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THE DEVELOPMENT OF V. S. NAIPAUL

AS A WRITER

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BY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the themes prevalent in the novels of V. S. Naipaul and examines his development from a regional writer to one with a more universal appeal. In Chapter One an attempt is made to establish a critical background by briefly discussing the ideas revealed in his non-fictional works. Chapter One also discusses the themes of the early novels, The Mystic Masseur, The Suffrage of Elvira and Miguel Street. Chapter Two of this thesis deals with the themes of A House for Mr. Biswas and Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion. These novels are seen as representing a turning point in Naipaul's development as a writer. Chapter Three focuses on The Mimic Men and "A Flag on the Island", and sees these two works as representing a bleaker but more philosophical mood by the author. In A Free State is examined in the final Chapter of this thesis and Naipaul's effectiveness is evaluated.

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Works by Naipaul

Listed in order of first Publication:

The Mystic Masseur (1957)

The Suffrage of Elvira (1958)

Miguel Street (1959)

A House for Mr. Biswas (1961)

The Middle Passage (1962)

Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion (1963)

An Area of Darkness (1964)

The Mimic Men (1967)

A Flag on the Island (1967)

The Loss of El Dorado (1969)

In A Free State (1971)

The Overcrowded Barracoon, and other articles (1972)

(All Published by Andre Deutsch Limited, London).

INTRODUCTION

Criticism of West Indian literature is as yet in its foetal stages. At present, the most tenable argument defines West Indian literature as a tradition within a tradition, "an outgrowth and extension of the Western mode of writing".¹ This presents a situation in literature not unlike the colonial experience of the West Indian writers themselves, who are striving to find an identity for themselves and their art that is distinct from the borrowed forms of the colonial masters. Indeed, the "colonial experience" is the topic that confronts each West Indian writer and his attempt is a tenacious confrontation between himself, his inner needs and his history. The lesson he draws varies with the individual author but it is uniform in its bitter and painful intensity.

Gordon Rohlehr summarises the trend of West Indian fiction in a passage that is worth quoting:

West Indian fiction is distinctive for its intense social consciousness. Faced by a society formed through slavery and colonialism, whose values have never been defined before, the novelist in the West Indies must recreate experience and simultaneously create the standards against which such experience must be judged. . . . Criticism of West Indian fiction, like the fiction itself, has tended to be an evaluation of sociological truth, perhaps to the detriment of analysis which aims at making statements about literary merit.²

¹R. D. Hamner, V. S. Naipaul, (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1973), p. 1.

²F. G. Rohlehr, "Predestination, Frustration and Symbolic Darkness in Naipaul's A House for Mr. Biswas," Caribbean Quarterly, X, No. 1 (March, 1964), 3.

Given this pervasive trend, it would be difficult to assess the literary merit of any West Indian work of art without first considering its sociological relevance. The purpose of this thesis is to see V. S. Naipaul's fiction in its totality as a superb artistic achievement. Integral to this attempt is a consideration of his relevance to the West Indian quest for cultural identity. In The Middle Passage, Naipaul writes: "Living in a borrowed culture, the West Indian, more than most, needs writers to tell him who he is and where he stands".³

Naipaul constantly uses the colonial experience as a metaphor for documenting the larger human experience of the Absurd. In this way, he aids in the establishment of a convenient link between separate cultures, one, indeed, that aids in their mutual benefit by an enriching exchange of feelings and ideas. Mr. Naipaul has proven that West Indian literature is no longer as dependent upon nor as imitative of the Western mode of fiction that was alien to the West Indian experience. Using the established genres he has created something which is unique not only to the West Indies but to his particular sensibilities and genius. His fiction responds with sensitivity to certain compulsions that arise from the West Indian socio-historic actuality and transforms them into a universal cry of anguish.

As yet, Naipaul has not received the acclaim at home, that he has obtained abroad. Naipaul himself is acutely aware

³V. S. Naipaul, The Middle Passage, (London: André Deutsch, 1973), p. 68.

of the lack of a "home" audience:

But an artist needs to be nourished, needs an audience and a response. A writer must be supported by the knowledge that he comes from a society with which he is in dialogue.⁴

Trinidad, indeed the West Indies in general, provides too limited an audience for writing to be pursued there as a lucrative profession. This is a regrettable factor and one which is due in part to the colonial disease of self-contempt which extends even to locally produced literature. This has been historically the case as noted by Mr. Morris in his article "Some West Indian Problems of Audience".⁵ Among conscious literary adherents though, Naipaul remains a controversial figure. His air of snobbish detachment coupled with his bitter indictment of Caribbean society has alienated the average West Indian reader. The aristocratic disdain and well-bred distaste apparent in his work is not palatable to the West Indian. His brahmanical fastidiousness is alien to the West Indian spirit and remains suspect. Much of the criticism levelled against his work stems from the critics' aversion to Naipaul's personality as evidenced in his work. Much of this criticism is just but it has been allowed to colour the finer and deeper marks of genius that inform Naipaul's work.

This thesis attempts to examine the development of V. S. Naipaul from a regional writer to one whose work carries a more

⁴Israel Shenker, "V. S. Naipaul, Man Without A Society", The New York Times Book Review, (Oct. 17, 1971), p. 22.

⁵M. Morris, "Some West Indian Problems of Audience", English, XVI (Spring, 1967), 127-31.

universal appeal. An analysis will be made of his developing concern with the psychological impact of colonialism as it takes its form in rootlessness, alienation and an increasingly sombre view of man's role in an absurd universe. The intimations of grimness apparent in early works culminate in a definite transition of approach and attitude in A House for Mr. Biswas. The experience gained in the composition of this latter novel continues with increasing sophistication to the later novels which deal with more and more psychological problems faced by introverted and alienated characters in hostile landscapes. Special attention will be paid to Naipaul's use of landscape to reflect inner predilections and dilemmas faced by his characters.

Naipaul scholarship is surprisingly quite extensive although most of it has not been very impressive. Particularly helpful is the fine book by Hamner, V. S. Naipaul, which appears as one of the works in the Twayne World Series of Literature. This thesis tends toward the ideas expressed in this comprehensive study and hopes to elaborate more fully on some of them as well as to contribute other thoughts which will throw light on Naipaul's achievement. The two articles by Gordon Rohlehr, "The Ironic Approach"⁶ and "Predestination Frustration and

⁶F. G. Rohlehr, "The Ironic Approach", The Islands in Between, ed. Louis James (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 121-139.

Symbolic Darkness in Naipaul's A House for Mr. Biswas", are also particularly elucidatory as perceptive readings of Naipaul's most impressive novel, A House for Mr. Biswas.

CHAPTER ONE

A BACKGROUND AND A DISCUSSION OF THE EARLY WORKS

The peculiar problem that has to be faced by every Third-World writer is to come to terms with a heritage forged in servility and degradation. The sense of cultural exile and loss concomitant to the colonial experience is particularly poignant in the work of V. S. Naipaul. This author's obsessive quest, as evidenced both in his fiction and travel books, is for an identity - a goal that appears continuously elusive and subject to only futile pursuit, since the view the author maintains is one which sees every human endeavour as constantly betrayed by a hostile universe which remains unresponsive to the human need to find something consoling in it. Without the sense of history, of a glorious past, the view for the West Indian author is even bleaker. As an exile from his homeland, Naipaul's constant attempt is to recapture a sense of the past, to come to terms with his history, (in The Loss of El Dorado he has recently attempted to re-interpret it), and thus to engage once more in the search for an identity.

In achieving his ideal of Buddhist detachment,¹ Naipaul has unnecessarily, or so it seems, alienated himself from his West Indian audience. Yet this pose of detachment is, after

¹V. S. Naipaul, "London", The Overcrowded Barracoon and Other Articles, (London: André Deutsch, 1972), p. 16.

all, a pose and Naipaul constantly betrays himself as a bewildered, angry, intense human being crying out at his sense of loss, bemoaning a situation which cannot accommodate itself to his highest ideals.

How can the history of this West Indian futility be written? What tone shall the historian adopt? . . . The history of the islands can never be satisfactorily told. Brutality is not the only difficulty. History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies.²

Naipaul's candid indictment of Caribbean society in The Middle Passage and of India in An Area of Darkness, is proof of the exile's bewilderment at his inability to acclimatize himself to both real and mythic landscapes. In Trinidad, Naipaul's place of birth, the author is desperately out of place. His observations of squalor, deprivation and inefficiency are acute in both travel books, but the sustained impression one receives of the author is of a hysterical, nervous, ill-at-ease man, one especially who is out of touch with and embarrassed at common humanity. His final ailment is one of despair and it is significant that the last chapter of An Area of Darkness is entitled "Flight", evoking the author's desire to escape a reality with which he cannot cope.

