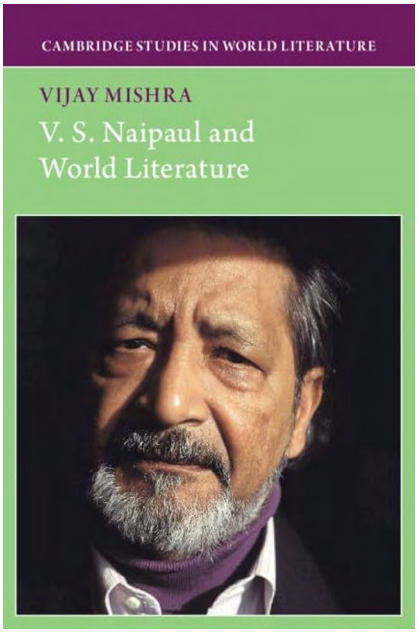

Vijay Mishra, *V. S. Naipaul and World Literature*

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Nivedita Misra

V. S. Naipaul, once a key figure in postcolonial criticism, was often associated with the theme of displacement, but more recently Naipaul's work has gained renewed attention as a new generation of critics have re-examined his early life in Trinidad as foundational to his literary contributions.[1] Vijay Mishra's latest book on Naipaul, *V. S. Naipaul and World Literature*, is a valuable addition, as it reads him from the perspective of diasporic poetics, decoding his place in world literature. Mishra argues that world literature's challenge is to ground its universality and humanism outside the Eurocentric traditions from which it originated. In his context, Naipaul's work stands out, as it skilfully avoids the traps of nationalist or exclusionary nativist writing, a feat largely attributed to his unique background. Born in Trinidad to East Indian descendants of indentured labourers brought to work on British sugar cane plantations, Naipaul's heritage profoundly shaped his writing. Mishra sees Naipaul's contribution to world literature in his ability to document his own development as a writer, particularly through his commitment to the aesthetics of writing itself. This commitment allowed Naipaul, as he himself puts it, to "claim the English language but not its tradition" ("Jasmine" 26). By writing about Trinidadians in Trinidad, Naipaul, as Mishra argues, expanded the literary canon and challenged its exclusivity.

Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* has inspired a range of postcolonial writers, largely because of its portrayal of an individual's desire for homeownership, deeply rooted in the Indo-Trinidadian social imagination. Mishra explains this success, noting that the novel avoids a narrative of victimization or retribution, "offer[ing] instead a drama of lived experiences" (*V. S. Naipaul* 73). Naipaul's achievement is significant because he expands upon

Enlightenment values by presenting lives that had never been explored in novels. His accomplishment is even greater because he was among the first writers to disconnect Englishness from the empire and imperialism, demonstrating that Englishness was "a performative act that anyone could master" (94). While Homi K. Bhabha defined this as colonial mimicry, Mishra shifts the focus to the act itself, noting that Naipaul not only exemplified this process but also recorded his evolution as a writer, repeatedly reflecting on and reinterpreting the stories he told.

Mishra's monograph begins with a personal reflection on how Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*—which he describes elsewhere as an "absent epic" of the plantation Indian diaspora (Mishra, *Literature* 94)—resonated with his own experiences in Fiji and beyond. Mishra was born in Fiji, another colonial state like Trinidad, where Indians were indentured to work on sugar cane plantations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Like Naipaul, who studied at Oxford, Mishra attended Victoria University of Wellington. The parallels in their life paths evoke the familiar sense of embarrassment that young adults often feel when adjusting to new environments. Later, Mishra recalls reading parts of *A House for Mr. Biswas* to his mother, who was deeply moved by Naipaul's portrayal of post-indenture life in Trinidad. By starting with these personal reflections, Mishra sets himself apart from other postcolonial critics, as his engagement with Naipaul's work is deeply personal. Naipaul's early novels, reflecting a background similar to Mishra's own in Fiji, shape Mishra's understanding of diaspora poetics.

Mishra has previously engaged with Naipaul's work and defined diaspora poetics emerging from his early writings as follows: "the experience of indenture is given artistic form in his works and . . . the artistic documentation of the effects of indenture history is part of their internal structure" ("(B)ordering Naipaul" 215). He draws on Naipaul's non-fiction to illuminate and analyse his fictional works. Mishra's critical approach combines thematic analysis with a central focus on defining Naipaul's place in world literature. Naipaul argued that understanding his early life was essential because genocide and slavery shaped the distorted New World inherited by Indians in Trinidad. Rather than perpetuating a postcolonial order, he focused on documenting the legacies of indentured labourers, preserving their adaptation strategies and way of life that was quickly vanishing before his very eyes. In doing so, he transformed Trinidad and its colonial relics into art. The memory of that first journey from India, though distant, was never far from Naipaul's consciousness as he later travelled between England and Trinidad: "Yet every journey home and every journey back to England was to qualify the one that had gone before, one response overlaying the other" (*Enigma* 161). Each journey, however, carried a sense of finality. Naipaul, like many of his contemporaries, bridged the gaps among Trinidad, his fragmented Indian diasporic cultural identity, and education in the English system.

Mishra's book is organized thematically into six chapters, each addressing different aspects of Naipaul's work: his aesthetic ideology, his use of the English language, his Trinidadian roots, his reinterpretation of colonial histories, and his travels across Africa, India, and the Islamic world. The first three chapters focus on establishing Naipaul's place in world literature and defining the context in which he wrote. The last three chapters examine how Naipaul engaged with the histories of the formerly colonized. Mishra defines Naipaul's aesthetic ideology as "a poetic, a theoretical enterprise in and of itself, that reads the literary world as an aesthetic totality" (*V. S. Naipaul* 14). He argues that by embracing this ideology, Naipaul challenged the British literary canon while endorsing its humanistic universality. Through a close reading of Naipaul's *A Writer's People*, the essay "Reading and Writing," and his Nobel acceptance speech, Mishra traces the evolution of Naipaul's aesthetics, suggesting that Naipaul's writing was intuitive, with the act of writing itself becoming a form of knowledge. Naipaul both accepted and defied the legacy of the Enlightenment and empire, often working beyond the received knowledge found in universities and social institutions to uncover a deeper truth, one that exists outside those structures, "as a glow brings out a haze" (Conrad 7). Influenced by Joseph Conrad, Naipaul—and now Mishra—moves away from conventional knowledge, emphasizing lived experience instead. Thus, Mishra resolves whether to read Naipaul as anti-colonial or as a collaborator, arguing that "complicity with the imperialist agenda worked alongside outright opposition to it" (*V. S. Naipaul* 8), with Naipaul endorsing Enlightenment principles while exposing colonial violence and suppression. Through this, Naipaul establishes his place in world literature, articulating universal humanitarian values that transcend geographical boundaries.

Mishra argues that while Conrad significantly influenced Naipaul in his writings about Africa, Naipaul neither endorsed colonial repression nor supported the postcolonial leadership of African countries. In his analysis, Mishra draws on multiple cultural registers, such as the Buddha and Friedrich Nietzsche, to explore Naipaul's use of the term *nihilism* in relation to Africa. Naipaul highlights both the positive and negative associations of nihilism, yet his stance remains ambiguous, as he shifts his focus away from politics towards achieving an aesthetic totality in his writing. Mishra regards *A Bend in the River* as Naipaul's second masterpiece, with Naipaul's vision shaping Salim's narrative. Despite the strong character portrayals of Zabeth and her son Ferdinand, Mishra critiques Naipaul for not addressing "colonialism's failure to complete the project of modernity" (*V. S. Naipaul* 154). Even in *The Masque of Africa*, Naipaul's last published book, Mishra argues that Naipaul fails to provide a "theory of African belief, its inner structures, and [how] rituals enact myths that have their own rational underpinnings, their 'pre-scientific' explanatory systems" (208). Mishra criticizes Naipaul for using the aesthetic to play a redemptive role instead of directly engaging with the ethical, moral, and political responsibilities in his writings on Africa.

Mishra's unique contribution lies in his inclusion of Hindu influences alongside European ones in his analysis of Naipaul's work. Drawing from his own experience as a

descendant of Indian indentured labourers in Fiji and his familiarity with the syllabi at Oxford University, Mishra invokes a diverse range of influences. He incorporates Indian classics and Hindu philosophers alongside European thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his detailed analyses of Naipaul's writings. This synthesis of diverse influences explains why Naipaul's work can be read as that of a world writer, shaped by a broad spectrum of ideas and accessible to a diverse audience. Building on this argument, Mishra reads Naipaul through his study of Sanskrit, offering a fresh perspective in his analysis of Naipaul's use of the middle voice in *An Area of Darkness* and the concept of "stilled drama," or *sthayi-natya*, in *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. While the former serves as a journey of self-discovery for Naipaul, the latter text presents India through a series of images placed in succession to form a whole. Although references to Hindu texts appear sporadically throughout Naipaul's works, Mishra does not attempt to build a singular argument regarding the extent of their influence. This is a deliberate choice, as Mishra's approach—recognizing and placing these influences alongside European ones without establishing a hierarchical structure—dislodges traditional literary genealogies. In doing so, Mishra effectively demonstrates how local traditions helped shape Naipaul's intuitive, independent development of his own aesthetic ideology.

While many critics have argued that Naipaul's later fiction fails to live up to the quality of his earlier works, Mishra links the decline of Naipaul's genius to the death of his first wife, Patricia. She was not only his first and most intimate critic, but she also read all his typescripts and was a profound assistant in his writing process. Although Mishra does not shy away from analysing Naipaul's later books, he believes that Naipaul's post-1996 writing lacks the same depth. He describes these later works as "disjointed, self-serving, and aimless" (*V. S. Naipaul* 204) and "like floating debris" (207), suggesting they were written from earlier notes rather than representing a fully realized vision. Mishra draws on draft manuscripts, letters, and Patricia Naipaul's notebooks, housed in the Naipaul Archive at the McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa, as key sources for analysing Naipaul's development as a writer. His study offers a fresh perspective by providing access to the Tulsa archives, exploring the wide range of influences on Naipaul's work and highlighting the significance of his writings for decolonized postcolonial readers and writers.

Notes

[1] Sanjay Krishnan's *V. S. Naipaul's Journeys* examines how Naipaul's first journey from Trinidad to England defined his writings. William Ghosh's *V. S. Naipaul, Caribbean Writing, and Caribbean Thought* places Naipaul in a Caribbean intellectual tradition, while Nivedita Misra's *V. S. Naipaul of Trinidad* looks at how Naipaul saw Trinidad and how Naipaul was received in Trinidad.

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