

Coetzee's Evaluation of Naipaul

Quazi Mostain Billah

In this paper I have tried to examine how far the characters in V.S. Naipaul's two early works--his novel *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) and travel memoir *An Area Of Darkness* (1964) bear out Coetzee's comment that Naipaul's works lack "the human side". In the November 1, 2001 issue of the *New York Review of Books* J. M. Coetzee published a review of Naipaul's latest novel *Half a Life* (2001), where in addition to reviewing the piece he offers a general estimate of Naipaul as a writer. Coetzee suggests that Naipaul's writings lack "the human side." What I have argued in this paper is that Coetzee's assessment of Naipaul is not unfair. The absence of "the human side" can be felt not only in his later works, but in earlier ones, too. I have further argued that this lack of sympathy derives from Naipaul's 'diasporic' situation.

A few of Naipaul scholars have also pointed out the lack that Coetzee has spoken about. For example, Manjit Inder Singh in a book on Naipaul says, "Nowhere to my mind, except in *A House for Mr Biswas* does Naipaul plunge deep into a reciprocity or empathy towards the individual or collective human experience, howsoever fragmented" (90). But not all Naipaul scholars share this view. Dennis Potter wrote in *The Times*, "Naipaul is 'ours' in the finest sense of all---that where the pronoun is universal. Simply human."1 Instead of lacking the human, in Potter's opinion, he upholds it. In view of these conflicting opinions, it is worthwhile to examine whether Naipaul's works evince any lack of 'the human side' as it may help us have one more perspective on him as a writer.

So far, Naipaul has written twenty-four books of which twelve are novels. Though he has written travel memoirs, essays, short stories, he began his career by writing a character sketch, *Miguel Street* followed immediately by a novel, *The Mystic Masseur* which got the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize. He has won almost all the prizes awarded to novelists in the English language; he has also been awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. But Coetzee feels that novels are not his

principal contribution to the English language. He notes, "Naipaul's principal legacy to English letters" is a "mixed mode" in which "historical reportage and social analysis flow into and out of autobiographically colored fiction travel memoir. . ." (10).

In Coetzee's opinion Naipaul did not attempt to write pure novels. His belief is based on Naipaul's reflections about the development of the novel. Referring to Naipaul's appraisal of the status of novel in his times, Coetzee writes :

In his view the novel as a vehicle for creative energies reached its high point in the nineteenth century; to write impeccably crafted novels in our day is to indulge in antiquarianism. Given his own achievements in pioneering an alternative, fluid, semifictional form, this is a view worth taking seriously. (10)

Two points clearly emerge from Coetzee's comment : first, for writing Naipaul created a new form, and secondly, he did not try to write novels adopting the nineteenth century form. Instead, he devised an alternative form, which Coetzee has named, "a mixed mode".

What subject is most suitable for this "mixed mode"? Coetzee has answered that, too. He says, "Only after a decade long labor of writing did he finally come to the Proustian realization that he had known his true subject was himself and his efforts, as a colonial raised in a culture that did not (he was told) belong to him and without (he was told) a history to find a way in the world" (10). Naturally, the question that arises is how successfully Naipaul has used this form in dealing with his subject- "himself". Coetzee extends a guarded approval to Naipaul as a writer. He notices a loss characterizing his work. He observes:

What was lost, in the course of his labor of self-construction, was the other side of life, the human side. *Half a Life* is the story (one among several) one can imagine where Naipaul might have gone if, having exhausted his first fund of memories, he had, instead of secluding himself with his typewriter, followed his heart. (10)

Other Naipaul scholars have also pointed out that Naipaul's works were deeply influenced by his own life. For example, Bibhu Padhi begins an essay on Naipaul stating:

In one of his recent articles, George Woodcock points out in clear-cut terms something about V.S. Naipaul that earlier critics had only implied or guessed; it is the fact of the novelist's autobiography continually influencing his writing, even during those times when he is writing about nonpersonal matters. (455)

However, he does not accuse Naipaul of neglecting "the human side," though he, too, points out how dominant the biographical element was for Naipaul.

