

V.S. NAIPAUL: NOT JUST ONE OUT OF MANY

LOCATING OUR FOREMOST WRITER IN OUR NATIONAL PSYCHE



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V.S. Naipaul immortalised his father Seepersad Naipaul in *A House for Mr Biswas* and he gave iconic stature to the Lion House in Chaguanas (pictured below) which he named in that novel, Hanuman House. He gave significance to the house on Ethel Street, St James which his father built by having Mr Biswas view it in his dying days at the end of this remarkable work of fiction as an act of creation, as a manifestation of independent identity, as an act of family love, as an assertion of will and as a symbol of national aspiration, human ambition and universal yearning.

The book was published in 1961, a year before Independence and it was immediately hailed by critics – because of its originality, its authenticity, the newness of the material for an international audience, the complexity of themes, the clash of cultures, the grandness of conception, the majestically realistic portrayal of a world never before that time created in fiction, the deft use

of varieties of the English Language, the sheer brilliance of the writing and the precision crafting of an epic West Indian novel about Trinidad with a focus on the individual struggle to be, as well as the striving of a community to become. *A House for Mr Biswas* would, before the end of the 20th century, come to be regarded as a masterpiece of fiction.

A House for Mr Biswas, the novel, achieved 50 years as a publication one year ago. Trinidad and Tobago is celebrating 50 years of nationhood this year 2012. What is the connection? Well, we gave birth and context to a Nobel prize-winning writer 30 years before the achievement of independence. Secondly, V.S. Naipaul's memory and knowledge of life in Trinidad and Tobago between 1932 and 1950 when he left for Oxford, became the source material of four novels – *Miguel Street*, *The Mystic Masseur*, *The Suffrage of Elvira* and *A House for Mr Biswas*. Pre-independence, colonial Trinidad was the rich source of stimulus for his fertile imagination. And V.S. Naipaul has acknowledged that those formative years in Trinidad became his point of reference for his way of seeing the world and how he related to the rest of the world, to write about other places and people in other lands and to write fiction located in other destinations. So when Naipaul looks at India, the eyes that are looking and discerning have been informed by his early Trinidad experience. And so it is too with Africa, Latin America, the Islamic countries and England.

Naipaul's contribution to humour in fiction is immense; his contribution to contemporary thought and ideas is significant; his contribution to the discourse on the colonial encounter both pre-independence and post-independence is without comparison; his penetrating insight into alarming tendencies in contemporary society in the age of globalisation is without parallel. His experimentation with the novel as a literary form; his commentary on the future of the novel



Photograph: Stephen Broadbridge

and his experimentation with various forms of writing has been significantly underestimated.

It is true that Naipaul is sometimes harsh on West Indian society and other societies in the developing world. Writers of fiction often rebel against their society and the world as it is. Think of James Joyce and William Faulkner or John Steinbeck or even Jean-Paul Sartre or Mario Vargas Llosa or Saul Bellow. V.S. Naipaul is no different – except that as a satirical novelist and essayist who explores the same or similar themes through both forms he can be especially biting. Mature societies do not take such criticism negatively; they seek to understand, to learn and to grow. As a society therefore, it is our responsibility to seek to attain the maturity that will allow us to rise to the challenge of locating Naipaul in context and examining him in perspective.

We may not like what Naipaul says or how he says it; we may not agree with his point of view at all. But it is important to view him as both a novelist and critical thinker even if one needs to acknowledge that even a critical thinker and creative writer can be wrong on some things. Most important of all though, as readers we need to understand and appreciate what Naipaul is thinking and the meaning of his writing before we ourselves accept his perspective, challenge it, dismiss it altogether or present an alternative point of view.

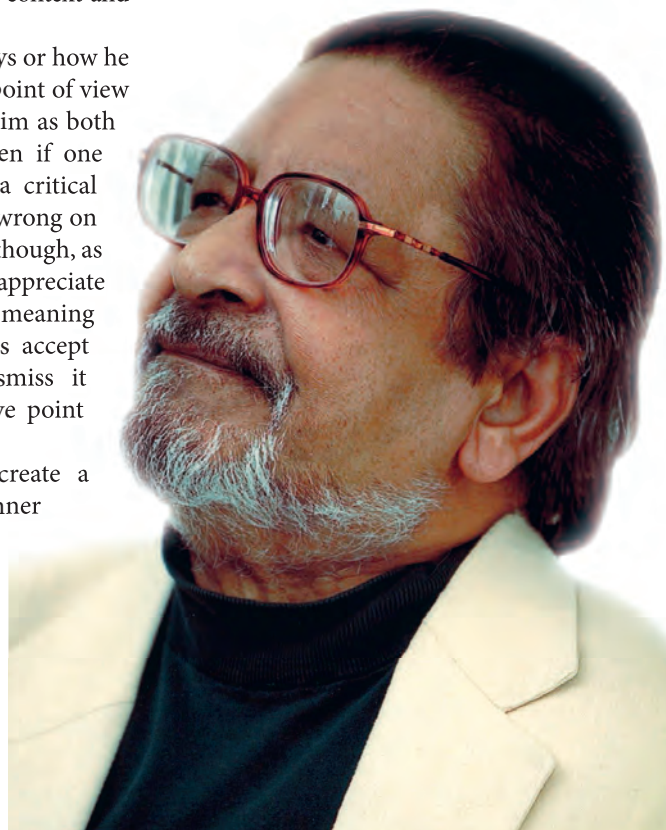
If Trinidad and Tobago can create a world writer and Nobel Prize winner in literature whose experience of Trinidad and Tobago was limited to the pre-independence experience, what more can we create and share with the world today? It is an issue worth thinking about and discussing. To turn a Naipaul statement upside down: history is built on achievement and creation,

and there is much more that we can create and achieve in Trinidad and Tobago.

We have given the world calypso, chutney and soca; we have given the world the steelpan and steel orchestras and great athletes; but we have also given the world great writers, thinkers and creative artists. V.S. Naipaul is one of them. He has done us proud and the world has taken notice and many writers at home have been inspired by what he has achieved.

Trinidad and Tobago had writers before Naipaul. And we have had many of world stature who were contemporaries of Naipaul and many more since. But V.S. Naipaul remains our outstanding example of high achievement in the world of literature. ■

If we can create a world writer and Nobel Prize winner whose experience of Trinidad and Tobago was limited to the pre-independence experience, what more can we create and share with the world today?



Opposite: The Lion House, Chaguanas.
Left: Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul