a fear of the people of the bush ... a fear that I haven't altogether lost."

Naipaul's "concern with his own anxieties remains paramount," writes Selwyn Cudjoe in reference to the Michiko Kakutani interview.[8] Selwyn Cudjoe touches on the deep psychological implications of Naipaul's feelings and ideas about Africa. That Naipaul does not really see Africa but rather uses it to mirror his own deep-seated colonial fears is something he himself admits to. He describes the time of writing "In A Free State" (a novella set in Africa) as a period of great anxiety. He was living in Wiltshire at the time, a calm picturesque valley in England's West Country, and he realized that what he was writing was "a book about fear":

> And the mist that hung over the valley where I was writing; the darkness that came early; the absence of knowledge of where I was -- all this uncertainity emanating from the valley I tranferred to my Africa (EA, 99).

The key words here are "the absence of knowledge of where I was." Naipaul's fear, which he projects onto the African landscape, comes from his sense of displacement, his feeling of rootlessness in the world. He tranfers this fear and anxiety to the main character of A Bend in the River who like himself is a man without a society, an Indian whose ancestors left their homeland and attempted to transplant their culture in an alien world.

Salim's relationship to Africa is described in terms of futility. Escape is not a real possibility because he has no roots anywhere and feels that he has no place to go. The futility and hopelessness of his position in Africa is seen in his journey at the beginning of the novel. He senses that he is going in the wrong direction: "But this is madness. I am going in the wrong direction. There can't be new life at the end of this (BR, 4)." He continues to drive from his home town on the coast deeper into the heart of Africa because, as a displaced man, a man born in Africa but with no roots in Africa, there is no "right" direction for him to take. The journey is filled with setbacks, frustration, and danger -- "This isn't the kind of drive you can do nowadays in Africa...too many places on the way have been closed down or are full of blood (BR,3)." He has to "palaver" his way past "men with guns" and pay bribes. And he knows from

the start that his journey will end in disappointment, that the town at the bend in the river is "half-destroyed."

Salim's sense of futility is not just a response to the recent postcolonial changes in Africa. It goes back to colonial times and is part of the history of his Indian community in Africa. He sees his community as one that has always been cut off from Africa, and feels that "as a community [they had] fallen behind." Early in the novel he reflects on their place in African history and in Africa's future:

> ...I saw, when I compared the Europeans with ourselves, that we had ceased to count in Africa, that really we no longer had anything to offer. The Europeans were preparing to get out, or to fight it out, or to meet the Africans half-way. We continued to live as we had always done, blindly (BR, 17).

If he sees himself as having "ceased to count in Africa" why does he travel even deeper into Africa instead of getting out altogether? His journey is an act of rebellion against his past. Paul Theroux observes that "rebellion in Naipaul's fiction is ... usually a

calculated act of stubborness or tenacity or uncompromising doubt."[9] Salim senses "a tide of history coming to wash [the Indian community] away":

> We couldn't protect ourselves; we could only in various ways hide from the truth. I had to break away from our family compound and our community. To stay with my community, to pretend that I had simply to travel along with them, was to be to taken with them to destruction. I could be master of my fate only if I stood alone (BR, 20).

Like other characters in Naipaul's fiction, he is caught in a hopeless situation. It is the paradox of being both unaccommodated and trapped. His journey away from the safe enclave of his coastal community and further into the troubled African state is his way of accepting the fact that his fate is tied to the future of Africa: "We could no longer say we were Arabians or Indians or Persians; when we compared ourselves with these people, we felt like people of Africa (BR, 11)." Shortly after arriving in the town at the bend in the river, he hears of an uprising in the coastal town he had just left, making his position even more insecure: "Arabs -- men almost as African as their servants -- had been finally laid low."

His family write to him: "their message was plain: There was no place for us on the coast; our life there was over." The coastal uprising further traps him; it makes his way out of Africa even more difficult: "I found I couldn't move. I had to stay (BR, 29)."

In his description of his travels in the Congo, Naipaul wrote: "To arrive at this sense of a country trapped and static, eternally vulnerable, is to have something of the African sense of the void (ROEP, 219)." Salim's vision of Africa, like Naipaul's, is one of destruction and ruin. The "nihilism of Africa," as Naipaul puts it in "A New King for the Congo," is expressed in Salim's impressions of the town at the bend in the river:

> ... the steamer monument had been knocked down. With all the other colonial statues and monuments ... Ruins had been left as ruins; no attempt had been made to tidy up ... The wish had been only to get rid of the old, to wipe out the memory of the intruder ... But even more unnerving ... was the ruined suburb near the rapids. Valuable real estate for a while, and now bush again, common ground, according to African practice. The houses had been set alight one by one .... The big lawns and gardens had returned to

> bush; the streets had disappeared; vines and creepers had grown over broken, bleached walls ... Here and there in the bush could still be seen the concrete shell of what had been restaurants ... and nightclubs. One nightclub had been called "Napoli"; the now meaningless name painted on the concrete wall, was almost bleached away (BR, 27).

Salim's sense of himself in relation to this ruined setting establishes the disturbing tone of loss and futility that continues throughout the book:

> The ruins, spreading over so many acres, seemed to speak of a final catastrophe. But the civilization wasn't dead. It was the civilization I existed in and in fact was working towards. And that could make for an odd feeling; to be among the ruins was to have your time-sense unsettled. You felt like a ghost, not from the past, but from the future. You felt that your life and ambition had already been lived out for you and you were looking at the relics of that life. You were in a place where the future had come and gone (BR, 27).

Salim's sense of displacement is poignantly described, and it is here that we see that his position in postcolonial Africa is essentially that of a colonial and outsider. It seems a misconception to think of the ruin described in these passages and the atmosphere of futility and doom that pervades the book as "the African sense of the void." Salim's is not an African point of view, and these are not really African ruins. It is in a former European suburb that Salim sees his "life and ambition ... already ... lived out." He may think of himself as being "of Africa," but his vision is that of an outsider's and a colonial. It is not postcolonial Africa that is the wasteland, but colonial Africa, among whose relics Salim tries in vain to picture his future. Similarly, when Naipaul speaks of "nihilism" and the "void" he seems to be responding not to Africa's present but to the disappearance and loss of the old colonial order.

Salim sets up shop in the town at the bend in the river amidst the ruins and in spite of the political instability, the constant threat of insurrection. When his old childhood friend, Indar, returns to Africa after studying in England, Salim is drawn into the life of the New Domain. The New Domain represents new, postcolonial Africa. It is the president's showplace, an institute for training young African officials and a center for

international meetings. Western experts -- "new-style foreigners" -- dressed in native attire, live at the New Domain. The director of the center, Raymond, a Belgian professor, is "the Big Man's white man." He realizes that his position grows more precarious every day, that his job and life depend on the President's whim. Salim gets involved in an affair with Raymond's young wife, Yvette. His involvement with the New Domain through Indar and through Yvette is his initiation into elite postcolonial African society. He finds the world of the New Domain to be as self-enclosed and self-deluding as the Indian family compound of his childhood. After attending one of Indar's seminars at the New Domain, Salim reflects: "I began to wonder whether [we] weren't fooling ourselves and whether we weren't allowing the Africa we talked about to become too different from the Africa we knew (BR, 123)."

Salim's affair with Yvette, which is marked with sadistic acts of violence, follows this pattern of self-deception. As the political situation grows more tense, and they all begin to feel threatened, Salim notices that he and Yvette "had begun to talk if not in opposites, at least indirectly, lying and not lying, making those signals at the truth which people in certain situations find it necessary to make (BR, 219)." The affair culminates in a particularly brutal scene of violence

where Salim beats and kicks Yvette and shouts: "Do you think I am Raymond?" That he imagines himself in Raymond's "place" is not only a reference to the sexual liason; Salim sees his own work and life in Africa as much threatened as Raymond's.

Between his clandestine affair with Yvette, the false talk at the New Domain, and the daily barage of propaganda from the Big Man, Salim realizes that his life at the bend in the river has turned into an accumulation of lies: "How long would it take to work back ... through all the accumulated lies, to what was simple and true (BR, 268)?"