Coetzee's comment about the loss of "the human side" in Naipaul's works proceeds from the general belief that writers, usually significant ones, use both head and heart for creative work. In fact, it is commonly believed that the drying up of one or the absence of one of these often affects the creative process itself. There are numerous touching works on this theme. But the composition of twenty-four books over a period of forty-six years indicates that the flow of Naipaul's creativity was not hampered by any supposed lack of the fusion of head and heart. However, it can be inferred from Coetzee's observations that since Naipaul did not follow his heart in his writing, he obviously followed his head, the other faculty for creative work. Therefore, he can be called a cerebral writer. I now want to examine whether we see any possible lack of "the human side" in his two early works mentioned above.

Ideally, to justify Coetzee's comment I should have looked into as many works of Naipaul as possible. But that would require a longer space than this paper can afford. Considering that limitation, I have selected only two works--his first novel and a travel memoir as these belong to the two genres that Naipaul used mostly and, therefore, can be considered representative of his art. Moreover, both possess elements of what Coetzee calls "mixed form"; biography, reportage and social analysis are co-present in them. I have chosen his two early works for another reason, too. Coetzee complains of the lack of "the human side" while commenting about his latest novel. So, one would like to find out whether his early works also suffer from any lack of "the human side." By resolving that question we will also be able to determine whether this loss was accidental or has always characterized his work, even from the beginning of his career as a writer.

First, I have considered the characters from *The Mystic Masseur*. In spite of its being called "an apprentice piece" even by the author

himself, it received sufficient critical acclaim and won a major literary award. The plot revolves round the rise of Ganesh, the protagonist of the novel.

There is a narrator in the story who combining his brief firsthand encounter with Ganesh and somewhat archival research constructs the story of Ganesh's life. The setting of the novel is Trinidad and his forefathers came to Trinidad from India as indentured laborers. The journey of his forefathers to Trinidad was the result of a design by the colonial master, the British to throw around people in places and circumstances that were alien to them. The goals were to secure their own political hegemony and advance economic prosperity. Naipaul thought poorly of the place and in writing about the lot of the Indian migrants wrote :

A peasant-minded, money minded community spiritually static because cut off from its roots, its religion reduced to rites without philosophy, set in a materialist colonial society, a combination of historical accidents and national temperament has turned the Trinidad Indian into a complete colonial, even more Philistine than the white. (89)

Ganesh was born in a country and into circumstances to which his family had not yet been properly adjusted. His father sent him to school following an empty ritual. The expectation was that eventually he would be able to steer the course of his life and carve for himself a place in this "philistine" condition. After finishing school where the divide among the races was sharp and Ganesh's attempt at social integration by anglicizing his name failed, Ganesh refuses to return home. He becomes a schoolteacher, but gives it up, as he cannot accept the working condition, though it seemed that he had adjusted to it quite well. The refusal to comply with his father's demand to return home and marry, and later giving up the school job make the early Ganesh something of a rebel, but the later Ganesh lacks any spirit of rebellion. His life comprises trickery and manipulation. He returns home after his father's death and his life begins to move in a new direction.

He takes one decision after another weighing each one carefully with his mind fixed on milking maximum benefit from opportunities at

hand. He marries Ramlogan's daughter Leela and moves to a new house in a new place and first starts to work as a masseur, though "masseurs were ten a penny." In marrying Leela he squeezes as much money and property as possible out of Ramlogan. Realizing that he was not making any progress as a masseur, he begins toying with the idea of writing books. He wrote several books, but his first success came as a mystic. He begins to cure people and his name spreads, bringing in a steady flow of cash. Ganesh becomes a success. A mystic and an author, Ganesh is set to acquire further plumes. He joins politics and gets elected to the parliament. In the beginning he fights to advance the interest of the people, but following a confrontation with agitating black laborers he does an "about-face" and sides with the British and is made an MBE. Ganesh's journey is complete. Though it looks like another tale of success from rags to riches, it is laden with social and political layers. Money is important; so is the colonial underpinning of the rise to fame. Commenting on Ganesh's "farcical upward journey." Singh writes:

Ganesh, a rank outsider to politics and an East-Indian post-indenture survivor, much like the Biswas (in purely literary sense), symbolizes the Indian's art of aggrandizing the colonial powers, at whatever price. The result is unbelievable: from Ganesh Ramsumair to G. Ramsy Muir; from Fuente Grove to London, the journey of mimicry is also a journey from peasant anonymity to metropolitan 'recognition' (98).

Naipaul tells the story of Ganesh's rise with detachment and wry humor.

Who are the fellow travelers in Ganesh's journey up the social ladder? They are not exactly his partners, but are affected by the event of his rise and receive their dividends according to their respective roles. Some are rewarded, and some are deprived. There is his wife Leela who benefits from Ganesh's rise though she fails to bear him any children. There are a few other characters, like Ramlogan, his father-in-law, an arch manipulator of money, friend and counselor Beharry and his wife, his political opponent, his belching aunt and several others. But none of them is as significant as Ganesh is. The novel does not swirl with a huge gallery of portraits, and the few that we find in the novel occupy what can be called only minor roles. Now, the question is whether the characters possess "the human side."

It would be useful to clarify a possible meaning of "the human side" at this point. Coetzee has not provided any clear definition or explanation of it. As he has called it "the other side," of Naipaul's project of "self-construction" as a writer, it can be assumed that by "the human side" he meant matters of the heart. To Naipaul, Coetzee felt, the head was more important than the heart and it can be assumed that "the human side" implies matters of the heart. In the absence of any separate discussion of the idea it can be concluded that Coetzee does not mean anything too subtle or complex by "the human side." He used it in its obvious sense. "The human side" means being endowed with the usual human attributes, like possessing feelings, emotions, etc. and being capable of making rational choices. To be more precise, the possession of "the human side" makes the characters look like living human beings made of real human flesh and blood, not figures representing certain abstract virtues or vices that a writer breathes into them.

A perfect example of what Coetzee means by "the human side" may be the character of Michael K in his novel *Life & Times of Michael K*. Though scholars have traced allegorical designs in the work and have compared it to Kafka's novel *The Trial* having K's namesake as its protagonist, it "is the story of a man caught up in a war beyond his understanding, but determined to live his life, however minimally, on his own terms" (2). K is mentally demented, but in spite of his intellectual limitations he resists the forces that try to control his life. He holds his head high as heroes do and his tale of resistance, anguish and wonderful vision wins our love, respect and recognition. His oppressors could not strip him of his humanity and he carries "the astonishing power to make the wilderness bloom" (3). In a society divided by the evils of apartheid K shows what it is like being a human being. Naipaul has written about another society that is also characterized by the curse of racial divide and evils of colonialism. But how far do his characters, particularly Ganesh and his friends and foes, represent human attributes? To ask more specifically, do they embody "the human side" in Coetzian sense?

The presence of the usual human emotions is almost non-existent in the account of Trinidadian life that Naipaul has narrated in *The Mystic Masseur*. The characters of the novel live in what Naipaul called a "peasant-minded, money-minded" spiritually static community and their chief aim in life is social establishment. As a result, they became more "philistine than" their colonial masters. In a "materialist colonial

society", to reach their goal, people, as Naipaul has shown, turn into either tricksters or badjohns or confidence men. The confidence man, in particular, makes himself a mimic to thrive in this kind of colonial condition and Ganesh,

'[A] B-grade confidence man' (Mann 469) is the first example of a series of Naipaulian portraits of mimic men. Mann concludes, 'The mystic masseur turned colonial statesman, the petty trickster transformed into a corrupt politician, has become the supreme mimic man' (470).

Though the other characters in the novel do not hold the importance that Ganesh does, they share his materialistic ambition and are driven by the same craze for success. None of them appeals to us by their humanity, even in their defeat. There is hardly any display of love or affection or sorrow by any of the characters; they are all wedded to one interest in life: success. Even Ganesh is never bothered that his wife will not bear him any child. He resigns to it because the value of life for him lies elsewhere. Money and success is more important than "the other side of life," such as love or affection. Even, there is rarely a moment in the novel that shows Ganesh's love or affection for his wife. On the contrary, it looks like that they have just accepted the roles of husband and wife to secure their material ambition. Considering the absence of usual human passion or emotion even in an early work, one would agree with Coetzee that Naipaul's works, in general, lack "the human side."

However, Mann holds a different view about the humanity of Naipaul's characters in *The Mystic Masseur*. He notes :

Impatient of such mimicry, Naipaul as controlling author nevertheless evinces a measure of sympathy for his characters in *The Mystic Masseur*, portraying them as possessing a genuine core beneath their imitation and trickery. Beharry, whose earnings skyrocket as Ganesh's clientele increases, is truly fond of Ganesh. The wily and corrupt shopkeeper Ramlogan is ultimately a lonely person, abandoned by his daughters, set upon periodically by Ganesh. And Leela, culpable as she is in her exploitative business ventures of the restaurant and taxis and in her upper-class affections, shares an authentic relationship with Ganesh is one of the rarer successful marriages in Naipaul's fiction. (474)

It is no doubt that there are a few moments in the novel that bring out the humanity of the characters, but calling the Ganesh-Leela relationship an "authentic" one is carrying the point too far. How can relationship be authentic if it is based not on love and affection but on mutual support of interest?

Though Mann calls Ganesh a "supreme mimic man," he thinks Naipaul has not made him a thorough rogue. He argues that despite his "mimicry and opportunism, he manages to win reader's sympathy" (474). To support his view he notes, "Ganesh is ultimately presented as both villain and hero, mimicker and genuine being, a confidence man who yet demonstrates admirable human traits, in short a problematical antihero" (474). As Ganesh's exonerating qualities, he mentions his conscience, innocence and concern for others. As his other redeeming virtue, he writes, "As Ganesh raises his mimicry to art, he establishes the most compelling category of role-playing in Naipaul's canon--the mimic man as artist" (476). According to Mann there is yet another level in which the figure of Ganesh draws our admiration. The story also recounts how the artist behaves as a trickster. Mann writes,

As controlling author, Naipaul, as well as being his critic, becomes an alter ego for Ganesh, his mystic masseur. Naipaul's underlying delight in the character communicates itself to the reader, who finds himself relishing the mix of naivete and charlatanism, simplicity and artfulness, genuineness and duplicity, hailing Ganesh as a hero because of rather than despite his trickery. (476)

So, in the end it is "trickery" whether as a man or as an artist that distinguishes Ganesh. But does it endow him with "the human side" that Coetzee misses in Naipaul's work? After all, can a trickster command a reader's sympathy? Or for that matter, do any of the other portraits appeal to the reader's emotion or feeling?

I think the answer is in the negative. Whether "the lack of human side" makes Naipaul a great writer or not is a different issue. It is evident from Naipaul's career as a writer that "the human side" did not interest him when he began his search for a suitable subject. His career began with three works on the life in Trinidad and his themes were "colonial uprooting, dereliction and illiteracy (and) . . . post-colonial political hollowness and corruption . . ." (Singh 89). With the end of the

Trinidad phase in 1967, his themes become "politics and the travails of immigration; the third world politico-racial imbroglio replicated in other nations and societies . . . and his own complex placement as a writer" (Singh 89). Commenting on the change of theme and tone in Naipaul's writing Gottfried has observed:

The tone and mockery, in these early books appears to lack the deeper and more humane sympathy of later works; they are a young man's books, brightly funny, intelligent, and marked by the lucidity of thought and style that was to remain one of his major characteristics. (440)

The book he must have in mind while making the comment is *A House for Mr Biswas*, which follows a different style. Gottfried considers it Naipaul's "epic novel, densely populated, rich in variety and felt life, full of humor, boiling with vitality, and in the end powerfully tragic" (441). But this work is an exception in Naipaul oeuvre; he never produced another work comparable to its human content.

To be a writer one needs talent and Naipaul also has acknowledged the importance of talent for a writer. While discussing his career as a writer he notes: "The writer begins with his talent, finds confidence in his talent, but then discovers that it is not enough, that in a society as deformed as ours, by the exercise of his talent he had set himself adrift" (Naipaul, *Overcrowded* 22). As he floated along geographically and intellectually, he used his talent to expose "the colonial cringe, the mimicry and the fraud" of post-colonial societies. Without a fixed home or a country Naipaul was set adrift as a writer. Reflecting on his choice of theme Naipaul says, "The people I saw were little people who were mimicking upper-class respectability. They had been slaves and you can't write about that in the way that Tolstoy wrote about even his backward society, for his society, was whole and the one I knew was not."² I think when he realized that he could not write like a Tolstoy, he decided to follow a Jonathan Swift instead, exploiting irony and satire. The materials he selected to write upon could be handled well in the satirical mode. He notes: "The most exquisite gifts of irony and perhaps malice would be required to keep the characters from slipping into an unremarkable mid-Atlantic whiteness." However, he employs it quite carefully. "The gifts required, of subtlety and brutality, can grow only out of mature literature . . ." (Naipaul, *Middle Passage* 75). In fact his literature, particularly his portraits are products of what can be