In both books,¹¹ a contrapuntal theme of barely contained hysteria¹¹ and fear of common humanity from which the author strives to remain inviolate, is developed. It is a harsh but just criti-

²V. S. Naipaul, The Middle Passage. (London: André Deutsch, 1974), pp. 28-29.

cism levelled against Naipaul by John Hearne, who cites the fundamental weakness of The Middle Passage:

. . . people embarrass Mr. Naipaul. Caribbean people, that is. The most rigid and severe of moralists - the aesthetic Puritan - he finds man under this sky to be raw, untidy, vulgar and as yet only a pass degree student in the great examinations set by Europe, Asia and Africa. Such a man is to be doubly chastised because Mr. Naipaul is too intelligent not to recognise how many of these limitations he shares with his fellow West Indians.³

Naipaul's infallible eye for what is wrong in society, be it Indian or West Indian, is as impressive as it is formidable. It is the eye of the surgeon, clinically inspecting before it makes the fatal dissection. The air of detachment that many have noted is a discipline of scrupulous accuracy which in the desire to be exact, refines away the feeling. The intensity of analysis and the ruthlessness of perception are all the more striking as the reader comes to see these two travel books as explorations of the self by the author.

In The Middle Passage, Naipaul examines his roots in the physical and social conditions of Trinidad and explores his childhood fear of this tropical island. In An Area of Darkness, he tries to come to terms with his heritage as the son of East Indian indentured immigrants. Victim of this colonial transplantation, Naipaul is neither at home in Trinidad, in England nor finally in India. His quest for identity is aptly summarized as:

³John Hearne, "The Middle Passage", Caribbean Quarterly, VIII no.4 (Dec., 1962), 65.

. . . the agonizing experience of a homeless, rootless man without country, without a set of beliefs and values to live by. For when after this self-laceration in India he goes back to England emptiness stares him in the face and emptiness ends in despair.⁴

In his historical work, The Loss of El Dorado, Naipaul attempts to recapture the pre-British history of Trinidad and thus to examine the dereliction of Trinidadian society from its roots in history. In the quest for the mythic city of gold, El Dorado, Trinidad was used as a base, first by the Spaniard, Antonio de Berrio, and later by Sir Walter Raleigh who became contaminated by the Spanish delusion that such a city existed. The colonization of the island was conducted in a haphazard manner, impeded by the conflicting interests of settlers of varying ancestries. The island was seen only in terms of exploitative pursuits. It was used as a stepping stone by petty officials toward better positions or in the acquisition of personal fortunes, and to the detriment of the island itself. Naipaul makes note of the Machiavellian intrigues that accompanied these fortuitous rises to fortune and fame.

According to Naipaul, two stories best define the West Indian futility: the quest for El Dorado and the British attempt to overthrow Spanish rule in Latin America. It was a combination of personal ambition, lack of vision and pettiness that set Trinidad on an irreversible course of mediocrity. The discrepancy between the actual exploration with its consequent savage hunting down of the indigenous people, its other treacheries,

⁴C. D. Narasimhaiah, "Somewhere Something Has Snapped", Literary Criterion, VI No. 4 (n.d.), 90. (Cited, Hamner, p. 12).

and the insubstantial fantasy for the sake of which these horrors were perpetrated, on the other hand, adequately expresses the futility of the West Indian experience. From a history moulded by the failures of Berrio, Raleigh and later of Miranda, the idealist, Trinidad emerges in The Middle Passage as an "unimportant, uncreative, cynical place",⁵ a place with no sense of community and no dignity. The favourite Naipaulian theme extracted from the pattern of failure, for which the myth of El Dorado provides an attractive and convenient motif, is that of the frustration of desire and rootlessness:

The vision of El Dorado, hopelessly out of reach is always implicit in Naipaul's novels. In retrospect it is even possible to see that all the characters of Naipaul's novels form a long gallery of "Mimic Men" . . . of all those who achieve a fake success in their second hand world. When his characters are genuine they are inevitably failures, and not even tragic ones because there can be no tragedy in a society which, in the author's words, "denies itself heroes".⁶

The society which Naipaul condemns as uncreative and cynical has its roots in the Spanish picaroon world:

Slavery, the mixed population, the absence of national pride and the closed colonial system have to a remarkable degree re-created the attitudes of the Spanish picaroon world. This was an ugly world, a jungle, where the picaroon hero starved unless he stole, was beaten almost to death when found out, and had therefore to get in his blows first

⁵Naipaul, The Middle Passage, p. 41.

⁶Hena Maes-Jelinek, "The Myth of El Dorado in the Caribbean Novel", Journal of Commonwealth Literature, VI No. 1 (June, 1971), 113.

whenever possible; where the weak were humiliated; where the powerful never appeared and were beyond reach; where no one was allowed any dignity and everyone had to impose himself; an uncreative society, where war was the only profession.⁷

Such a society, according to Naipaul, still manifests itself in the attitudes of Trinidadians and it breeds a peculiar blend of cynicism and tolerance. Lacking dignity or any sense of moral wholeness, it accommodates itself to every human activity, ideal or base, and it looks affectionately upon "every demonstration of wit and style." ^{Naipaul, MP} Naipaul sees Trinidad as the land of the complete anarchist and natural eccentric. Deprived of adequate and authentic outlets for personal ambition, the common man resorts to the cultivation of idiosyncrasy in order to distinguish himself from the morass of failure. It is from this chaotic display of "character" that Naipaul draws material for his novels. The satirical impact of Naipaul's work is often due to the discrepancy between men's aspirations and their ineffectual attempts to achieve them.

Pervasive in the novels is the idea of a fundamental split between man and his landscape. Naipaul seems unable to relate to the squalor of the Trinidadian and Indian landscape. In India he admits his alienation from the natural scene.

The landscape was harsh and wrong. I could not relate it to myself: I was looking for the balanced rural estates of Indian Trinidad. . . . In all the striking detail of India there was nothing which I could link

⁷Naipaul, The Middle Passage, p. 73.

with my own experience of India in a small town in Trinidad.⁸

Despite this nostalgia for the closed, familiar spaces of his home country, the fear of Trinidad remains and continues to cloud the landscape in many of the later novels. If The Middle Passage was intended to be an exorcism, it clearly failed. Beelzebub, in his Trinidadian regalia, continues to haunt Naipaul, but amidst his train of horror he has brought one positive element - he has at least, induced Naipaul to recognize for once, that beauty can exist in a tropical landscape. It is with utter disbelief that the reader encounters the passage:

I often went to the country, and not only for the silence. It seemed to me that I was seeing the landscape for the first time. I had hated the sun and the unchanging seasons. I had believed that the foliage had no variety and could never understand how the word "tropical" held romance for so many. Now I was taken, by the common coconut tree, the cliché of the Caribbean . . . I had forgotten the largeness of leaves and the variety of their shapes. . . . To ride past a coconut plantation was to see a rapidly changing criss-cross of slender curved trunks, greyish white in a green gloom.⁹

This is one of the few sections which relieve Naipaul's unflattering appraisal of his homeland. It combats effectively the typical kind of morbidity and bleakness of view apparent in Naipaul's fear of humanity such as when at the beginning of An Area of Darkness he comments:

⁸Naipaul, An Area of Darkness, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 140.

⁹Naipaul, The Middle Passage, p. 61-62.

From Athens to Bombay another idea of man had defined itself by degrees, a new type of authority and subservience. The physique of Europe had melted away first into that of Africa . . . into Aryan Asia. 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 to remain what I was.¹⁰

It is the clear, sharply-defined ego of Naipaul which finally dominates the landscape of his novel and which simultaneously repels and attracts.

The early works, The Mystic Masseur (1957); The Suffrage of Elvira (1958); Miguel Street (1959): were described by Naipaul as an apprenticeship¹¹ before he was ready to undertake the composition of A House for Mr. Biswas. Of these early novels it has been said that Naipaul has given "the very smell, taste and tempo of life in the Indian locations of rural Trinidad".¹² The range of characters in these three novels is as varied as it is lengthy but it is firmly based in the concept of the picaroon society discussed in The Middle Passage, and the portrait of dereliction that this book paints of the local landscape.

¹⁰ An Area of Darkness, p. 13.

¹¹ Naipaul, "Speaking of Writing", London Times, (Jan. 2, 1964), p. 11.

¹² Gerald Mooew, "East Indians and West. The Novels of V. S. Naipaul", Black Orpheus, VII (June, 1966), 11.

In The Middle Passage, Trinidad was seen as a dusty, cynical place. This is a view complemented by the descriptions of landscape both rural and urban in the early novels. Signs of deprivation and desolation pervade almost every description of place and give the lie to the legendary island paradise of tourist brochures. Consider the description of Fuente Grove in The Mystic Masseur:

Fuente Grove was practically lost. It was so small, so remote, so wretched, it was marked only on large maps of the Government Surveyor; the Public Works Department treated it with contempt; and no other village even thought of feuding with it. You couldn't really like Fuente Grove. In the dry season the earth baked, cracked and calcined; and in the rainy season melted into mud. Always it was hot.¹³

This is the typical rural setting, as seen by Naipaul. It remains uncreative and unstimulating except to the exploitative observer, such as Harbans in The Suffrage of Elvira, who scans the landscape not for beauty's sake but in appreciation of the lucrative maintenance contracts afforded him by the impassable country roads.

Fuente Grove's pathetic attempts at festivity underscore its dereliction. At harvest time the town makes a brave show of gaiety:

The half-dozen bullock carts in the village were decorated with pink, yellow and green streamers made from crepe paper; the bullocks themselves, sad eyed as ever, wore bright

¹³Naipaul, The Mystic Masseur, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 68.

ribbons in their horns; and men, women, and children rattled the piquets of the carts and beat on pans, singing about the bounty of God. It was like the gaiety of a starving child.¹⁴

Even in the imagery, degradation prevails and conditions in the town offer no relief. Miguel Street is after all a ghetto where a growing child's greatest ambition is to emulate Eddoes who "was one of the aristocrats of the street. He drove a scavenging cart and so worked only in the morning".¹⁵

This is the landscape of the historic picaroon.