Naipaul suggests that there is no going back for Salim. One of the few links to his past is his friend Indar who also grew up in the Indian coastal community. But the lies they share disintegrate their friendship. They begin to deceive themselves not just about the present and future of Africa but also about their past:

> So, in my talks with Indar about Africa -- the purpose of his outfit, the Domain, his anxieties about imported doctrines...I felt that between us lay some dishonesty, or just an ommission, some blank, around which we both had to walk carefully. That ommission was our own past, the smashed life of our community (BR, 124).

Indar's monologue at the center of the novel, in which he describes to Salim the alienation he felt as a student in London, is a moving portrayal of what it means, on a psychological level, to be from one of the peripheral, "dark places of the earth." Its length (ten pages) and its position right at the center of the narrative indicate how important the theme of displacement is to the novel. This is where Naipaul writes those lines, quoted in my introduction, which capture the brittle self-consciousness and disturbing sense of being "at the edges" which is part of the colonial sensibility. Indar describes his experiences in London:

> The word "university" dazzled me, and I was innocent enough to believe that after my time in the university some wonderful life would be waiting for me .... But I hadn't understood to what extent our civilization had also been our prison. I hadn't understood to what extent we had been made by ... Africa and the simple life of the coast, and how incapable we had become of understanding the outside world... We feel of the great world that it is simply there, something for the lucky ones among us to explore, and then only at the edges. It never occurs to us to make some

> contribution to it ourselves. And that is why we miss everything. When we land at a place like London Airport we are concerned only not to appear foolish. It is more beautiful and more complex than anything we could have dreamed of, but we are concerned only to let people see that we manage and are not overawed ... and that was how I spent my time at the university in England, not being overawed (BR, 142-43).

One day, while walking along the Embankment, Indar is "awakened" to where he is. He notices dolphins carved into the metal lamp standards and the shapes of camels carved into the supports of benches. From this point on, he begins to truly look at his surroundings: "I understood that London wasn't simply a place that was there as people say of mountains, but that it had been made by men, that men had given attention to details as minute as those camels (BR, 151)."

Indar's awakening to the sights of London, and to "the great world" presumably puts him in a better position than Salim to see through the lies and mockery of the Big Man's presidency. Yet he too pretends, for as long as he can, that the work he is doing at the New Domain is of value. Like Salim, he is adrift in the world, and Africa is the

only home he has ever known. When the New Domain falls apart and chaos breaks out in the country, Indar suffers perhaps more than any of the other characters. He returns to London and there he withdraws, refusing to speak about what happened in Africa. One senses that for him, like Marlow, the truth has been "too dark altogether." The last we hear of him is that he keeps to himself in a rented room and is wrapped up in "a dream village."

The idea of London as a world "that had been made by men," is in direct contrast to the idea of postcolonial Third World countries "as places which continuously made and unmade themselves" and "seemed doomed to remain half-made (ROEP, 233)." This contrast arises out of the colonial's inability to see his own world as whole. In fact, Indar is described as one who is not able to properly see anything around him until his senses are awakened in London. Growing up on the African coast he had "paid attention only to one colour in nature -- the colour of the sea. Everything else was just bush, green and living, or brown and dead (BR, 151)."

It is no wonder then that Naipaul's colonial characters, who depend on Europe for wholeness of vision, see nothing but chaos in the withdrawal of Europe from Africa. The nihilism of Africa is much more of a subjective than an objective reality. In the same way that

the colours of his native surroundings meant nothing to Indar before the awakening of his senses in London, Naipaul is unable, or he refuses, to recognize that anything other than "bush" existed before colonialism or that anything might exist after.

In the postcolonial world of A Bend in the River nothing that men do, whether they are Indian, African, or European, amounts to anything. Naipaul satirizes every postcolonial effort towards development and progress: "Under the rule of the new President the miracle had occurred: Africans had become modern men who built in concrete and glass and sat in cushioned chairs covered in imitation velvet (BR, 101)." Swimming pools are built but due to poor irrigation there is no water to fill them. Through an elaborate system of government-paid "disinfectors," the taxis stink of disinfectant while there is no system for removing garbage from the street, so that rubbish grows "month by month into increasingly solid little hills."

The story of Salim's other Indian friend, Mahesh, is another of those stories of failure like those found in Miguel Street. Mahesh is "dazzled" by the idea of imported machines. At one point, he imports a machine for making name-plates: "The modernity and precision -- and above all, the "manufactured" look of the plates -- really

excited him (BR, 89)." But this enterprise is soon dropped because, as Salim says, "not many of us felt the need to have our names on triangular sections of wood on our desks." Mahesh's next venture is an ice cream-making machine. The unavailability of eggs and milk does not dampen his enthusiasm. The ice cream machine leads to another obssession: "he wanted to import a machine from Japan for cutting little flat wood sticks and spoons" for the ice-cream. Finally Mahesh succeeds in starting a Bigburger franchise in the town. He explains to Salim: "They don't just send you the sauce, you know ... They send you the whole shop (BR, 97)."

Naipaul is doing more than satirizing Third World dependence on the more highly developed manufacturing countries. Unlike "the pyrotechnist" and "the mechanical genius" in Miguel Street, Mahesh actually succeeds. The made-to-measure counter, the milk-shake machines, the made-to-measure wall panelling with the Bigburger design, the Bigburger ketchup containers and Bigburger uniforms are described with such joy and precision that we know they fill Mahesh and the Africans who work for him with pride. Their response to the Bigburger enterprise is in keeping with Naipaul's idea that "the machine is the great humanizer" of Third World societies, "[giving] men whose labours have been very petty, a new idea of themselves." [10]

But in Naipaul's nihilistic vision of Africa, Mahesh's efforts finally amount to nothing. All foreign-owned services are suddenly nationalized. Mahesh and Salim, though born in Africa, are considered "foreigners." Salim loses his shop and Mahesh loses his franchise; both are taken over by "state trustees." The New Domain also fails and the foreign experts there are forced to leave; it becomes a ruin and "returns to the bush." Salim's vision of a dead civilization in which he saw himself "a ghost of the future" becomes reality.

The sense of futility which marks Salim's relationship to postcolonial Africa is also seen in his relationship with Africans. If Naipaul feels "threatened" by "bush people," as he claims, so do his main characters. Africans are, on the whole, seen as "malins" (evil) and as part of "the vacancy of the river and forest." The bush and the African are inseparable in Naipaul's vision. And the confusion of post-colonial Africans, like Big Man, is seen to be the result of their futile attempt to leave the bush.

There are two African characters in the novel with whom Salim interacts: Zabeth, half-sorcerer, half-businesswoman, and her son, Ferdinand. Zabeth comes into the town by way of the river to do business with Salim: "What journeys Zabeth made! It was as though she came out

from her hidden place to snatch from the present...some precious cargo to take back to her people -- those razor blades, for instance, to be taken out of their packets and sold one by one, miracles of metal (BR, 9)." Naipaul seems to have taken great pleasure in creating this character; his description of her is powerful and flamboyant:

> Zabeth travelled without fear; she came and went with her vanity case and no one molested her. She was not an ordinary person. In appearance she was not at all like the people of our region. They were small and slight and very black. Zabeth was a big woman with a coppery complexion; there were times when this copper glow .... looked like a kind of make-up. There was something else about Zabeth. She had a special smell ... the smell was meant to keep people at a distance ... [it] was the smell of protecting ointments. Other women used perfumes and scents to attract; Zabeth's ointments repelled and warned. She was protected. She knew it, and other people knew it (BR,9-10).

Salim not only respects Zabeth as "a <u>marchande</u> and good customer" he is "charmed" by her: "Now that I knew

that in our region she was a person of power, a prophetess, I could never forget it. So the charm worked on me as well (BR, 10)."

Zabeth emerges as a strong character because she is seen as securely rooted in her past. She is untouched by the chaos of postcolonial Africa because she virtually remains in the bush.

