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The Invidious Sir Vidia

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When the Nobel Committee awarded its prize in literature to Trinidadian writer V.S. Naipaul this year, it lauded him as the "the greatest living writer of English prose...a literary circumnavigator, only ever really at home in himself, in his inimitable voice." But the choice of Naipaul has provoked as much controversy as any of the author's books on Islam and the Third World. Some have argued that the events of 9/11 and the current stand-off between "Islam" and "the West" tipped the committee in Naipaul's favor, as judges sought to celebrate this great champion of the West and unsparing critic of the non-Western (particularly Islamic) world. Others defend the prize as long overdue, describing Naipaul as a candid truth-teller who doesn't hesitate to puncture the liberal party line. But just exactly what does Sir Vidia (he was knighted in 1990) say about non-Western peoples?

Naipaul has won numerous accolades for his fiction and non-fiction, both of which explore the quest for identity in a post-colonial world. His probing of themes of exile, displacement and rootlessness, coupled with a keen awareness of the dangers of nationalism, have made him one of the most trenchant and elegant analysts of our increasingly borderless world. From his early autobiographical masterpiece, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, on being an East Indian in the West Indies, to *A Bend in the River*, about an East Indian shopkeeper on the Congo River, Naipaul has created unforgettable characters, deracinated people trying to find a home in teetering post-colonial societies.

It would be simple-minded to label Naipaul an Uncle Tom, a colonized immigrant who is grateful for colonialism and contemptuous of the post-colonial world. Yet while the author, born and raised in Trinidad, the child of

South Asian parents, has criticized imperialism and former colonial powers, Naipaul has reserved his most scathing critiques for the Third World — its filth, incompetence, corruption and ugliness — and its First World liberal sympathizers. If sometimes refreshing and humorous, his descriptions of Trinidad, India, and various countries throughout Africa and the Muslim world are dripping with negativity and sarcasm. He has referred to Africa as a continent of "half-made societies that seemed doomed to remain half-made" and Mobutu's Zaire as a land of "lunacy and despair."

In recent years Naipaul's harshest words have been leveled at Islam, a faith that in his *Beyond Belief: Excursions Among the Converted Peoples*, he refers to as "the most uncompromising kind of imperialism." Describing his travels through Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia, Naipaul observes that non-Arab countries that embrace Islam become "countries with an element of neurosis and nihilism" that can be "easily set on the boil." In his view, the spread of Islam is worse than colonialism. "Islam is not merely a matter of conscience. It makes imperial demands," he writes. "It has had a calamitous effect on converted peoples. To be converted you have to destroy your past, destroy your history. You have to stamp on it, you have to say 'my ancestral culture does not exist, it doesn't matter.'...this abolition of the self demanded by Muslims was worse than the similar colonial abolition of identity. It is much, much worse in fact...You cannot just say you came out of nothing."

Regarding 9/11, Naipaul said: "Religious hate, religious motivation, was the primary thing. I don't think it was because of American foreign policy. There is a passage in one of the Conrad short stories of the East Indies where the savage finds himself with his hands bare in the world, and he lets out a howl of anger. I think, in its essence, this is what is happening. The world is getting more and more out of reach of simple people who have only religion."

Not surprisingly, many Muslims see Naipaul's rhetoric as part of the problem, contributing to the gulf of misunderstanding. He is not, they note, an expert on Islam. He does not speak any of the main languages of the Islamic world (Farsi, Urdu, Arabic), and is clearly oblivious to the cultural, ideological and theological differences among various strains of Islam.

Naipaul sees no distinction between Islamic fundamentalism and any other forms of Islam. Asked recently about the difference between "nonfundamentalist Islam" and "moderate" Islam, he responded, "I think it [nonfundamentalist Islam] is a contradiction...The idea in Islam, the most important thing, is paradise. No one can be a moderate in wishing to go to paradise. The idea of a moderate state is something cooked up by politicians looking to get a few loans here and there." Many fundamentalist movements — such as those in northern Nigeria and Algeria — do aim to homogenize their societies, imposing Arabic on non-Arabs and creating a myth of origin that looks East to Arabia, obliterating local cultures and languages. But from Algeria's Berber hinterland to Zanzibar, movements are arising to resist the Arab-centered Islamism funded by extremist patrons in Arabia. In fact, the current war in Afghanistan is essentially pitting Islamist movements that look to Arabian Wahabism for support and legitimacy against an opposition seeking a more pluralist Islam.