A derelict man in a derelict land; a man discovering himself, with surprise and resignation, lost in a landscape which had never ceased to be unreal because the scene of an enforced and always temporary residence; the slaves kidnapped from one continent and abandoned on the unprofitable plantations of another, from which there could never more be escape.¹⁶

This is the society which "denies itself heroes" in which "every person of eminence was held to be crooked and contemptible".¹⁷ In this formless, transitional society, cast in its derelict landscape, chicanery and buffoonery are dominant aspects of life. Trinidadians are described in The Middle Passage as eccentrics and anarchists and in these early novels, as well as A House for Mr. Biswas, The Mimic Men and A Flag on the Island, characters continue to be people flaunting their eccentricities, eager to secure recognition in a stifling atmosphere of decay and decadence.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 68-69.

¹⁵Naipaul, Miguel Street, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 92.

¹⁶Naipaul, The Middle Passage, p. 190.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 41.

The degree of chicanery pertinent to this society is properly revealed in Baksh, Ramlogan, Ganesh, Harbans and almost the entire populace of Miguel Street. The daily intercourse of Trinidadian life, rustic as well as urban, seems to be conducted on the level of swindling and "out-smarting" competitors in every field. Hence Harbans is not elected to the Legislative Council through any intrinsic merit on his part or because of any philanthropic contribution to society. Rather his election is completed by the very devious manoeuvrings of his campaign committee who see the "possibilities" offered by democracy.

Democracy had come to Elvira four years before, in 1946; but it had taken nearly everybody by surprise and it wasn't until 1950, a few months before the second general election under universal adult franchise, that people began to see the possibilities.¹⁸

The statement is charged with irony for the glory of the democratic process, the privilege of franchise, is seen by the Trinidadian as an economic outlet. Bribery reigns supreme as the power of the vote is given an economic context.

The introduction of the theme of politics at the end of The Mystic Masseur affords Naipaul an excellent dramatic situation for exploring the goals of individuals. The stories of Ganesh and Harbans provide excellent illustrations of a society whose only motivation for advancement is economic. This is a

¹⁸Naipaul, The Suffrage of Elvira, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 92.

society geared to material success, lacking in principles which would ensure authentic self-fulfillment. Hence the rise to power of an incompetent, mediocre man, Ganesh Ramsumair, can be treated with mock-reverence. The ironic point and the factor that turns humour into bitter satire is that frauds such as Ganesh and Harbans are venerated by the society out of which they grow. And, it is this society, picaroon in its ethics and values, which populates almost every Naipaul novel. The satiric thrust is given further impetus by the ironic changes that overcome both Harbans and Ganesh at the end of their stories. Harbans reverts to his earliest assessment, "Elvira you is a bitch",¹⁹ and absconds from the responsibility of his constituency. In spite of his well-meaning principles, Ganesh succumbs to corruption and concedes even his identity to the colonial powers.

The first three novels disclose the terms of existence for a complex if depressed way of life. The author does not play up the peculiarities of the local setting for its exotic merit. Rather he seeks to establish a concrete setting in which he can display his characters. Moreover, Naipaul takes pain to draw the reader's attention to the fundamental split, as he sees it, between man and his environment. Hence most of the characters are frightened, alienated, little men, playing at grandeur in an alienating and hostile landscape.

In the early novels it is stylistically appropriate that Naipaul should delineate his idea of a fragmented society by only hinting briefly at various themes. Often the reader is left with

¹⁹Ibid., p. 206.

the impression that he is dealing with thematic elements as opposed to fully developed ideas. Hence the caricatures of Miguel Street and the sketchy minor characters of The Mystic Masseur and The Suffrage of Elvira. This apparent weakness in these works led critics such as Walsh to comment: "the reader is aware of considerable powers put to rather too markedly a parochial purpose. There is perhaps a shade too much emphasis on charm. One begins to long for something more severe and testing".²⁰ More patronizing in tone is the response evoked from several English critics at the time of publication. This reaction combined with the hostile criticism provoked by the books in the West Indies is summarized in an admirable critique by Francis Wyndham:

During the Fifties it was considered rather bad form, in literary circles, to approach an "underdeveloped country" in a spirit of sophisticated humour; and it was therefore perhaps unfortunate for V. S. Naipaul that his first three books happened to be social comedies set in Trinidad. Well-meaning British reviewers - whether in sheer ignorance of the background, or else unconsciously reflecting the prevalent attitudes of neo-colonialist embarrassment - responded to The Mystic Masseur, The Suffrage of Elvira and Miguel Street in dismayed tones of patronizing rebuke. They would have preferred a simple study in comparison where a clear distinction is made between the oppressors and the oppressed, or a "charming" exercise in the faux-naif, or a steamily incoherent drama of miscegnation and primitive brutality. The West Indian public, with a refinement of irony, expressed a similar reaction - thus proving that the recent confusions of neo-colonialist liberalism had already travelled

²⁰William Walsh, V. S. Naipaul, (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1973), p. 13.

as far as the original imperialist settlers and taken roots as deep.²¹

The predominant air of the first three novels is fairly light but intimations of the grimness to be treated in later works are already apparent. Serious insight is given in these novels into the basic terms of existence for various levels of the island's society. As we have seen, signs of deprivation and desolation pervade place description but as satirist, Naipaul's chief concern is with the moral dereliction of a society which "denies itself heroes". Naipaul discusses his task in The Middle Passage:

It is not easy to write about the West Indian middle class. The most exquisite gifts of irony and perhaps malice would be required to keep the characters from slipping into an unremarkable mid-Atlantic whiteness. They would have to be treated as real people with real problems and responsibilities and affections - and this has been done - but they would also have to be treated as people whose lives are corrupted by a fantasy which is their cross.²²

It is this attitude which leads George Lamming to comment in The Pleasures of Exile:

His books can't move beyond a castrated satire; and although satire may be a useful element in fiction, no important work comparable to Selvon's can rest safely on satire alone. When such a writer is a colonial, ashamed of his cultural background and striving like mad to prove himself through promotion to the peaks of a "superior" culture whose values are gravely in doubt, then satire, like the charge of philistinism, is for me nothing more than a refuge.

²¹Francis Wyndham, "V. S. Naipaul", The Listener, LXXXVI No. 219 (Thursday, 7 October, 1971), 462.

²²Naipaul, The Middle Passage, p. 69.

And it is too small a refuge for a writer who wishes to be taken seriously.²³

The inferiority to which Naipaul constantly draws attention, of Third-World society, reeks of the idea of European superiority. This is precisely the charge laid against him by Lamming and it is not unfounded although it may be damaging. Satire is seen by Lamming as a way of escaping the raw truth by seeking refuge in laughter whose basis lies in assumption of one's moral and cultural superiority. In all fairness to Naipaul, he has proved that his "Englishness" has not inhibited him from uncovering the equally drab and squalid qualities of English existence. The life of the English middle class is shown, in Mr. Stone and The Knight's Companion, as equally impervious to any attempt by man to fulfil himself authentically. The best description of Naipaul's attitude is offered by Gordon Rohlehr who insists that "Naipaul is a Trinidadian East Indian who has not come to terms with the Negro-Creole world in Trinidad, or with the East Indian world in Trinidad, or with the greyness of English life, or with life in India itself where he went in search of his roots".²⁴ The failure to come to terms with his own identity results in the astringency and bitterness of the author's attitude toward a society that has perhaps far

²³G. Lamming, The Pleasures of Exile, (London: Michael Joseph, 1960), p. 225.

²⁴Gordon Rohlehr, "The Ironic Approach", p. 122.

outstripped him in its collective pursuit of self-fulfillment.

In the early novels, Naipaul is at times the "irresponsible ironist, subtle, but lacking in a sensitive participation in the life he anatomises."²⁵ Naipaul's clinical eye is persistently insensitive to the other qualities of life that transcend the obvious squalor. In the early novels and travel books one can be easily convinced of how seriously Naipaul accepts ludicrousness and anarchy as the norms of Trinidadian society. As satirist, his task is to hold up the vices and follies of his society to ridicule and thus, hopefully to initiate an awareness that would lead to the amelioration of conditions. Rohlehr summarises the inherent difficulties in Naipaul's position:

Satire is the sensitive measure of a society's departure from a norm inherent in itself. Since Naipaul starts with the conviction that such a norm is absent from his society, his task as satirist becomes doubly difficult. Not only must he recreate experience, but also simultaneously create the standards against which this experience is to be judged.²⁶

One might add that the measure of Naipaul's efficiency as satirist lies precisely in his ability or failure to recreate such norms.

Rohlehr sees the mixture of farce and social consciousness which appears in the early novels as a direct result of the problems inherent in Naipaul's satire. "Naipaul consciously presents his real world as farcical. The reader is invited

²⁵Ibid., p. 122.