Ferdinand, on the other hand is doomed, a victim of the post-colonial society that creates him. Salim's relationship to Ferdinand is one of reluctant patronage. Zabeth entrusts Salim with Ferdinand's education. He is sent to the African lycee and ends up at the New Domain where he is trained to be a government official. Salim's attitude to Ferdinand's progress is condescending and resentful:

> You took a boy out of the bush and you taught him to read and write; you levelled the bush and built a polytechnic and you sent him there. It seemed as easy as that, if you came late to the world and found ready-made those things that other countries and peoples had taken so long to arrive at -- writing, printing, universities, books, knowledge. The rest of us had to take things in stages ... Ferdinand starting from nothing, had

> with one step made himself free, and was ready to race ahead of us (BR, 103).

The casual certainity with which Salim says "Ferdinand, starting from nothing ..." comes from Naipaul's belief that there was "nothing" in Africa before colonialism. Ferdinand's situation also expresses Naipaul's belief that there can be nothing after the withdrawal of Europeans. Africa left to itself "has no future" as Ferdinand himself discovers. Towards the end of the novel, Salim goes to see him at his administrative office in the Capital:

> On the newly painted white wall was a larger-than-life photograph of the President...Below that face, Ferdinand seemed shrunken and characterless in the regulation uniform that made him look like all those officials who appeared in group photographs in the newspapers ... These men, who depended on the president's favour for everything, were bundles of nerves ... they were unstable, half-dead (BR, 271).

Salim finds Ferdinand in a state of hysteria. He helps Salim to leave the country, but he knows there is no

escape for himself. He cannot even return to "the bush;" he tells Salim:

> Nobody's going anywhere. We're all going to hell, and everyman knows it in his bones. We're being killed. Nothing has any meaning...Everyone wants to make his money and run away. But where? That is what is driving people mad. They feel they are losing the place they can run back to .... Everything that was given to me was given to me to destroy me ... nowhere is safe now (BR, 272).

Metty, Salim's half-African half-Indian servant who had followed him from the coast, is equally hysterical and begs Salim to take him away with him: "They are going to kill everybody who can read and write, everybody who ever put on a jacket and tie ... all the masters and all the servants. When they're finished nobody will know there was a place like this here (BR, 275)."

Salim does not take Metty with him. As an African, Metty, like Ferdinand, is left to face the destruction and bloodshed. The last scene of the novel dramatically illustrates Naipaul's apocalyptic vision of Africa. Salim escapes but that escape is no comfort to him since he has nowhere to go. As the steamer on which he is travelling

begins its journey down the Congo back to the coast, his final vision of the Africans among whom he has been living is one of utter destruction and despair. Villagers living along the riverbanks sail up to the steamer in dug-outs, desperate to get away: "They jammed and jostled against the sides of the steamer and the barge, and many were swamped. Water hyacinths pushed up in the narrow space between the steamer and barge." The hyacinths, which were earlier seen uncontrollably spreading and clogging the river, become an agent of destruction, a symbol of the land itself mercilessly devouring its own. In the frenzy of villagers trying to connect their dugouts to the passenger barge and soldiers trying to take over the steamer, the passenger barge carrying the third-class African passengers gets caught among the hyacinths. It is night, and Salim is only able to see by way of the steamer's searchlight. The search-light with its connotations of rescue and hope plays an important part in this final scene:

> ...the passenger barge... had snapped loose and was drifting at an angle through the water hyacinths at the edge of the river. The searchlight lit up the barge passengers who, behind bars and wire guards, as yet scarcely

> seemed to understand that they were adrift. Then there were gunshots. The searchlight was turned off; the barge was no longer to be seen. The steamer started up again and moved without lights down the river, away from the area of battle. The air would have been full of moths and flying insects. The searchlight, while it was on, had shown thousands, white in the white light (BR, 278).

These are the final words of the novel. The Africans are stranded, without realizing that they are "adrift," and Africa is left to its own destruction and darkness.

Seventy years after Kurtz utters "The horror! The horror!" Naipaul appears to be saying the same thing except that the African is now committing the atrocities in the Congo. Also, the positions of outsider and native are reversed. In Heart of Darkness colonialism is seen as the destroyer and the European bears the responsibility and guilt for the native. To Marlow, his late helmsman is "heavier than any man on earth." In A Bend in the River the outsiders are victims and colonialism is mourned. The native, Ferdinand, sympathises with and rescues the outsider, Salim, while Salim virtually washes his hands of all responsibility for the Africans. He leaves Metty and Ferdinand helplessly adrift in the same way that the

steamer turns off its searchlight on the sinking passenger barge. If Naipaul's vision of Africa is nihilistic, this sense of nihilism sweeps over his main character also as he tries to escape. The steamer has to make its way downriver without lights. The colonial, with no place of his own to return to, moves ahead in darkness and uncertainity.

The African helmsman in Heart of Darkness, whose lustrous eyes contain a question at his death, opened the door to the native consciousness in the literature of colonization. In A Bend in the River Naipaul closes it. His African characters, at the very end, are unconsciously adrift. Or, like Ferdinand, they are reduced to "frenzy."

Naipaul's writings about Africa are among the most controversial of his works mainly because of what critics see as his negative or limited portrayal of Africans. Adewale Maja Pearce rebukes not only V. S. Naipaul but also his brother, Shiva (who wrote a travel book on Africa), for their "racism." In "The Naipauls on Africa: An African View," Pearce asks, "How far must the Naipaul's go before their racism ... is called by its proper name?" Pearce feels that "the key to their attitude lies in their slavish worship of the West and the western tradition [which] ... they use to measure everything else by."[11] Thomas Mpoyi-Buatu, another African critic, says that in Naipaul's writing "the Africans are lacking in psychology

... he has made the choice to deny "otherness," and in this he is a zealous, painstaking .... son of this Western world which for a long time and even now is being thought of positively only in the context of the negation of the Other."[12]

The majority of Naipaul's Western critics, however, see him as describing the true Africa. Angus Calder has said that no other writer since Conrad has "exposed the otherness of Africa so starkly."[13]

Naipaul himself insists that his subject in his African writings is the "other."[14] He is vicious in his attack on the "imperialist writers" -- Dinesen, Hemingway, Greene -- for their failure to deal with Africa honestly. Of Dinesen's Out of Africa he has said "I feel this book performs a vanishing act ... How could imperialism allow such blindness." [15]

It seems as though the idea of "otherness" itself is as much in question as Naipaul's handling of it. How critics perceive this notion of "otherness" falls roughly into the same two categories as the literature depicting "otherness." On one hand, there is the literature of empire written about colonialism. Here the "other" or native is exactly that -- other. He is, as Hana Wirth Nesher points out in "The Curse of Marginality," "a vaguely defined alter ego...not seen as part of an alternative civilization as much as an

anticivilization." She mentions Kipling and (perhaps unfairly) Forster as writers who perceive the native in this light.[16] In the second category there is colonial literature, writing by colonials about colonized societies, written from the point of view of the native or "other." He remains "other" because he is colonial and never stops being conscious of his peripheral relationship to the metropolis. His "otherness" is the glass through which he sees the world.

Critics, like Calder, who feel Naipaul is "exposing the otherness of Africa" can be associated with the first category. His is a Eurocentric way of looking at colonial literature. Critics like Mpoyi-Buati belong to the second. He is looking at colonial literature as a colonial himself. Ultimately they are both saying the same thing: the African in Naipaul's fiction is, from a psychological point of view, incomplete. His shadowiness is the means by which Naipaul contrasts and exposes the concerns of the main character who is not African. In Calder's sense of the word then, Naipaul is "exposing the otherness of Africa" in that the African fulfills his role as "other" and does nothing more. In Mypoyi-Buati's sense of the word, "otherness" is not explored from the insider's perspective, that is, from the psychological point of view of the "other."

I said that Naipaul, in comparison to Conrad, had closed the door on the African character. It is important to keep in mind, however, that A Bend in the River is not a book about Africans. It is about outsiders. And it is about colonials, those who have grown up as colonials, suddenly finding themselves outsiders.

As for the apocalyptic ending, Africa sinking into an impenetrable and devastating darkness while the outsider, the non-African, sails away: Naipaul's main concern is the collapse of a certain kind of order, a way of life and a way of seeing the world that belonged to his own colonial generation. The end of colonialism in Africa cannot be described except in apocalyptic terms. It was an era of violence, displacement, confusion and ruin.

In Things Fall Apart by Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, which is about the tragedy of colonialism in an African village, the ending is also apocalyptic and, surprisingly, as in Naipaul's novel, it ends with an outsider's view. The novel's hero, an African, a great warrior and respected villager, has been driven to commit suicide. Achebe describes the European district commissioner leaving the scene of tragedy and ends the book from his point of view. It is worthwhile to compare the endings of A Bend in the River and Things Fall Apart. These are the last lines of Achebe's novel:

> The Commissioner went away...In the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilization to different parts of Africa he had learned a number of things. One of them was that a District commissioner must never attend to such undignified details as cutting a hanged man from a tree ... In the book which he planned to write he would stress that point. As he walked back to the court he thought about that bock. Every day brought fresh material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chhapter but a reasonable paragraph at any rate ... He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: The Pacification of the the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger.[17]

Achebe is being ironic, but underlying this irony, is a painful truth about colonialism and about the disturbing omissions in the writing of its history. The silence of the African character in literature that is set in colonial Africa reflects the way in which colonialism itself silenced the native. In Things Fall Apart the European has the final word and the African will perhaps have a paragraph devoted to him in the commissioner's

book. In Heart of Darkness the African dies without speaking and Marlow himself falls silent when he goes back to Europe. A Bend in the River ends not only in silence but in darkness as the searchlight goes out on the African castaways.

In a lecture that he gave at Wesleyan University, Naipaul remarked: "We are all so much victims of our time. It makes us almost dishonest."[18] He was speaking about writers like Dinesen and Greene and about their description of African society. But the statement applies to his own writing too. Naipaul is a victim of his time and history. He is an outsider everywhere. He has given a voice to others like himself. But in his writings about Africa he is no more able to give Africans a voice, to articulate that horrifying, inarticulate aspect of colonialism, than the "imperialist" writers he criticizes.

With writers who have been uprooted, some, like Naipaul, dwell on what has been lost to them; others attach themselves to the promise of the new. In An Essential Gesture, South African writer, Nadine Gordimer, describes her journey to the Congo. Like Naipaul she announces change: "Whatever happens, the hour of man has struck in Africa." Unlike Naipaul she leaves the Congo "with men's voices in [her] ear."[19] They are African voices.

[1] Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness (New York: Signet, 1983), p. 118. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

[2] Jonah Raskin, The Mythology of Imperialism (New York: Random House, 1971) p.14.

[3] Judy Clain, "Capturing Wildlife," Elle, June (1990), p.132.

[4] Richard Kelly "Landscapes of Fear" in V. S. Naipaul (New York: Continuum, 1989).

[5] Elizabeth Hardwick, "Meeting V. S. Naipaul," New York Times Book Review, May 13, 1979, p.20.

[6] For example, Selwyn Cudjoe, A Materialist Reading and Richard Kelly, V. S. Naipaul.

[7] Michiko Kakutani, "Naipaul Reviews His Past From Afar," New York Times, December 1,1980, p.C15.

[8] Selwyn Cudjoe, V. S. Naipaul: A Materialist Reading (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989) p.192.

[9] Paul Theroux, V. S. Naipaul (London: Andre Deutsch, 1972) p.116.

[10] Levin Interview, The Listener, 23 June (1983) p.16.

[11] Adewale Maja-Pearce, "The Naipauls in Africa: An African View," The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, 20, i (1985),p.112.

[12] Thomas Mpoyi-Buatu, "Le Refus De L'Autre," La Quinzaine Litteraire, October 16 (1983) p.8.

[13] Angus Calder quoted in Richard Kelly, V. S. Naipaul, p.54.

[14] Michiko Kakutani, "Naipaul Reviews His Past From Afar,"p.C15.

15 M. Banning Eyre, "Naipaul at Wesleyan," South Carolina Review 14, no.2, Spring (1982), p.35.

16 Hana Wirth Nesher, "The Curse of Marginality," Modern Fiction Studies 30, Autumn (1984), p.531.

17 Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1988) p.191.

18 Eyre, Naipaul at Wesleyan, p.35.

19 Nadine Gordimer,"The Congo River" in An Essential Gesture (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1988) p.184.

6.The Colonial Vision of the Mother Country: Ideas about Self and World in The Enigma of Arrival

Naipaul took the title for this novel from a painting by De Chirico called "The Enigma of Arrival," though it was the poet, Apollinaire, and not De Chirico, who gave the painting its name. Naipaul describes the painting and the effect it had on him when he first saw it:

> ...on an otherwise deserted street in the foreground there are two figures, both muffled, one perhaps the person who has arrived, the other perhaps a native of the port. The scene is desolation and mystery; it speaks of arrival. It spoke to me of that, as it had spoken to Apollinaire (EA,98).

The figures in the painting are tiny in contrast to their surroundings. A wall separates the foreground and background of the painting and comes between the men and the sea which lies in the background and which cannot be seen. Part of a ship's sail is visible above the wall, and it is this ship in the background that dominates the untold narrative. We know that its recent arrival and departure have some meaning for the two men. It is no wonder that

Naipaul was intrigued by this painting. De Chirico, whose wide, desolate spaces touch a chord of child-like fear -- the fear of suddenly finding oneself lost and alone -- is the painter Naipaul comes closest to resembling in his description of alienation and displacement.

Naipaul calls the book "a novel."[1] However, it is written in the first person, in a confessional tone, and is clearly about his own life. In Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography, James Olney, defines the term "autobiographical" simply as "a point of view on the writer's own past life."[2] In this basic sense, The Enigma of Arrival can be said to be autobiographical. Yet it is not an autobiography in the conventional sense of the writer's telling the story of his life from his early years to the present. Rather, it is concerned with a turning point in his life, his arrival in England.

"Arrival" in this novel is not so much about finding oneself in a new place but in a new state of mind. Naipaul is writing about what he calls his "second arrival" in England, the beginning of a new life for himself in the rural setting of Wiltshire near Stonehenge. This "second arrival" causes him to reflect on his earlier arrival in England from Trinidad at the age of eighteen. Throughout the novel, Naipaul goes back and forth in time comparing his early and later impressions of England and his changing ideas about himself, as a colonial and as an outsider, in

relation to his mother country. If De Chirico's painting (which is printed on the book's cover) were to serve as an illustration of the book's characters, one could say that one of the figures in the painting is the eighteen-year-old Naipaul who has just arrived in England and the other who has come to meet him is Naipaul, the older man and writer. Each is an enigma to the other. Each is clothed in a separate way of seeing and a separate way of experiencing the world around him. Their reunion after years of separation is the psychological starting point of the novel.

The tone of the novel, as I earlier stated, is confessional. Naipaul appears to be unburdening himself of his early colonial anxieties and his early shame and insecurity about his origins as he begins a new life: "this gift of a second life in Wiltshire, the second, happier childhood as it were, the second arrival (but with an adult's perception) at a knowledge of natural things ... the child's dream of a safe house in the wood (EA, 88)."

This new awareness or as he says "second arrival ... at a knowledge of natural things" comes to the writer following the deaths, one after another, of his sister and brother. The novel is dedicated to the memory of his brother, Shiva, and the last chapter of the book "The Ceremony of Farewell" describes Naipaul's trip back to Trinidad for his sister's funeral. The deaths of his

brother and sister are for Naipaul a further weakening of his ties to his former homeland. At the Hindu ceremony of farewell, he sees the Trinidadian Hindu traditions dying with his own generation: "Our sacred world had vanished ... Every generation was to take us away from those sanctities (EA, 353)."

If I begin here, with the last chapter, it is because, in a sense, Naipaul begins here too. The end of the book contains its beginning. In the very last lines he says that his sister's death, "fitted a real grief where melancholy had created a vacancy" and that "faced with a real death, and with this new wonder about men, I laid aside my drafts and hesitations and began to write very fast about Jack and his garden (EA, 354)."