While much has been made of Naipaul's anti-Islamic writing, his most recent novel *Half A Life* will probably revive another long-standing accusation against him — that of an anti-African bias. In that novel, a character is described as "dedicated to inter-racial sex" but says African women are "attractive" only "if you like the animal thing."

Derek Walcott, the St. Lucian Nobel laureate, once wrote that "Naipaul does not like Negroes," and that he "has a repulsion towards Negroes," positing that if Naipaul wrote as viciously about Jewish people as he does about black people, he would not get published.

In the opening pages of *The Middle Passage*, a travelogue about a journey through the West Indies, Naipaul makes the following indictment of his island of birth: "History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies.... There were only plantations, prosperity, decline, neglect: the size of islands called for nothing else." The great Caribbean historian C. L. R. James would say of Naipaul's statement: "What Vidia said about the West Indies...was very true and very important. But what he left out was twice as true and four times as important."

Talking to a journalist in 1980, Naipaul lashed out at his countrymen again: "I can't see a monkey — you can use a capital M, that's an affectionate word for the generality — reading my work.... These people [Trinidadians] live purely physical lives, which I find contemptible.... It makes them only interesting to chaps in universities who want to do compassionate studies about brutes."

In *Sir Vidia's Shadow: A Friendship Across Five Continents*, former friend Paul Theroux describes an occasion on which Naipaul judged a writing competition in Uganda. Referring to all the contestants as "infies" (short for "inferiors," his preferred term for lesser mortals), Naipaul insisted that there should be no first or second prize, only a third prize. "You are trying to give the African an importance he doesn't deserve," he told his stunned colleague when he questioned the move.

"There does indeed seem a part of Naipaul — that part of him most conscious of his own group identity as a Hindu — that is suspicious of black people when they seem members of a group opposed to his own, when they represent a political force that threatens people like him. This seems to operate most of all in his Caribbean fiction, but in an African context it comes up in relation to the harassment that the Indian mercantile community has suffered in places like Uganda," says Michael Gorra of Smith College, author of *After Empire: Scott, Naipaul and Rushdie*. "He is a figure of rage. He is not as far apart from Frantz Fanon as one commonly thinks. He has a permanent sense of fury, a hunger for justice now, and this gives him no tolerance for what in *A Bend in the River* he describes as 'Black men assuming the lies of white men' for a new injustice in response to the old one of empire. But like all great writers, that anger is itself capable of corruption and injustice of its own."

So, did the Nobel committee choose Naipaul in an attempt to discredit Islamic fundamentalism and endorse the virtues of Western civilization? Did 9/11 influence the decision? "Literature is the basis of a worldwide community," reads one Nobel committee statement, "which is obviously not based on violence or hatred, but which paves the way of mutual understanding between cultures and peoples."

But if the judges sought to affirm the West's tolerance and pluralism, Naipaul was an ill-conceived choice. His prose, however shimmering and sharp, is peppered with bigoted quips ("Africans have no culture").

Naipaul offends on other levels as well. His misogyny is legendary: he once said Indian women's long hair "encourages rape" and the bindi Hindu women wear on their forehead means "my head is empty." By all accounts he is an insufferable grump, a curmudgeon who dislikes children (his wife

tells of how recently he saw a baby in a carriage and exclaimed, "Look, look! What an ugly little brute!"), hates "all music," and is casually and proudly snobbish, stating once: "The melancholy thing about the world is that it is full of stupid and common people; and the world is run for the benefit of the stupid and common."

At a reading earlier this month at New York University, Naipaul was true to his reputation. He read racially provocative passages from his new novel, *Half A Life* ("I'm going to read a funny passage, so be prepared to laugh," he said). Then he grudgingly answered written questions from the audience. The session was vintage Naipaul, with the laureate sitting, scowling at the floor and responding in short, grumpy tones. Asked about Muslim rage, he said, "Muslims are disturbed by the technological and scientific advance of the West." About the war in Afghanistan, he said, "As Kissinger said on CNN, we cannot afford to lose this war...civilization itself is at stake... There's no place for me in Islam; I don't write for Saudi Arabia, there's no place for me in Saudi Arabia."

Then, as hundreds of people lined up to have their books signed by the newest Nobel laureate, Naipaul decided he would only sign copies of *Half A Life*. Some returned their books to the bookstand and left, irritated yet bemused by the literary world's most renowned and gifted misanthrope.

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