called his intellectual "brutality." There is hardly a Naipaul portrait that endears himself to the readers by his human warmth or dilemma. He created them as if only to mock at them.

Naipaul's use of satire is a debated subject; the judgements are varied. He has been both admired and criticized for the way he has handled satire. Long ago George Lamming commented, "he can't move beyond a castrated satire." He has also been compared to Johnson and Dryden for the use of satire. Mann thinks that Naipaul is not "contemptuous of his subject matter" and reveals "a lively and grotesque imagination" in dealing with his characters. Surveying the different opinions on Naipaul's use of satire Mann writes: "Naipaul's censure takes the form of what he terms 'the recognition of difference' between classes, castes, even races, and of the direct vision and the compassion of a Chekhov or a Dickens." It is out of this direct or largest vision', he says in his essay:

"The Documentary Heresy," that true satire grows, a satire that is not "compounded of anger and fear, which exalt what they seek to diminish," but of concern and honesty, which expose vice, sometimes subtly and sometimes brutally, to provoke people to reform themselves. (483)

Furthermore, Mann notes that Naipaul's early works "bear testimony to his skill at teaching without dogmatizing, portraying character without damning, and amusing while stirring the readers' humanity." He thinks Naipaul has succeeded in his early works in transcending "national boundaries" and has produced "documents on the condition of life in all developing lands" (485).

Naipaul's criticism of his subjects, specially, the third world scenario is not undeserved. After All, who will accept a trickster or a confidence man as a social hero? But it is figures of this kind that have thrived in political conundrum of colonial societies and need to be exposed. Naipaul's criticism of the 'picaresque society' and its products is justified. There was no remission in his criticism when he recorded his impressions about his first visit to India. *An Area of Darkness* also begins with his impatience of colonial mimicry. As he moves around, real India unfolds itself deepening his disgust and disillusionment.

What picture of India does he create? It was very different from the picture that he had nourished since his childhood. The colonial hangover was visible everywhere. Naipaul writes: "In the faded hotel, full, one felt, of memories of the Raj, there was a foreshadowing of the caste system" (11). The dress, the manner and the buildings all bore signs of colonial mimicry. A man from Andhra makes him think of "the possibility of an evolution downward, wasted body to wasted body, Nature mocking herself, incapable of remission. Compassion and pity did not answer; they were refinements of hope. Fear was what I felt" (45). The fear and disgust moved him to produce the following piece of sonorous invective on India:

Indians defecate everywhere. They defecate, mostly, beside the railway tracks. But they also defecate on the beaches; They defecate on the hills; they defecate on the river banks; they defecate on the streets; they never look for cover. (70)

Naipaul does not forget to mention that even this ugly habit has poetic defenders. He records with disgust the defense by the poet that "nothing was as poetic as squatting on a river bank at dawn" (70). I wonder whether any other travelogue on India is as vituperative as Naipaul's is. It's not only India that he is angry with; the 'East', in general, draws his ire throughout *An Area of Darkness*.

Travel memoirs are about people and places and the writer does not create figures as much as he records them. The figures he writes about are usually the ones that capture his imagination. During his first trip to India Naipaul spent a good chunk of his time in Kashmir and he developed a relatively longer relationship with a figure he calls Aziz. The name rings a bell, reminding one of another figure having the same name in another famous book on India, Forster's *A Passage to India*. But do they bear any comparison? Hardly any; Naipaul's Aziz in the end stands out because of his trickery and meanness. In spite of these follies, he develops an involvement with Aziz. He writes, "On that small island I had become involved with them all, and with none more than so with Aziz. It was an involvement which had taken me by surprise." But this "involvement" never became an easy or smooth one and he had to try hard to keep it going. He admits: "So in my relations with him, I alternated between bullying and bribing; and he handled both" (11). The relationship hardly shows any warmth of human feeling. He rarely notices anything admirable or redeeming anywhere in India. The tone

of mockery and satire prevails throughout *An Area of Darkness*. It turns into another portrait of 'colonial cringe and mimicry'.

I think this eye for the pettiness has dehumanized his portrayal of people and places both in Trinidad and India. As he scanned his subject around him from his "magisterial authorial stance" (Coetzee, "Razor's Edge" 10) everything looked puny and ridiculous to him. He rarely found anything admirable or redeeming about the people or the places he wrote about. The compassion that is visible in *A House for Mr Biswas* has special reasons. It is an autobiographical work and contains an account of his father and family and himself. He certainly did not want to judge his father the way he judged others. Moreover, Mohan's struggles are genuine and draw sympathy.

Coetzee does not exaggerate when he mentions that Naipaul's principal concern as a writer is "self-construction." He is a writer without a home or a country and is an example of "diasporic" writer. It is through his writing he has tried to carve a place for himself in the larger world. Trapped as he was by his condition as a "diasporic," he did not try to come out of it. It has been observed that the 'diasporic situation' can provide bonding of "culture, literature or history," but "it can (also) place one in a situation of exclusion in the metropolitan zones of the West" (Singh 61). As a "diasporic" writer moves in a climate of "mobile and multiple identities," he assumes "a new stability, self-assurance and quietism." Singh locates Naipaul in the West Indian 'diasporic' map, and feels that he opted for "quietism." Singh thinks that "this 'quietism' indicates one's coming to terms with unfixed modes of existence and professions; to opportunities the First World offers through attractive assignments, metropolitan consumerism. . ." (61).

Not all these charges are true about Naipaul as he has followed no profession other than writing. One certainly cannot accuse him of any kind of opportunism, but his bias toward the West is ever present in his thoughts and approaches to social and political issues. But though professionally fixed, he is a writer without a home and one could say a root. His center is his metropolitan consciousness and to prove his sharpness he recurrently hones it against his West Indian or Indian or African targets. The same critical spirit colors his portrait of Argentina. With regard to his depiction of Argentina, Foster writes:

It is a case study, and as such his portrayal of Argentina's politics and people, their failings and ordeals, is intended less to excite empathy or solicit judgement than it is to invite respectful acknowledgement to its author's theoretical acuity. The focus of Naipaul's analysis, then, is not Argentina's failure but his own intellectual mastery. (178)

His main object is to advance himself as a writer. In fact, one could accuse him of using art as a trickery to secure his "self-construction." It appears that the "diasporic" condition has made him a homeless, rootless writer and a trickster as an artist.

But Coetzee is a writer with a home and one could say has a clear identity. For example, Coetzee can be called a rooted writer in the sense that he belongs to a particular geography and writes about issues typical of it. As a South African writer he writes about the evils of apartheid. But Naipaul is more of a metropolitan writer. A typical product of "diaspora," he chose to view things from an intellectual distance. He almost never gets involved with his subject emotionally. This is the kind of loss, I think, Coetzee has in mind when he complains of 'the lack of the human side' in Naipaul's works. It can be found not only in his later works; on the contrary, it is present even in his early works. Singh has taken up this point and notes: "Ironically, this very loss and sterility in the absence of a grand subject-matter had catapulted Naipaul into international fame for being an "exotic" writer without roots and place" (Singh 91).

Naipaul's greatness as a writer cannot be contested; one can't dispute his authentic criticism of the people and politics of the developing countries whether they are located in Asia or Africa or Latin America. But at the same time one has to admit that he did not create any figure comparable to Coetzee's Michael K. Therefore, one can say that Naipaul is predominantly a chronicler of the political conundrum that most of the third world countries have become. The landscape he loves to look into is a bleak one with little prospect of regeneration and growth. Coetzee's landscape is no less blighted than Naipaul's is. Yet, his portraits are richer because of their "human side." For them hope is not dead yet and despite adversities, they try to make "the wilderness bloom."

Notes

- ¹ Quoted by Singh from Young, J.C. *Colonial Divide : Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. London : Routledge, 1995.
- ² Interview with Israel Shankar qtd. by Signh.

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