The "real death" spoken of here at the end of the book is to be compared with those deaths and losses which were only imagined or contemplated earlier. The ceremony of farewell for his sister is also a farewell to his early life in Trinidad, and this compels him to seek a new life elsewhere, hence the "second childhood ... the second arrival." "Jack and his garden" refers to the first chapter of the book which is titled "Jack's Garden." In circling back round to the book's beginning, he draws attention to the act of writing, to the importance of the book's structure, and the relationship between the "real" and the

fictional. The repeated use of the word "real," -- "real death" and "real grief" -- offsets what is not real, what is fictional. Events, characters, and places are all real. The only thing that is "fictional" about The Enigma of Arrival is the structure itself, the reordering of time and events, as for example at the end where it is implied that the book still remains to be written, that it is exists only as "drafts and hesitations." Naipaul seems to have chosen this experimental structure because of his "hesitation." There is a tone of uncertainty and a tentative, almost timid, approach to character and setting that does not occur in any of his other books. It is as though Naipaul is conscious of being in a very different kind of territory and in a very different position than usual. He is not "a colonial travelling among colonials;" he is not on one of his journalistic expeditions to the post-colonial Third World; he is a colonial in the mother country.

The reference to the book's beginning at the end also fits in with the theme of renewal -- Naipaul's "second life." Throughout the novel, Naipaul is preoccupied with growth, change, decay and the possibilities of renewal. "Jack's Garden" is about a dying man, one of Naipaul's neighbors, who continues right up until his death to tend a garden on an otherwise ruined estate. It is his observation of Jack that gives Naipaul a "new wonder about men." At

first he sees Jack only as "something from the past, a remnant" because he seems an inseparable part of the landscape, the derelict farm and nearby Stonehenge. But after a while, Naipaul realizes that he is projecting his own sense of a "ruined" past onto Jack and his surroundings:

> To see the possibility, the certainity, of ruin even at the moment of creation: it was my temperament. Those nerves had been given me as a child in Trinidad ... Possibly too this mode of feeling went deeper and was an ancestral inheritance, something that came with the history that had made me: not only India, with its ideas of a world outside men's control, but also the colonial plantations or estates of Trinidad to which my impoverished Indian ancestors had been transported in the last century -- estates of which this Wiltshire estate, where I now lived had been the apotheosis (EA, 52).

He comes to see Jack in a new way: "solid, rooted in the earth." He seems to Naipaul to be the very opposite of himself, a colonial whose past "had given [him] an especially tender or raw sense of an unaccommodating world." Jack "was not exactly a remnant; he had created

his own life, his own world, almost his own continent."

> ...he had created a garden on the edge of a swamp and a ruined farmyard; had responded to and found glory in the seasons. All around him was ruin; and all around, in a deeper way was change...[and] he had asserted at the very end, the primacy not of what was beyond life, but life itself (EA, 92-93).

This "new wonder about men" is part of Naipaul's "second arrival ... at a knowledge of natural things." The physical beauty he sees in his rural surroundings "soothes" his "raw stranger's nerves." Jack's garden, the nearby orchards, and water meadows answer "every good idea [he, Naipaul] could have had as a child in Trinidad of the physical aspect of England (EA, 53)."

Naipaul's frequent use of the words "child" and "childhood" suggest a return to a former state of innocence in regard to his surroundings. In his "second childhood" he arrives at an almost Wordworthian relationship to nature. In Wiltshire he sees, or more aptly, recognizes, things that had been part of the remote fantasy of England he had had as a boy in Trinidad. His response to his surroundings when he first arrives in the West Country is to attempt "fitting" what he sees to what he already "knows":

> I saw what I saw very clearly. But I didn't know what I was looking at. I was still in a kind of limbo. There were certain things I knew, though. I knew the name of the town I had come to by the train. It was Salisbury. It was almost the first English town I had got to know, the first I had been given some idea of from the reproduction of the Constable painting of Salisbury Cathedral in my third-standard reader. Far away in my tropical island, before I was ten. A four-color reproduction which I had thought the most beautiful picture I had ever seen (EA, 7).

When Naipaul uses the word "know" here he is speaking about that remote, secondhand knowledge of "the great world" which colonials receive as part of their education. Naipaul's "second arrival ... at a knowledge of natural things" involves a new way of knowing, a direct, firsthand encounter with those things he had known only indirectly but which had been deeply instilled in his consciousness by his colonial education. He speaks of things and places as being the "original" of what he had seen or known of before in Trinidad, just as he did in An Area of Darkness where he cherished aspects of the Indian landscape which seemed to him the "original" of what he had seen in the pictures in his grandmother's Trinidad house. Both

countries, India and England, have been important areas in his struggle against displacement. They are the "two salient points on the boundary of [his] colonial experience."[3] In India Naipaul sought "the mythical land of [his] childhood;" and in England, in The Enigma of Arrival, he seeks an end to his colonial sense of displacement and insecurity and the beginning of a new state of being summed up in the words "the child's dream of a safe house in the wood."

His colonial background and education have trained him to see England with "a literary eye":

> So much ... I saw with the literary eye, or with the aid of literature. A stranger here, with the nerves of a stranger, and yet with a knowledge of the language and the history ... I could find a special kind of past in what I saw; with a part of my mind I could admit fantasy (EA, 18).

Jack's father-in-law seems to him "a figure of literature in the ancient landscape...a Wordsworthian figure...going gravely about his peasant tasks, as if in an immense Lake District solitude (EA,16)." The farms are like "something out of an old novel, perhaps by Hardy, or out of a Victorian country diary (EA, 13)." Seeing Jack's geese puts him "in touch with the early language" by way of an

allusion Shakespeare makes in King Lear to Salisbury Plain and Camelot: "Goose, if I had you upon Sarum Plain, I'd drive ye cackling home to Camelot (Kent, in King Lear II,ii)."

There is no irony in Naipaul's observations of the mother country as there has been in his observations of every other place he has written about; nothing disappoints or disillusions him; and nothing seems incongruous to him, not even his own presence as a Trinidadian Indian in the pastoral English setting. Naipaul celebrates the English landscape like a man who has just returned to his native country after years of exile: "the damp and mist of the glorious riverbank," "the hill of larks, with the ancient barrows at the top" and "the familiar solitude of the grassy way." He expresses a love for this part of England that is "greater than for any place [he] had known (EA,18)." He has, in a sense, returned to a wellknown and beloved landscape; Wiltshire satisfies "a child's fantasy of the beautiful other place, something which...I had always known (EA,84)."

At the time of writing, Naipaul had already lived in England for over twenty years. But those twenty years are looked back on as years of displacement and exile. This "second arrival," this new awareness of England, presumably signifies an end to that displacement. His "new wonder about men" includes a sense of wonder about himself as a

"new man," and it comes across particularly in his frequent shifts to the third-person when describing himself:

> The man who went walking past Jack's cottage saw things as if for the first time .... He could not have seen like that, so clearly, twenty years before. And having seen, he might not have found the words or the tone. The simplicity and directness had taken a long time to get to him; it was necessary for him to have gone through a lot (EA, 173).

His newfound happiness in his surroundings is set against the anxieties and unhappiness of the past: "The past for me -- as colonial and writer --was full of shame and mortifications (EA, 245)." He unburdens himself of this "shame" in the next chapter, titled "The Journey" where he describes his arrival in England at the age of eighteen. In his shame and insecurity about his origins as a young colonial in England, he had denied part of himself. At eighteen, Naipaul, the writer, had separated himself from, Naipaul, the man. By reflecting now on that earlier arrival he attempts a reconciliation of the two selves that had come apart.

Naipaul describes his first night away from Trinidad at the age of eighteen. The shifts in point of view from "I" to "he" heighten the division Naipaul feels between his former and present lives and also the separation of man and writer. He describes how after spending the day searching for "metropolitan material" to write about, he goes back to his hotel room and eats the food he has brought with him from Port of Spain, explaining "[his] family's peasant, Indian, Hindu fear about ... food, about pollution":

> I ate over the wastepaper basket, aware as I did so of the smell, the oil, the excess at the end of a long day. In my diary I had written of the biggest things, the things that befitted a writer. But the writer of the diary was ending his day like a peasant, like a man reverting to his origins, eating secretively in a dark room and wondering how to hide the evidence of his meal (EA, 113, underlining mine).

The shift from "I" to "he" dramatizes the change in perspective. The "he" is acutely self-conscious and suddenly appalled at his own actions. This is where man and writer begin to separate:

> ... I could feel the two sides of myself separating one from the other, the man from the writer. Already I felt a twinge of doubt about myself: perhaps the writer was only a man with an abstract education ... and a capacity for learning things by heart. And I had worked so hard for this day and this adventure! I watched the two sides of myself separate and dwindle even on this first day (EA, 120).

By "man" Naipaul means "the colonial-Hindu self below the writing personality (EA, 146)," a self which he tried to deny. What he was denying was the whole issue of race, the "other" self, or as he puts it "the other thing":

> I was travelling to be a writer. It was too frightening to accept the other thing: it was to be diminished as man and writer. Racial diminuition formed no part of the material of the kind of writer I was setting out to be. Thinking of myself as a writer, I was hiding my experience from myself; hiding from my experience. And even when I became a writer I was without the means for many years to cope with that disturbance (EA, 127).

He had come to London as to a "purely literary region" and his colonial education had given him "a Bloomsbury idea" of being a writer. The London that he saw before him did not fit his expectations. He writes that "in 1950 in London [he] was at the beginning of that great movement of peoples that was to take place in the second half of the twentieth century." It was no longer a national city but "a city of the world visited ... by all the barbarian peoples of the globe, people of forest and desert, Arabs, Africans, Malays (EA, 141)." In his Earl's Court boardinghouse he found himself surrounded by people "even more remote in language and culture" than he was. This was not what he was looking for as a writer. He searched for "metropolitan material," and found little to record. Moreover, he "lost the gift of fantasy." Having come to "the place that for all those years had been the 'elsewhere' no further dream was possible (EA, 134)." He began to feel that "the grandeur" he sought in England belonged to the past: "I had come too late to find the England, the heart of empire, which (like a provincial, from a far corner of the empire) I had created in my fantasy (EA, 130)." He compares his limited colonial way of looking at his new surroundings with the arrival of the first Spanish travellers in the New World:

> I was, in 1950, like the earliest Spanish travelers to the New World, medieval men with high faith ... taking the wonders for granted, saving inquiry (and true vision) only for what they knew they would find before they had left Spain: gold. True curiosity comes at a later stage of development. In England I was at that earlier, medieval-Spanish stage .... And like the Spaniard, having arrived after so much effort, I saw very little (EA, 143-144).

At this point, I find myself asking in what way does the older Naipaul, "the man ... walking past Jack's cottage," see things differently from the younger Naipaul? The older writer claims that twenty years earlier he "could not have seen ... so clearly" as he does now. But has his way of looking at the world around him really changed that much between his first arrival at the age of eighteen and this celebrated "second arrival?"

Naipaul's comparison of himself with the Spanish explorers is a good starting place for examining what England means to him as a colonial. In making this comparison Naipaul reverses the typical native/imperialist roles, and it is a reversal that occurs throughout the novel. Naipaul is the Third World man, the native of the colonies, seeking something in Europe just as the European

sought something in the colonies. Though he compares himself to the early Spaniards who he says were single-minded in their quest for gold, he proves to be much more like the later European explorers and settlers who went to the colonies not for gold or slaves, but in search of an ideal, unspoiled world, a place to begin again. For them, the colonial setting was important in providing a contrast to the world they had left behind, often in disillusionment. And the native was, like the setting, another point of contrast, an opposite, or alter-ego.[4] This way of seeing the colonial world can be found in much of the literature of empire, for example in the works of Kipling. Naipaul sees England in exactly the same way, both upon his first arrival and his "second." He goes to England with an ideal picture of the setting and the people, and he expects England to provide a contrast to the colonial world which is hateful to him. Throughout the novel the two worlds -- England and colonial Trinidad -- are contrasted, and the same conclusion is drawn every time: England represents order, Trinidad, chaos.

Looking closely at "Jack's Garden" it becomes apparent that the older Naipaul in his "second childhood" is seeing England in exactly the way he had prepared himself to see it during his "first" earlier childhood. He does not see the "real" England in "Jack's Garden" but the ideal England he had constructed in his imagination while still a child

in Trinidad. It is "the place that had for all those years been the 'elsewhere.'" He seems unable to see England as a country in itself and not merely an answer to his painful colonial past. The farm he lives on in Wiltshire is the "apotheosis" of the Trinidad sugar plantations. English society is one which is able to "create" things (an idea Naipaul expresses also in A Bend in the River, "London ... had been made by men") unlike the "half-formed" colonial/post-colonial societies which "continuously made and unmade themselves." Jack, the representative English man, "had created his own life, his own world, almost his own continent." Rule Britannia! And Naipaul, the representative colonial, blames most of his miseries on his "half-English half-education" and "ancestral ways of feeling." Jack triumphs over ruin, over death; the colonial man is made for ruin: "I had grown to live ... with the idea of decay ... It was like my curse: the idea, which I had had ... as a child in Trinidad, that I had come into a world past its peak (EA, 23)" England is the order and beauty of changing seasons; Trinidad is "a world in flux." Derek Walcott writes in his review of the novel: "so wonderously broad as it begins, it shallows into a fretful murmur, a melodious whine. Trinidad injured him. England saves him."[5]

Again, it is a peculiar reversal of imperialist/colonial ideas that Naipaul thinks of Trinidad -- the New World -- as "past its peak" and that he does not find England at all to blame for the colonial (or postcolonial) disorder. This is the direct opposite of what writers like Kipling and Conrad felt. His contempt for Trinidad, which continues through this "second, happier life," prevents any real reconciliation taking place between the "man and writer" who had separated earlier. His contempt for the past seems tantamount to a continued denial of a part of himself.

Another thing Naipaul seems still not to have confronted after twenty years is the "disturbance" of race. An Indian Trinidadian, he finds England "perfectly suited to [his] temperament." There is no acknowledgement on his part of the racism in England against those like himself, the immigrants from the former colonies, even though he is writing during a time of recurring violence against Pakistanis in England and in the aftermath of the Brixton race riots. When the older Naipaul does, at one point, infer the issue of race (though the word, "race," is not mentioned), he is painfully self-disparaging. Towards the end of the book he describes an old lady's appearance at his cottage on revisiting the region where she grew up. Naipaul feels "embarrassed to have ... disoriented the old lady and made her question where she was":

> I was also embarrassed to be what I was, an intruder, not from another village or county, but from another hemisphere; embarrassed to have destroyed or spoilt the past for the old lady, as the past had been destroyed for me in other places, in my old island (EA, 318).

Once again, destructive change is associated with the colonial world, and Naipaul, the colonial, is the "intruder" and the "destroyer." He feels himself, in that moment, violating the homogeneity of English society in the same way that he saw his "Bloomsbury idea" of London destroyed when he arrived in 1950 and found it "a city of the world visited by all the barbarian peoples of the globe."

Naipaul's idea -- and idealization -- of the mother country does not seem to have changed in twenty years. It is the same quintessentially colonial outlook he had arrived with in 1950. And, as Walcott puts it, this "second arrival" proves to be "neither enigmatic nor ironic, but predictable."[6] What has changed in twenty years is the way the writer views himself in relationship to his setting. England has become his home. Naipaul's celebration of the English rural landscape can be seen as an announcement of homecoming.

On one of his walks it dawns on Naipaul that he is "in the original" of a picture that had been been imprinted in his mind as a child. Here, he is not merely seeing the "original" as he did at Salisbury Cathedral; he is in it. Some black and white cattle grazing on the slopes remind him of the cows on the labels of the condensed milk cans in Trinidad:

> ... the black and white cattle, especially when seen against the sky, brought to mind the condensed-milk labels we had known as children in Trinidad and brought to mind especially a coloring competition for schoolchildren that the distributors ... had organized. The drawing or outline to be colored was an enlarged version of the label itself. What pleasure to get as many sheets with the outline as one wanted! What landscapes came to the mind of a child to whom cattle like those in the picture and smooth grassy hillsides ... were not known!
>
> Always on a sunny day on this walk, and especially if at the top of the slope some of the cattle stood against the sky, there was a corner of my fantasy in which I felt that some minute, remote yearning ... had been satisfied, and I was

> in the original of that condensed-milk label drawing (EA,331).

The recollection has powerful, symbolic undertones. The coloring competion, the imported cans, and the remote pastoral scene printed on the labels convey the colonial sense of being peripheral to the great world. It depicts the English as "the makers" and the colonials as the "mimic men," the mere recipients of a culture that has come to them second-hand. The condensed milk can label is not an obscure image from Naipaul's past; in the Caribbean, when Naipaul was growing up, canned (tinned) milk was a staple. Those labels with the cows grazing on English pastures were seen every day. Naipaul evokes in the passage how the fantasy of "elsewhere" was nurtured in those drawings on the labels. The idea that nothing can originate in the colonies ("that nothing could be constructed among these rotting shacks, barefooted backyards...")[7] is implied in the limited creativity of the competition; the colonial child colors what has already been outlined, and this outline is a scene completely unrelated to the native setting. It is also suggests how on a subconscious level the English landscape would have come to have more meaning to the child than the native setting. When Naipaul, now in England, recognizes that he is "in the original" of that

drawing, it is a recognition of his no longer being "peripheral."

The joy and serenity Naipaul feels in the West Country is a startling contrast to the discomfort, if not terror, that he has conveyed in his writings about other places -- those "landscapes of fear" -- Africa, the Caribbean, and India. One might ask why Naipaul's "homecoming," why his "gift of a second life [and] second, happier childhood" has taken place in England and not in his native Trinidad. Why does he find the ripening of fruit on English trees so much more appreciable than the lush tropical vegetation, the perennial blossoms, rivers and hills of his own country? In 1962, in The Middle Passage, Naipaul wrote that Trinidad's landscape "has never been recorded (MP, 72)." Elsewhere he has said that "landscapes do not start to be real until they have been interpreted by an artist" and that for this reason, Trinidad had always seemed to him "without shape and embarrassing (OB, 25). These were the words of the younger writer. As an older writer, Naipaul appears still to be suffering from this colonial delusion about his native surroundings. Daffodils are somehow more commendable than frangipani because Wordsworth wrote about them. It simply is not true that the Trinidadian landscape has not been recorded; it has by painters and by writers. It has been recorded by Naipaul too, but only in the most derogatory terms. At one point, describing his journey

from Trinidad at eighteen, he compares the light and colors of New York (where he has stopped on his way to London) with those of Trinidad:

> The outdoor light was magical. I thought it was created by the tall buildings ... Light indoors flowed into light outdoors: the light here was one. In Trinidad from seven or eight in the morning to five in the afternoon, the heat was great; to be out of doors was to be stung, to feel the heat and discomfort. This gray sky and gray light, light without glare, suggested a canopied, protected world ... The colors of the new York streets would have appeared to me in Trinidad, as "dead" colors, the colors of dead things, dried grass, dead vegetation, earth, sand, a dead world -- hardly colors at all (EA, 115-116).

Elsewhere in the novel he speaks of having learned during his autumns and winters in Wiltshire "to see the brown of dead leaves and stalks as a color in its own right." When a mood of depression comes over him some time later, the color becomes "again what it had been in Trinidad: not a true color, the color of dead vegetation, not a thing one found beauty in, trash (EA, 334)." This feeling that light and colors take on a new meaning for the

colonial in the mother country is also expressed by Indar in A Bend in the River when he says that before going to England he had only paid attention to one color in nature, the color of the sea (BR, 151). It suggests the colonial's dependency on the mother country in order to make sense of his surroundings.

It is not simply that Naipaul hates his native country, Trinidad, and loves the mother country, England. In The Enigma of Arrival he writes: "Land is not land alone, something that simply is itself. Land partakes of what we breathe into it, is touched by our moods and memories (EA, 335)." What Keith Garebian calls Naipaul's "negative sense of place"[8] is linked to his sense of displacement. He has never felt as though he belonged in Trinidad, and it has taken him a while to feel as though he belongs anywhere. England too, in the past, has been one of his "landscapes of fear." In a 1958 article in the Times Literary Supplement, he gives his impressions of London, and his feeling of estrangement is apparant. He complains about everything including the theatre in London! The "privacy of the city depresses" him. Nothing interests him, and he writes: "I never cease to feel that this lack of interest is all wrong. I want to be involved, to be touched .... (OB, 25)." Now, in later life, his deep satisfaction in the simple rural activities and things around him in Wiltshire -- the hay stacks and sheep

shearing and change of seasons -- suggests an end to that earlier sense of estrangement he had felt as a West Indian in England.

The autobiographical style of The Enigma of Arrival is another thing which suggests an end to his alienation in England. Janet Gunn writes in Autobiography: Towards a Poetics of Experience:

> The taking up of one's life in language that adumbrates the autobiographical perspective testifies to the autobiographer's particular involvement in the world, a landing rather than a hovering. The finitude of that involvement, the fact that one exists somewhere and not everywhere, constitutes one's access to the past.[9]

In The Enigma of Arrival, Naipaul has "landed." He feels that he has found his "safe house in the wood." His use of the autobiographical can be seen as an act of affirmation on his part about self in relation to place. In Finding the Center, published three years earlier, Naipaul explained that his colonial background had made it difficult for him to use the autobiographical "I," particularly in his travel- writing:

> I was uncertain about the value I should give to the traveler's "I." This kind of direct participation came awkwardly to me ... I was still a colonial, travelling to far off-places that were still colonies in a world still ruled more or less by colonial ideas (FC,ix).

In The Enigma of Arrival he overcomes that colonial "awkwardness" which had kept him from "direct participation." He becomes a participant: "the man who went on the walks down to Jack's cottage ...[was] not an observer merely, a man removed; but a man played on, worked on, by many things (EA, 103)."

Autobiography can be seen not only as an acknowledgement of having "landed," but also as an attempt to "land," an attempt to establish roots where none previously existed. This certainly seems to be the case with many Third World writers and also minority writers in America. In the autobiographical slave narratives of the nineteenth century, autobiographical novels like Richard Wright's Black Boy, and more recent works by African and Caribbean writers (Derek Walcott's Another Life, Wole Soyinka's Ake, Mark Mathabane's Kaffir Boy), the assertion being made is "the fact that one exists somewhere." These writers are voices outside the mainstream saying "I exist." Naipaul, like these writers, uses the

autobiographical form to define and center himself in a world in which he has previously felt alienated and rootless. It is significant that here in this autobiographical novel, Naipaul defines self through his involvement with his natural surroundings where before in the earlier novels he defends self by withdrawal or escape.

This reconciliation of man and writer following the reconciliation of self and world seems to be the primary motivation in the writing of The Enigma of Arrival. He explains that his early idea of the novel -- a "Mediterranean fantasy," the story of a traveler, a strange city, and a "spent life" -- was dropped as the story became increasingly personal:

> The story had become more personal: my journey, the writer's journey, the writer defined by his writing discoveries, his way of seeing, rather than by his personal adventures, writer and man separating at the beginning of the journey and coming together again ina second life just before the end (EA, 343-344).

The question is whether or not this reconciliation between man and writer actually occurs in the novel.

Naipaul is not an English writer, and the fact that he is still not reconciled to his own society and his own past

is perhaps what gives his descriptions of his "second, happier childhood" an edge of hysteria and uncertainity. His happiness appears strained, and this strain comes across in his need to repeat key words and phrases -- "second arrival" "second childhood" "fantasy" "picture" -- like a man trying to convince himself of something he does not really believe. There is also a great restlessness in the writing which is apparent in the meandering structure of the novel. The circuitous narrative, though it can be seen to correspond with the idea of rebirth and the "second childhood," could also be seen as the narrator's getting nowhere in his journey of reconciliation, neither truly confronting the past, nor moving ahead to a new level of awareness. In his review of the book, Walcott observed that Naipaul writes himself into a kind of cul-de-sac: "...the phantoms of the old Naipauline trauma -- the genteel abhorence of Negroes, the hatred of Trinidad, the idealization of History and Order -- appear at the end of Naipaul's garden path.[10]

But the character Naipaul in Naipaul's novel need not succeed in his intention to reconcile man and writer any more than Don Quixote need realize his dream of righting the wrongs in the world. The intention itself and the "internal adventure" of the character seem more significant than the outcome. The title of the book suggests its

contemplative purpose. The enigma of arrival is really more the enigma of the "arrivant." Naipaul exposes what lies within the frightened consciousness of a colonial when he sets foot on English soil: what becomes of his childhood fantasy of the mother country, what happens to his sense of identity, and how he goes about recovering both fantasy and identity through his interaction with his natural surroundings. The question of whether that recovery is complete is a question the book leaves its readers and critics to ponder.

In his analysis of the novel, Selwyn Cudjoe says that Naipaul "disguises" autobiography as fiction because "he is unwilling to expose this new 'self' he claims to have become...hence, the convenient fiction/fantasy that the obviously autobiographical Enigma of Arrival is a novel." This contrivance, says Cudjoe, is unnecessary because "the past of which [Naipaul] is a prisoner would not allow him" to expose a new self. He concludes:

> [Naipaul] may continue to depreciate these societies [postcolonial Africa and the Caribbean] ... but until he examines their positive aspects, seeking honestly to understand the social and cultural frames from which they operate, he will never get close to their or his truth ... Until he positions himself

> differently ... the reconciliation of man and writer which he seeks will continue to evade him. Writing may ease the pain momentarily but the man will always be alone and afraid. [11]

Selwyn Cudjoe is implying that Naipaul's use of fiction as a "disguise" and his tentative approach to autobiography shows an unreadiness or refusal to confront his past. But this in turn suggests that a writer is unable to confront the past in a work of fiction. In Naipaul's case this clearly is not so, as A House for Mr Biswas proves. Cudjoe says that because Naipaul is "a prisoner of his past" he is unable to expose his "new self." Naipaul himself admits to being "a prisoner of the past" and that imprisonment is a predominant theme in his writing: "the past for me -- as colonial and writer -- was full of shame and mortifications. Yet as a writer I could train myself to face them. Indeed, they became my subjects (EA, 245)."

Both Selwyn Cudjoe and Derek Walcott seem to be rebuking Naipaul for his failure to "decolonize" himself. The country Naipaul left at eighteen is no longer a colony of Britain; it has been independent since 1961. And Naipaul has lived in England as an "ex"-colonial for some thirty years. Yet he continues to write as though he were still

the colonial subject of a great empire. Still traumatized by colonialism, he is even further traumatized by the idea that it has ended. This way of thinking and feeling is not so anomalous. Franz Fanon in Black Skin, White Masks and D. Manoni in Prospero and Caliban: Psychology of Colonization explain in psychological and sociological terms what writers like Naipaul express through their art: that colonization took place in the mind. For many, the process of decolonization has been filled with dread and uncertainity and Naipaul's characters express their feelings. There are "areas of darkness" in Naipaul's writing, things to which he may never be reconciled. Some critics interpret this as his refusal to come to terms with history. But these areas of darkness are aspects of the history he carries in him. Denial, fantasy, insecurity, hysteria, fear, shame -- these are phantoms of colonialism which follow him everywhere and cast their shadows across all his journeys. To read The Enigma of Arrival is to get an idea of how difficult it has been to be V. S. Naipaul. As a writer, he has not tried to make history more easy to bear, he has simply borne it.

[1] The full title of the book is The Enigma of Arrival: A Novel.

[2] James Olney, Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1972), p.329

[3] Keith Garebian, "V. S. Naipaul's Negative Sense of Place," Journal of Commonwealth Literature 10,no.1 (1975) p.27.

[4] Hana Wirth Nesher, "The Curse of Marginality," 30, Autumn (1984), p.531.

[5] Derek Walcott, "The Garden Path" New Republic April 13 (1987), p.28.

[6] Ibid.

[7] _____, Dream on Monkey Mountain (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1970) p.4.

[8] Garebian, "V. S. Naipaul's Negative Sense of Place." Note 3.

[9] Janet Gunn, Autobiography: Towards a Poetics of Experience (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1982) p.17.

[10] Walcott, "The Garden Path," p.29.

[11] Selwyn Cudjoe, V. S. Naipaul: A Materialist Reading (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989) p.223.

Conclusion

> One thought one entered a new world. One was making one's own life. Then you find that no, you're still a prisoner, a prisoner of the past.[1]

There is a contradiction at the heart of V. S. Naipaul's writing: the past that confines him is the past that exiles him. His colonial history has given him a heightened sense of displacement, and he projects this displacement onto all settings and onto all characters in his writing.

In Naipaul's fiction and non-fiction, the colonial is seen as the quintessential outsider. Self-consciousness, withdrawal, and the sense that one is experiencing the world only from "the edges" are all part of what might be called "colonial anxieties" and these anxieties are expressed by all Naipaul's characters. In the early comic novels like Miguel Street estrangement takes the form of mimicry and self-mockery; the characters try on roles borrowed from another culture; and, because they see their lives as remote and insignificant in relation to "the great world," they see their own actions as clownish. Estrangement takes on a tragic-comic stature in A House for Mr. Biswas, where the main character is acutely aware of his displacement, and this awareness is the cause of his

suffering. Naipaul's travel writings are also marked by this anguish over displacement, and his later autobiographical writings can be seen as an attempt to "place" himself securely in the world.

Naipaul shows us how through their unique place in history colonials come to embody a modern, universal sense of rootlessness. The colonial West Indian, as Naipaul depicts him, is a product of upheaval. His life in the colonial setting is a brief pause or interlude between dark, amnesiac journeys. He has come from India and Africa and Europe and lost his connection to these ancestral places, and he sees himself as a castaway, abandoned and powerless in the new world. Because he is rootless, the colonial sees his setting as unreal and at times threatening. No place provides solace because the colonial carries his history of upheaval with him everywhere he goes. Trinidad, India, and Africa are landscapes which only serve to remind Naipaul and his characters of their alienation.

The colonial and postcolonial societies of Naipaul's writing are "half-formed" societies which he says "continuously made and unmade themselves." Curiously, these "half-formed" societies and landscapes, which other writers see as new and prelapsarian and as providing possibilities for creating and naming, are seen by Naipaul as a wasteland. Derek Walcott writes in Another Life: "We were

blessed with a virginal unpainted world / With Adam's task of giving things their names." Naipaul writes in The Enigma of Arrival: "The history I carried with me ... had sent me into the world with a sense of glory dead." Disorder, ruin, and futility are the features of Naipaul's wasteland settings, and his characters are men and women who have been wounded by history.

For Naipaul, England, the mother country, is the antithesis of colonial disorder. His relationship to England is reminiscent of Eliot's, a writer who also turned to England out of a deeply felt need for tradition and order. And like Eliot, Naipaul's wasteland vision is a subjective response to a fragmented world of lost or broken traditions.

Naipaul's work is a personal response to the upheavals of roughly a hundred years of colonial history, beginning with his grandparents' journey from India to Trinidad, through to the end of colonialism and continuing up to the present postcolonial time. He has said that "a writer [can] not be separated from his society," and he has exposed his own life in his writing: his insecurities, fears, and his colonial West Indian sense of displacement. That Naipaul is tied to his colonial past does not make him an anachronism in the postcolonial era. Although his writing is a response to his history, it transcends history in being primarily concerned with that "internal adventure of anxieties," the

psychological aspects of displacement. The powerful hold that his native background has on his vision, and the fact that this background is also the source of his rootlessness puts Naipaul in a complex position, a position which has become the focus of his writing. In the story "One Out of Many" in In A Free State, the main character says, "My strength is that I am a stranger (IFS, 57)." The colonial experience, the experience of being peripheral to "the great world," ultimately compels one to define oneself as a "stranger," and to be perpetually faced with the paradox of being confined in a free state.

[1] "The South Bank Show -- V. S. Naipaul," London Television. Interview by Melvin Bragg, March 8, 1987.

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