²⁶Ibid., p. 123.

simultaneously to recognize the degree of distortion and to share in the author's grin as he insists that the situation he is describing is perfectly normal".²⁷ Assuming an almost Chaucerian pose, Naipaul seems to condone the behaviour of his characters and assert it as normal. Thus the comment, "I myself believe that the history of Ganesh is, in a way, the history of our times",²⁸ or, "Ganesh elevated the profession by putting the charlatans out of business".²⁹ But the geniality of treatment can switch to bitter farce at times. In The Mystic Masseur, the ineptitude and gaucheness of West Indian society is paraded at Government House where the local diplomats are entertained at dinner.

The dinner was a treat for photographers. Ganesh came in dhoti, koortah and turban; the member for one of the Port of Spain wards wore a khaki suit and a sun helmet; a third came in jodhpurs; a fourth, adhering for the moment to his pre-election principles, came in short trousers and an open shirt; the blackest M.L.C. wore a three-piece blue suit, yellow woolen gloves, and a monocle. Everybody else among the men, looked like penguins, sometimes even down to the black faces.³⁰

Naipaul's satire is caustic. These are the same people he describes in The Middle Passage as being "like monkeys pleading for evolution".³¹ As Lamming points out, however, the incongruity of his position lies precisely in the fact that while he condemns Trinidadians for mimicking European standards, he does

²⁷Ibid., p. 122.

²⁸Naipaul, The Mystic Masseur, p. 18.

²⁹Ibid., p. 139.

³⁰Ibid., p. 207.

³¹Naipaul, The Middle Passage, p. 80.

so by assuming those norms himself.

As Rohlehr recognizes, whatever the merit or deficiencies of Naipaul's satire, it serves in the more important establishment of the theme of futility which occupies a significant place in all the novels. The apprenticeship of which Naipaul spoke was one not only pursued in narrative method but also in thematic unification.

Miguel Street, set in Port of Spain, is a gallery of sketched failures. The ambitious wish to escape and the un-aspiring wish no more than to acquire reputations as characters, or to obtain very menial jobs. The distortion of moral values provides the norm for this society and seems to be based on a comment in The Middle Passage:

There were no local standards. In the refinement of behaviour, as in architecture, everything was left to the caprices of the individual. In the immigrant society, memories growing dim, there was no guiding taste.³²

Rohlehr suggests that in a society with no true standards, "irony is bound to operate in reverse, the ironist starting with an abnormal situation and hinting at a sanity which is absent from the street".³³ In this way, the satire becomes more than the refuge Lamming notes, it becomes a method of fighting against what is held to be wrong in society.

What Miguel Street presents is a veritable nightmare. Illegitimacy, promiscuity, violence are accepted as normal and

³²Ibid., p. 77.

³³Rohlehr, "The Ironic Approach", p. 125.

at times ideal:

Once Hat said, "Everyday Big Foot father, the policeman, giving Big Foot blows. Like Medicine. Three times a day after meals. And hear Big Foot talk afterwards. He used to say, 'When I get big and have children, I go beat them, beat them'."

I asked Hat, "And Big Foot mother? She used to beat him too?"

Hat, said, "Oh God! That woulda kill him. Big Foot didn't have any mother. His father didn't married, thank God".³⁴

The pattern of failure that weaves its thread through Miguel Street is properly revealed in the degree of success achieved by its inhabitants. For Elias, scavenging easily replaces the ambition of becoming a doctor. "No theory here", Elias used to say, "This is the practical, I really like the work".³⁵ These are the limited successes that reinforce Naipaul's grim picture of dismal failure. Miguel Street is given its code by the street philosopher Hat who comments:

Life is a helluva thing. You can see trouble coming and you can't do a damn thing to prevent it coming. You just got to sit and watch and wait.³⁶

Miguel Street presents stark and raw tragedy in action and the full effect is achieved by the author's refusal to indulge in banal philosophising. Hence the force of the tragic and stoic comment by the promiscuous Laura when informed of the death of her unmarried, pregnant daughter, "It good. It good. It better that way."³⁷

³⁴Naipaul, Miguel Street, p. 55.

³⁵Ibid., p. 37.

³⁶Ibid., p. 91.

³⁷Ibid., p. 91.

The laughter of Miguel Street compounds the tragedy.

"Their double-edged humour transforms the frustrating problems of depressing existence into laughable absurdity and seems to function as both an avenue of escape and a defensive mechanism."³⁸ Laughter in the early novels is the medium which allows characters to detach themselves from their unsavory plights. It acts as a shield between man and his tragic predicament. Hence Morgan burns his house down and gains the sympathetic laughter of Miguel Street. But laughter also has a moral quality. Boyee is constantly scolded by Hat for laughing at the wrong things.

In these early novels where the setting is particularly Trinidadian, Naipaul makes effective use of local dialect. It is perhaps wise to treat the use of dialect at this point, since its use diminishes in later novels which strive toward more universal recognition both in theme and setting. In spite of an attempt to standardize the vernacular so as to render it more comprehensible to a foreign audience, Naipaul has been able to retain the lyrical rhythm and effervescent spirit of the dialect. The intimate, energetic and at times brutal speech of characters contrasts with the silken flow of the author's voice. The effect speaks of Naipaul's manifold capacities for orchestrating to best effect differences in tone and speech, without jarring results. A humorous incident in The Mystic Masseur illustrates the dilemma of the Trinidadian who becomes caught between the grammatically correct English taught at

³⁸Hamner, p. 74.

school and the local equivalent spoken at home.

One day he said, "Leela is hightime we realize that we living in a British Country and I think we shouldn't be shame to talk the people language good."

Leela was squatting at the kitchen chulha, coaxing a fire from dry mango twigs. Her eyes, were red and watery from the smoke. "All right, man."

"We starting now self, girl."

"As you say, man."

"Good. Let me see now. Ah, yes. Leela, have you lighted the fire? No, just gimme a chance. Is 'lighted' or 'lit', girl?"

"Look, ease me up, man. The smoke going in my eye."

"You ain't paying attention, girl. You mean the smoke is going in your eye."

Leela coughed in the smoke. "Look, man, I have a lot more to do than sit scratching, you hear. Go talk to Beharry."³⁹

As regional differences begin to play less part in Naipaul's thematic concerns, both dialect and ostensible setting diminish in presentation. They are used only in so far as they aid in character development. This change of emphasis is slightly noticeable in A House for Mr. Biswas. By the time of The Mimic Men, A Flag on the Island, and In A Free State, landscape and language exist: predominantly for the demonstration of mental states.

Walsh notes two contrasts in the early works, one "between the huddled disorder of the place, and the unqualified sharpness and clarity of the readers' perception", the other, "between the flatness and dreariness of village and town", and, "the folk with a genius for vivacity".⁴⁰ It is this discrepancy

³⁹Naipaul, The Mystic Masseur, p. 77.

⁴⁰Walsh, V. S. Naipaul, p. 4.

between man and his setting evoked by the writer's sharp and unflinching eye that constitutes perhaps, the single most important theme of the early novels. It is this theme, treated with irony in the early novels, that is to emerge in the later novels in the increasing introversion of characters and their hopeless alienation. The flight taken by Ganesh, Harbans and the boy-narrator of Miguel Street heralds the theme of exile and rootlessness explored in In A Free State. In the latter work, this theme is treated with greater sophistication but it is impossible to imagine that it could have been written without the experience gained in the earlier novels. Whatever their individual deficiencies, the early novels remain the most enjoyable of Naipaul's fiction.

CHAPTER TWO

A TURNING POINT IN THE FICTION

In an article published in the Times Literary Supplement in August 1958, Naipaul comments on the state of his novelistic career:

It isn't very easy for the exotic writer to get his work accepted as being more than something exotic, something to be judged on its merits. The very originality of the material makes the work suspect.¹

Naipaul cites the position of the "exotic" humorous writer as being especially delicate, particularly for one catering to an English audience. The regional barrier seems an insurmountable obstacle in the path of a writer who wishes to be considered seriously by an audience who, for the most part, must remain unsympathetic to the basic fabric of his material.

I live in England and depend on an English audience. Yet I write about Trinidad . . .²

Naipaul himself admits the limitations of his early novels:

The social comedies I write can be fully appreciated only by someone who knows the region I write about. Without that knowledge it is easy for my books to be dismissed as farces and my characters as eccentrics.³

It is ironic that Naipaul's publication just after this cry of misunderstanding is recognized as an achievement of classic proportions.

¹Naipaul, "London", p. 11.

²Ibid., p. 9.

³Ibid., p. 11.

A House for Mr. Biswas has been acclaimed as the high point of Naipaul's literary achievement. Together with Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion, it represents a watershed in the author's novelistic development, summing up the themes explored in the early novels in a supreme artistic statement. Together these two works combine "the vitality, colour, and indomitable spirit of the early novels with the consistency, depth and maturity of the later ones. The variety available on the one side is mingled with the particularity from the other side."⁴ In A House for Mr. Biswas, Naipaul attempts to give metaphysical context to what was initially seen as a regional peculiarity of existence, while in Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion, he broadens the geographical field of vision and aspires towards a more universal and inclusive subject.

The juxtaposition of treatment of these two novels in this chapter may appear disconcerting since they are very different in form. A House for Mr. Biswas is executed in the grand manner of the traditional nineteenth-century novel of manners, reminiscent of the achievement of Hardy and Dickens. A recent article even stresses Naipaul's debt to H. G. Wells.⁵ The author revels in and explores to the fullest the devices pertinent to this genre. Naipaul is actively engaged in his creation and the work is to that extent self-conscious, revealing several of the author's biases, controlled by his constructive irony and

⁴Hamner, p. 69.

⁵Martin Fido, "Mr. Biswas and Mr. Polly", Ariel, V No. 4 (Oct., 1974), 30-37.

coloured by his taste for lucid and accumulative detail. In its totality, A House for Mr. Biswas contrasts sharply with the skeletal Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion. And it is not merely a matter of volume. As Naipaul himself asserts, "But after Mr. Biswas I felt the need to react against this luxuriance and expansiveness, so instead I set out in Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion to write a compressionistic novel pared to the bone."⁶ Thus Naipaul marries Mr. Stone in one paragraph. He had, he informs us, even considered executing this marriage in a single sentence. Despite these obvious stylistic differences, and Mr. Stone's belaboured Englishness, Mr. Stone remains in many other ways a typical Naipaul character, retaining the colourful eccentricities of the earlier characters as well as the introverted and tormented psyche of those that appear later.

Thematically, the novels complement each other, the change in setting reinforcing a picture of universal dereliction. Both Mr. Stone and Mr. Biswas wage individual struggles for personal and social identity. They encounter the difficulties that arise out of the irreconcilable disparity between man's highest ideals and harsh reality. The two stories provide a focal point for the theme of alienation that pervades Naipaul's fiction. They compound the idea of an Absurdist view of the world.

The novels are interesting because they provide two of the three positive intimations of hope that appear in the entire

⁶Naipaul, "Speaking of Writing", The London Times, (Jan. 2, 1964), p. 11.

body of Naipaul's fiction. In Miguel Street, the boy-narrator flees from the squalor and deprivation of his setting but he does so with a display of affection and humour which intimates the author's empathy with the scene. The perseverance, the ability to endure human hardships, demonstrated in the stories of such obscure characters as Mr. Biswas and Mr. Stone, bespeaks a glimmer of faith in the possibility of man's reconciliation with the universe. Mr. Biswas does get his house and despite a heavy mortgage is able to control his anguish as he faces an obscure death. Mr. Stone is able to bear with stoic fortitude the commercialisation of the scheme for the Knights Companion and finds comfort in his power to endure in the dual face of his own insignificance and the obstacles which dwarf him even further. It is clear that whatever positive elements may be deduced from these three stories, they are limited. For Naipaul's characters there are no great victories. Tragedy is deprived of its classical trappings and is presented in all its vulgar crudity.

After A House for Mr. Biswas and Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion, Naipaul's controlling attitude becomes darker and more reflective, even more cynical. It is in these two novels that a maturity of philosophical attitude is clearly developed. The novels are to an extent free of the clinical detachment of the earlier work and the despairing verdict on mankind that appears in the later novels. The reader does not get the impression, as he does in the later novels, that Mr. Biswas and Mr. Stone are merely objects held up to examination. The brutality of Naipaul's

wit is still operative but Mr. Stone and Mr. Biswas are also presented as fellow human beings with whom we suffer. It is the mark of Naipaul's genius that he is able to reconcile so much that is coarse, disordered and graceless in human existence to produce a sensitive and almost sympathetic document of the human dilemma.

In the early novels Naipaul's attention seemed to focus upon the depiction of vivid but inevitably parochial characters. The impressions and experiences derived from these early but limited portraits culminate in the ultimate figure of Mohun Biswas. He is a regional and colourful character but in his abstract isolation he maintains a universal appeal. He becomes a model of man just as the particular history and situation which form him become a metaphor for the circumstances which dictate all human life and endeavour. This metamorphosis is ample evidence of Naipaul's genius. It is an achievement of classic proportions. Mr. Biswas' pursuit of habitation, no less than Mr. Stone's attempt to reaffirm the coming of Spring, is the intimate and universal expression of man's immemorial attempt to humanize his context. Together, Mr. Stone and Mr. Biswas dramatize man's frailty and corruptibility while they demonstrate the possibility, if not the absolute confirmation, of a reconciliation between man and his context.

It is essential aloneness that Naipaul perceives at the centre of the human condition. Both Mr. Biswas and Mr. Stone must pay the price for romanticism that centres entirely upon

the self. Their fantasies only heighten the sense of loneliness and despair that immediately follows their ecstatic flights of imagination. They are both frightened, alienated, little men in a hostile universe. The basic dissatisfaction which motivates Mr. Biswas and Mr. Stone is nothing less than an intimation, although it is never quite given an intellectual evocation, of the Absurd - the essential incongruity between man's deepest need and the nature of the reality that enshrouds him. The extent of the influence of the philosophy of the Absurd on Naipaul is uncertain. There are, however, references in An Area of Darkness to passages from Camus' novel The Rebel, indicating that Naipaul's thought in this period lay in this direction. Naipaul insists that he had not read Camus' The Rebel before the composition of the Chapter entitled "Fantasy and Ruins". However, his comment supports an Absurdist interpretation. "If I had read Camus's The Rebel before writing this chapter, I might have used his terminology".⁷ Indeed, Naipaul's metaphysic as deduced from his fiction seems peculiarly akin to Camus', especially to the ideas documented in Le Mythe de Sisyphe. In this work, Camus describes man's alienation in a world which remains unresponsive and even hostile to his basic need to affirm himself and his existence in it. This is a point in passing and is not intended to diminish Naipaul's originality of metaphysic in any way. Suffice it to say that the metaphors by which Naipaul

⁷Naipaul, An Area of Darkness, p. 208.

translates his vision of reality are those which are particularly attractive to Absurdist interpretation.

In A House for Mr. Biswas, Naipaul explores the theme of the individual. Despite his cringing littleness, the central character is dubbed Mr. Biswas from birth. He is engaged in a pathetic rebellion against the central incongruities of life. That he is predestined and doomed to failure, is implied from the very circumstances of his obscure entry into the world in rural Trinidad. The pundit deems him one of the blighted, and no degree of exorcism can rid him of the misfortune and disaster symbolised in his dubious and potent sneeze. In a chapter ironically entitled "Pastoral", Naipaul paints a scene of rank poverty and dereliction. Plagued by malnutrition, Mr. Biswas is destined to become another victim of the feudal agricultural system, "joyfully co-operating with the estates in breaking the law about the employment of children".⁸ There runs throughout the novel the strongest idea that Mr. Biswas' attempt to escape his preordained lot, of virtual slavery and peasant ignorance, lies at the heart of his alienation and his ultimate failure. Free of the ambition of colonial social mobility as implied in the educational process, Mr. Biswas' brother Partap, "illiterate all his days, was to become richer than Mr. Biswas; he was to

⁸Naipaul, A House for Mr. Biswas, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 22.

have a house of his own, a large strong, well-built house, years before Mr. Biswas".⁹

What Naipaul calls upon the reader to examine is the full circle of a human life - the Hindu concept of samsara and its primum mobile karma:

The condition of each succeeding rebirth was determined by the relative balance of good and bad deeds in previous existence. This points to an early belief in the doctrine of karma by which man's relation to mortality (dharma) determines his destiny. . . . While such a belief could logically offer the reassurance that one's situation is never hopeless and that, being based on one's previous deeds one's predicament is surely just, in fact the opposite was not infrequently the case. Disease, suffering and bondage to the continual course of migration was man's lot. Continued existence in successive states of reincarnated life [samsara] came to be thought of as an unfortunate entanglement in the endless wheel of time.¹⁰

The passivity inherent in the Hindu view of life is what Mr. Biswas rebels against but oft-times he is himself victim to its stifling power. On Bipti's father's maxim, "Fate. There is nothing we can do about it,"¹¹ Naipaul cynically comments:

No one paid him any attention. Fate had brought him from India to the sugar estate, aged him quickly and left him to die in a crumbling mud hut in the swamplands; yet he spoke of Fate often and affectionately, as though, merely by surviving, he had been particularly favoured.¹²

This is the truest evocation of a derelict man in a

⁹Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁰F. Comstock, et al, Religion and Man, (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 134.

¹¹Naipaul, A House for Mr. Biswas, p. 15.

¹²Ibid., p. 15.

derelict land, of the species figured in The Middle Passage. One, indeed, who is depicted as stranded not only by an accident of history but bound to his exile by the very dictates of his religion.

The above passage sums up the full desolation of those who made the Middle Passage, but it also demonstrates, in its evocation of futility, the odds against which Mr. Biswas must fight as he gravitates toward identity. In An Area of Darkness, Naipaul cites a passage from Camus' The Rebel which throws light on Mr. Biswas' role as rebel:

For the Inca and the [Hindu] pariah the problem [of rebellion] never arises, because for them it had been solved by tradition, even before they had time to raise it - the answer being that tradition is sacred. . . . rebellion does not arise Metaphysic is replaced by myth. There are no more questions, only eternal answers and commentaries, which may be metaphysical.¹³

Bred in a society that negates rebellion, Mr. Biswas' pathetic attempt to retain his individuality gains in grandeur. Given his context, his refusal to conform can be seen as a courageous struggle in the face of the Absurd.

The failure of which Mr. Biswas is constantly aware, in the landscape that surrounds him, has to do with the concept of man's vulnerability to the impartial processes of the universe. The fatalism contingent upon a Hinduistic attitude is engrained in the prevailing tone of the novel with its emphasis on death

¹³Naipaul, An Area of Darkness, p. 209.

and darkness. The landscape is typically bleak. Ramchand comments:

There is another way in which the author's over-indulgence in a point of view . . . initially attributed to the character threatens the balance of the novel. It is appropriate that Mr. Biswas should see his world as a sordid one, but the frequency with which he is made to do so lends emphasis to the novel's apparently gratuitous descriptions of decay, disease, squalor and blight.¹⁴

The decay that pervades the novel perhaps bespeaks an authorial obsession, but it also complements the thematic mode. The stage upon which Mr. Biswas acts out his strange and futile rebellion is one which prescribes non-entity. It is best portrayed in Mr. Biswas recurring vision of

. . . a boy leaning against an earthhouse 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.¹⁵

The irrelevance and littleness conjured up in this image torments Mr. Biswas into a struggle for at least psychic self-preservation. Existence, which is continually seen by Mr. Biswas as a void, is like the bus, constantly rushing away from beneath his feet. The task becomes to make a mark in that void, in order to assure himself of his worth, indeed to affirm the very fact of his existence. The dilemma is compounded as Mr. Biswas begins to

¹⁴ Kenneth Ramchand, The West Indian Novel and Its Background, (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 203.

¹⁵ Naipaul, A House for Mr. Biswas, p. 190.

see his own son, Anand, heir of his flesh, in terms of this ominous image, standing and staring like that other boy Mr. Biswas had seen outside a low hut at dawn.

A novel which begins, "Ten weeks before he died . . .",¹⁶ can only prescribe a specified role for the reader. He is invited to look helplessly upon the circumstances that form Mr. Biswas' life as they evolve full circle to their prophesied end. Faced with the possibility of having lived, "without even attempting to lay claim to one's portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated",¹⁷ Mr. Biswas attempts to procure a house of his own - a symbol of his inner significance and a measure of the sum achievement of his life. The house is more than a place where he can lead a private existence with his family although, given the omnipresence of the Tulsi clan, privacy itself becomes an integral part of the novel's purport.

Kenneth Ramchand suggests that A House for Mr. Biswas is "the West Indian Novel of rootlessness par excellence".¹⁸ Emphasizing the novel's historicity, Ramchand sees it as a metaphor for the peculiar dilemma of the colonial who is caught between two worlds, two cultures and two historical eras.

Mr. Biswas is an Indian who marries into an Indian enclave in Trinidad between the wars. He recognizes the blinkered insulation of this world from the

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁸ Ramchand, p. 192.

outside, and he senses its imminent dissolution. He spends most of his life trying to escape its embrace, only to find that the future, the colonial society upon which he wishes to make his mark, is as yet uncreated. Mr. Biswas struggles between the tepid chaos of a decaying culture and the void of colonial society.¹⁹

It is to this extent that the novel is sociological, fulfilling Naipaul's dictum that, "living in a borrowed culture, the West Indian more than most, needs writers to tell him who he is and where he stands".²⁰ A House for Mr. Biswas captures the nostalgia experienced by the displaced colonial for a cultural homeland. It examines the quality of life possible for individuals in a colonial society and sees it as ultimately second-hand and shabby.

The rootless instability that pervades the existence of characters in the early works, becomes, in A House for Mr. Biswas and Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion, a document of what it means to be transient. Naipaul's characters seem to be always inclined towards the preservation of their "alienness" - their sense of exile. They see it as a distinguishing feature, albeit in the form of eccentricity, and one which elevates them from the chaos and disorder evident in the landscape which surrounds them. The idea of India, a country they had never seen, prevents the Tulsi family from ever considering themselves settled. The family's journey was one back to the mythic homeland. In A House for Mr. Biswas, transience is seen as the special lot

¹⁹Ibid., p. 192.

²⁰Naipaul, The Middle Passage, p. 68.

of the East Indian in Trinidad. Defined by the mode of ethics documented in The Middle Passage, victimized by his society's inherent deficiencies and cruelties, Mr. Biswas becomes a model of the Absurd man - the transient, the stranger whose exile is without remedy. In Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion, transience in the form of the mutability of nature, and symbolised in Mr. Stone's doubting of the coming of Spring, becomes a universal statement about the nature of human existence.

The house that Mr. Biswas finally gains possession of, "the external symbol of [his] inner significance, ^{„Rohlehr} is won only after long and arduous suffering. After abortive attempts to build a house of his own, he buys one that has been ineptly erected by a shrewd solicitor's clerk. The many peculiarities and awkwardness of the house are forgotten by the family as it revels in the sheer joy of ownership. It is significant that Mr. Biswas is cheated in the purchase of the house. It leaves the suggestion that even his final victory is a sham. Possessed of a doctrine of futility, Naipaul cannot allow Mr. Biswas total success. The house is a shelter, a fortress, a declaration of independence, but even given such a symbolic role, it remains significantly ramshackle, decrepit and vulnerable to the piercing afternoon sun. Biswas' greatest victory is a pathetic substitute for the real thing but it is all that appears possible in a hostile world.

The idea of the "derelict land" appears early in Naipaul's fiction and is the constant defining backdrop against which his characters struggle. All Naipaul's characters seem impelled to

demonstrate their human necessity, their relevance in such an environment. In the earlier novels, they did this by bruising themselves absurdly and ineffectively against an indifferent world. In this light, Miguel Street becomes a study in failure since each of its inhabitants fails more miserably than the other and success exists only in the form of geographical and cultural escape. Mr. Biswas constructs the proof of his identity in both a comic and moving way. He endeavours by a blend of clowning and fantasy, evident in his newspaper pieces and short stories, to make a romantic escape. He realizes however, that the opportunities available to a temperate Samuel Smiles, his literary hero, are not those that are open to him:

But there always came a point when resemblance ceased. The heroes had rigid ambitions and lived in countries where ambitions could be pursued and had a meaning. He had no ambition and in this hot land, apart from opening a shop or buying a motor-bus, what could he do?²¹

Mr. Biswas rebels against the failure engrained in the very climate. Rohlehr detects universal implications in his struggle: "Biswas is everyman, wavering between identity and nonentity, and claiming his acquaintance with the rest of men".²² He refuses to accommodate himself to the established patterns of existence that surround him and it is thus that he appears a rebel. This is not to attribute any titanic dimension to his inept querulousness. A thin grit of mutiny is liberally sprinkled

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Naipaul, A House for Mr. Biswas, pp. 78-79.

²²F. G. Rohlehr, "The Ironic Approach", p. 137.

on his personality but there is nothing grand or stoic in his rebellion which amounts, for the most part, to stubborn peevishness. He takes little significant action towards controlling his own destiny. He cannot be considered a hero as such, in either the Absurdist or Existentialist vein. Biswas' struggle, like that of characters before and after him, is for a secure personal independence and a stay against transience. Hamner notes ironically that "since nothing in his environment has prepared him for this kind of freedom, he is unable to face the responsibilities incumbent on self-determination".²³

Mr. Biswas' breakdown at Green Vale is adequate example of the type of psychological stress that faces the man who seeks authentic existence. Walsh cites this incident as the phase of the novel in which we see "at its most refined the psychological acumen for which all of Naipaul's work is so notable; a form of analysis which is also a revelation of a unique individual and the clarification of a universal process".²⁴

As the wretched house at Green Vale assumes its form, Mr. Biswas' sanity oozes away. He is unable to cope with the nature of the reality that surrounds him. People appear to him as an overwhelming but formless threat. Mr. Biswas exists as a point of terror in the darkness that engulfs him.

When he got to Green Vale it was dark. Under the trees it was night. The sounds from the barracks were assertive and isolated one from the other:

²³Hamner, p. 131.

²⁴Walsh, p. 36.

snatches of talk, the sound of frying, a shout, the cry of a child: sounds thrown up at the starlit sky from a place that was nowhere, a dot on the map of the island, which was a dot on the map of the world. The dead trees ringed the barracks, a wall of flawless black. He locked himself in his room.²⁵

The darkness that enshrouds the landscape adequately complements Mr. Biswas' entrance into a psychic void. It counterpoints Naipaul's depiction of a self that crumbles when faced with the void that exists between being and objective reality. Naipaul records with unflinching accuracy the terror of psychic collapse:

Then he saw that the room was full of these ants enjoying the last minutes of their short life. Their small wings, strained by large bodies, quickly became useless, and without wings they were without defence. They kept on dropping. Their enemies had already discovered them.²⁶

The remorseless activity of the ants conveys the existence of a world of inhuman ferocity in which the individual can claim only tenuous salvation. It is significant in this regard that whenever Mr. Biswas confronts the natural elements, he loses. Driven from his unfinished house at Green Vale by a storm, he suffers a nervous breakdown. Later, he and his family are unnerved by a week-end trip to the seaside. It is interesting that most of Naipaul's characters are unnerved by nature at its most elemental. Mr. Stone intuits a death-like experience when he confronts a fire at Chysauster. Ralph Singh declares that the sea is not his element.

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Naipaul, A House for Mr. Biswas, p. 237.

²⁶Ibid., p. 289.

The idea of the "past", of an historic and cultural background which has to be confronted, recaptured or broken away from, dominates A House for Mr. Biswas.

The past could not be ignored, it was never counterfeit; he carried it within himself. If there was a place for him, it was one that had already been hollowed out by time, by everything he had lived through, however makeshift and cheating.²⁷

Biswas' rebellion is waged against the Tulsi clan, into whose household he unwittingly marries. Representatives of a solid merchant class, they stand for a materialistic, tightly closed social structure. Symbolically, the Tulsis serve a multiple function. In their hankering after the motherland, the Tulsis represent the decaying and stifling East Indian traditions which are no longer applicable in a colonial world. Hanuman House is the stage on which the drama of the cloistered family pattern described in The Middle Passage is acted out:

. . . an enclosing self-sufficient world absorbed with its quarrels and jealousies; as difficult for the outsider to penetrate as for one of its members to escape. It protected and imprisoned a static world awaiting decay.²⁸

Stifling or not, this is the past against which Mr. Biswas must define himself. For all his resentment of the Tulsis, Mr. Biswas always returns to Hanuman House for resuscitation both economic and spiritual, if only in the sense that he gains new incentive to fight. The idea of India which stimulates the

²⁷ Ibid., p. 316.

²⁸ Naipaul, The Middle Passage, pp. 81-82.

evening conversation of the old men outside the arcade at Hanuman House, also affects Mr. Biswas. Despite his efforts, Mr. Biswas is completely identifiable with the background from which he despairingly tries to escape. His story is largely that of the tragic acculturation of the East Indian in Trinidad. This is a theme which Naipaul handles sensitively and skillfully. Lying beneath the cynical condemnation of dead rituals is a deep nostalgia for a lost culture. As a second-generation East Indian, Naipaul, like Biswas, can only intuit the deep callings of an Indian heritage, knowing that he can never define or fully claim it as his own. In An Area of Darkness, Naipaul writes of the East Indian confrontation with the creole, colonial world:

Into this alienness we daily ventured and at length we were absorbed into it. But we knew there had been changes, gain, loss. We knew that something which was once whole had been washed away. What was whole was the idea of India.²⁹

Rohlehr notes, quite correctly, that "A House for Mr. Biswas moves far beyond preoccupation with race or with the Hindu world in Trinidad and depicts a classic struggle for personality against a society that denies it".³⁰ The acculturation of the East Indian in a derelict land becomes a metaphor for the timeless and universal processes that alienate man from his context. Mr. Biswas is, by this token, an Everyman, his success, the limited victory of all men.

²⁹Naipaul, An Area of Darkness, p. 42.

³⁰F. G. Rohlehr, "The Ironic Approach", p. 134.

The distinct change of setting and of mode of narrative in Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion, makes it clear that the novel was written in order to allow Naipaul to explore from a different, and indeed more constricting, angle the observations he made earlier on the human condition. It implies moreover, a view that sees these observations as universal. Nationality and setting only adjust the peculiar definition of man's inherent tragedy. Anthony Boxhill notes the continuation of thematic concern in The Mystic Masseur, A House for Mr. Biswas and Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion.

Ganesh, Mr. Biswas and Mr. Stone are all potentially creative individuals whose environments make it difficult for them to express their creativity. But whereas Ganesh and Mr. Biswas struggle against a background without standards or order, Mr. Stone is stifled by the rigidity of the order of his community. All three men desire escape. Ganesh and Biswas from chaos, Mr. Stone from the weight of his ossified order.³¹

Mr. Stone, like Mr. Biswas before him despairs over the hostility of the universe. A creature of habit, a slave to the past, he had found comfort in the sameness of existence, the solidarity marked by the changing of the seasons,

Life was something to be moved through. Experiences were not to be enjoyed at the actual moment; pleasure in them came only when they had been, as it were, docketed and put away in the file of the past, when they had become part of his 'life', his 'experience', his career. It was only then that they acquired colour, just as colour came truly to Nature only in a coloured snapshot or a painting, which

³¹A. Boxhill, "The Concept of Spring in V. S. Naipaul's Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion", Ariel, V. No. 4 (Oct., 1974), p. 22.

annihilated colourless, distorting space.³²

This is the kind of deadness that ruled Mr. Stone's existence and in which he found security.

At first, Mr. Stone is only subliminally aware of the narrowness of his experience. Naipaul expresses this awareness through Mr. Stone's preoccupations with the tree outside his window and his neighbour's cat. Mr. Stone merely uses the seasonal changes in the tree to mark the passage of time.

He had grown to regard it as a part of his own life, a marker of his past, for it moved through time with him. The new leaves of spring, the hard green of summer, the naked black branches of winter, none of these spoke of the running out of his life. They were only a reminder of the even flowing of time, of his mounting experience, his lengthening past.³³

A London Transport poster which announces, "a trip to the London countryside . . . will reassure those who doubt the coming of Spring".³⁴ induces new fears in Mr. Stone - grim intimations of mortality. With his relaxing hold on life, Mr. Stone feels excluded from the inexorable rhythm of the tree's natural cycle. The dull, monotonous routine of his life, measured by the regularity with which Miss Menzies rotates her office clothes, fails to bring a feeling of renewal. Mr. Stone begins to doubt the coming of Spring and comes to the conclusion that "the order of the universe to which he had sought to ally himself was not his order".³⁵ The progenerative impulses of the

³²V. S. Naipaul, Mr. Stone and The Knights Companion, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 15.

³³Ibid., pp. 16-17.

³⁴Ibid., p. 20.

³⁵Ibid., p. 125.

cat and the tree are unfortunately no longer available to Mr. Stone.

At an advanced age, Mr. Stone attempts to get in tune with the universe. He marries Miss Springer but this disruption in the pattern of his life only disconcerts him further. Renewal is impossible. Not only is the marriage sexless but also Miss Springer herself has ceased to believe in Spring and the value of renewal. Towards the end of the novel, Mr. Stone wonders rather pathetically about Nature's cycle and man's relationship to it.

"Doesn't it make you think, though?" he said.
 "Just the other day the tree was so bare. And that dahlia bush. Like dead grass all winter. I mean, don't you think it's just the same with us? That we too will have our Spring?"³⁶

To this nostalgic outburst his wife replies, "Well, I think it's a lotta rubbish".³⁷ Instead of encouraging Mr. Stone into new avenues of experience, Mrs. Springer moulds herself parasitically around her husband and becomes an extension of him. A sense of impending doom imposes itself on Mr. Stone's mind as he contemplates his retirement. He realizes that his marriage did not bring the longed-for renewal. The symbolism of Miss Springer's name is ironic; she did not bring the promised spring.

What the house means to Mr. Biswas, the plan for the Knights Companion means to Mr. Stone. It is a stay against personal destruction, a check against mortality. As Mr. Stone

³⁶Ibid., p. 116.

³⁷Ibid., p. 116.

becomes more acutely aware of the separateness of the individual from the natural pattern, as he loses his confidence in the possibility of his own renewal, despair overtakes him. It inspires, however, a final and desperate outburst of creativity - the scheme for the Knights Companion. Mr. Stone cannot quite find the security he desired in the scheme, because the good cause he formulated is turned into a commercial venture by Whympers, a man who creates nothing, but licks things into shape. In addition to his professed intention to help retirees, Mr. Stone's latent goal is to create for himself in the Knights Companion a monument to his memory - a proof of his existence to relieve the feeling of rootlessness and non-belonging:

All that he had done, and even the anguish he was feeling now, was a betrayal of that good emotion. All action, all creation was a betrayal of feeling and truth. And in the process of this betrayal his world had come tumbling about him. There remained nothing to which he could anchor himself.³⁸

Mr. Stone rages internally as he resigns himself to the fact that his scheme has somehow transcended him. He observes as one by one the most familiar components of his life drop away from him and he sees his fate reflected in their own - Tony dies, Mrs. Millington is fired, the black cat is exterminated. Like Mr. Biswas, he is imbued with a sense of his own irrelevance. Alienated from the universe, Mr. Stone rationalizes that destruction is the only order, that man can only assert

³⁸Ibid., pp. 118-119.

himself by destroying, not creating.

But now he saw, too, that it was not by creation that man demonstrated his power and defied this hostile order, but by destruction. By damming the river, by destroying the mountain, by so scarring the face of the earth that Nature's attempt to reassert herself became a mockery.³⁹

Mr. Stone rejects the destructive element; he refuses to submerge himself in it. The quality of endurance is what is finally important, to Mr. Stone and indeed to Naipaul. Mr. Stone takes stoic consolation in simply having survived. In a manner similar to Mr. Biswas he finally discovers a steady faith that allows him to await his fate calmly.

In Mr. Stone and The Knights Companion as in A House for Mr. Biswas, Naipaul portrays human existence on the edge of the ridiculous, translated at a frightening level of intensity. For Mr. Stone as for Mr. Biswas, being caricatured, given a role that one is expected to fulfil, secures one from the terrifying business of authentic existence. With the abatement of his earlier comic spirit Naipaul turns more and more to the common elements in humanity for serious analysis.

The folk gaiety evident in the earlier novels and still apparent in A House for Mr. Biswas modulates into the elegant urban comedy of Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion. The term "comedy" is ventured with great trepidation. Naipaul's work is

³⁹Ibid., p. 125.

more like Balzac's Theory of the Comédie Humaine - a sensitive revelation of the many grotesqueries and eccentricities that rule human existence and compound both its laughter and despair. Mr. Biswas' attempt to become a clown, his spectacular exploration of escape fiction, his flights of imagination are complemented by Mr. Stone's relishing of grotesque fantasies:

He thought of moving pavements: . . . He was able to fly. He ignored traffic lights; he flew from pavement to pavement over people and cars and buses (the people flown over looking up in wonder while he floated serenely past, indifferent to their stupefaction). Sealed in his armchair, he flew up and down the corridors of his office.⁴⁰

In both novels, the lightness, delicacy and essential comic spirit of fantasy, underlines, by means of ironic contrast, the fundamental desperation and grimness of the author's view of life. Mr. Biswas' clowning enables him to avoid conveniently the pain of his non-entity by drawing attention himself to his exaggerated inadequacies. The realm of fantasy in both novels uncomfortably delineates for the reader the nightmarish quality of existence.

The endings of Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion and A House for Mr. Biswas denote an emphasis on human perseverance not unlike the kind of tenacious confrontation with life recommended by Camus in Le Mythe de Sysyphe. The endings also demonstrate a growing sombreness in tone. Although Mr. Stone and Mr. Biswas somehow manage to rise above their predicaments,

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 8.

their victories are unconvincing. Mr. Biswas does get a house, but he literally pays the price of death for it. Mr. Stone's moment of creativity hardly seems adequate reimbursement for a lifetime of stagnation. The consolation each takes at the end of his story is not unlike the characteristic "leap of faith" taken by many philosophers of the Absurd. These novels would indicate that there is a way for men to tolerate if not vindicate the absurdity of existence. Mr. Stone remains in his Prufrockian littleness, a sadly comic figure in a nondescript suburban setting, awaiting only death. Mr. Biswas dies and his family return to an empty house.

In their totality, these two novels represent not only a maturation of narrative skill but also a formulation of a philosophical attitude. Kenneth Ramchand's statement that Naipaul is "the least metaphysical of West Indian writers",⁴¹ can only be taken as ironic. After these two novels, Naipaul returns to the Caribbean subject matter with a darker but more objective perspective. The direction of the succeeding novels is even more inward into the psyches of the characters. Figures such as Ralph, Frank and Bobby, in their abstract isolation maintain the extensive appeal of Mr. Stone and Mr. Biswas. Chronologically, Naipaul's characters are more and more introverted, but insight into each results into a more universally recognizable view of the human condition.

⁴¹Ramchand, p. 8.

CHAPTER THREE

TOWARDS A BLEAKER VIEW

The glimmers of hope intimated in the histories of Mohan Biswas and Mr. Stone are short-lived. For Ralph Singh of The Mimic Men and Frank of "A Flag on the Island", nothing short of cataclysmic obliteration will exorcise the purposelessness of existence. The sterility apparent in Singh's conclusion, "So writing, for all its initial distortion, clarifies, and even becomes a process of life",¹ is, in its implicit negation of active life, just once removed from the complete annihilation postulated in the dance macabre that terminates "A Flag on the Island":

The world was ending and the cries that greeted this end were cries of joy. We all began to dance. We saw dances such as we had seen in the old days in Henry's yard. No picking of cotton, no cutting of cane; no carrying of water, no orchestrated wails. We danced with earnestness.²

The apocalyptic mood prevalent in this latter ending is appropriate not only as a climax for the particular story it terminates but more so as a grand finale for the kind of darkening and sombre atmosphere that has been intensifying in the preceding novels. The type of geographical and cultural flight undertaken by Ganesh, Harbans and the boy-narrator of Miguel Street, no longer provides adequate relief from the essential

¹V. S. Naipaul, The Mimic Men, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 251.

²V. S. Naipaul, A Flag on the Island, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 211.

frustration inherent in the landscape. The sham victory of Mohan Biswas is undercut by his obscure death. For all his faith in human perseverance, Mr. Stone is too old to start again. Ralph Singh resorts to Hindu renunciation and completely lacks the inclination to resume active life. Frank's identification with the destructive natural elements of the hurricane is the inevitable climax to this train of incremental desperation.

The dead-end signified in Frank's wish for total obliteration is not complete. "The quotidian ensues as it always has in life and as it has in all Naipaul's fiction".³ Indeed, it is this return to the quotidian at the end of "A Flag on the Island", that enables the composition of In a Free State to appear less than anticlimactic. It is a tenacious confrontation with the quotidian reality of existence, a yielding under the force of a losing battle that Ralph Singh and the American, Frank, share in common. In either story the action is internalized for the most part and the stream of consciousness technique employed in both adds to the atmosphere of converging reality and unreality. While Singh consciously attempts to impose order on the state of mental flux that engulfs him, Frank remains completely under the sway of his hallucinatory excursions into a past that defines both his present and future. Naipaul's genius lies in his ability to capture the chaotic turns

³Hamner, p. 63.

of memory without reproducing equally disorienting fiction.

In terms of narrative method, "A Flag on the Island" and The Mimic Men are singularly well-suited for treatment in a single chapter. The technique of narrator-persona employed in both novels with its autobiographical overtones ensures that the fictional veil is never obtrusively disturbed. The narrator's voice and his mood in each story is so consistently in control that unless an attempt is made to read the author's direct statements from other sources into the narrator's point of view, Naipaul's hand never jarringly intrudes. Unfortunately, Naipaul's fiction is particularly susceptible to this type of critical analysis and the result is some rather harsh criticism. being levelled against Ralph Singh who can too easily be identified with Naipaul himself. "An unlikely colonial", Ralph's egotistical and narrow-minded perspective is reminiscent of Naipaul's own attitudes in the discursive works which were published just before the composition of The Mimic Men. Frank's very Americanism detracts from such overt identification and this story in its artistic totality proves more satisfying.

The heightened sensibilities of the narrator in "A Flag on the Island", as his melancholy and despairing mood intensifies, facilitate the ease with which the reader accepts the exaggerations and distortions of reality that pervade the work. "As in other novels, then, the basic structure hinges upon the personality of a limited narrator. Readers see through his

eyes and feel through his emotions".⁴ The result is a "willing suspension of disbelief". The narrator colours the landscape with his cynical fancy and presents his subjective conceptualization of it. It is as such that Naipaul is able to communicate effectively to the reader his character's utter desperation. The fanciful element, exhibited in Priest's maddening exhortations before the storm and in the grotesque caricaturing of lesser characters, demonstrates the aptness of the story's subtitle - "A Fantasy for a small screen".

Cinematic terminology has also been employed in describing Naipaul's narrative technique in The Mimic Men. Naipaul employs "not only a flash back but a dissolving technique".⁵ The novel's framework takes the form of an autobiographical chronicle, undertaken by a narrator whose sharply defined personality enables the reader to accept the static quality of the story and the detached reserve of the narrative voice. As the reader accustoms himself to the selfishly introverted personality of the narrator, he begins to accept his frequent philosophical intrusions into the text. The idea of the artist editing himself is one carefully prepared by Naipaul. Singh speaks of himself as ". . . a man lifted out of himself and separate from his personality which he might acknowledge from time to time".⁶ Walsh

⁴Ibid., p. 63.

⁵"Suburbia in the Sun", Times Literary Supplement, (April 27, 1967), p. 349.

⁶The Mimic Men, p. 192.

phrases the essential method by which the narrative works:

The action swirls backward and forward in a rhythm that follows the starts and turns of memory. But there is one insistent theme, the pursuit of order, and one recurrent image, the image of landscape, both real and ideal, which informs the varied material of Ralph Singh's life with an inward and poetic unity.⁷

A discussion of Naipaul's technique in these two novels is essential to the comprehension of their thematic concern. The very presence of the narrator, his moods and biases, becomes, from The Mimic Men onward, one of the primary focal points of Naipaul's novels. These later novels deal with, among other things, perception of place - highly subjective and imagistic renderings of the psyche's encounter with physical reality. The comprehensive atmosphere of both works is constantly dominated by the narrators' moods. The novels are significantly concerned with the idea of landscape and how it is perceived. Ralph Singh is convinced that for the colonial there remains "no link between man and the landscape".⁸ Frank, the American, extends this awareness into a universal cry of anguish and concludes that "all landscapes are in the end only in the imagination".⁹

The Mimic Men is Naipaul's third novel on colonial politics and it is his most complex and bitter treatment of the subject. Karl Miller considers that Naipaul's fiction in its

⁷Walsh, p. 54.

⁸The Mimic Men, p. 206.

⁹A Flag on the Island, p. 124.

totality "describes the fortunes of an emergent country".¹⁰ The particular location is West Indian but as Ralph Singh makes clear the same thing has happened in "twenty places, Twenty countries, islands, colonies, territories".¹¹ The kind of ineptness that Naipaul discerns in colonial politicians was satirized in the early figures of Ganesh and Harbans. These were seen as amateurish imposters playing at grandeur - two portraits in the gallery of mimic men for which Ralph Singh becomes the unrivalled exemplar. Naipaul describes the plight of the colonial leader in The Middle Passage:

Power was recognized, but dignity was allowed to no one. Every person of eminence was held to be crooked and contemptible. We lived in a society that denied itself heroes.¹²

In The Mystic Masseur and The Suffrage of Elvira, Ganesh and Harbans fulfil Naipaul's dictum:

Nationalism was impossible in Trinidad. In the colonial society each man had to be for himself; every man had to grasp whatever dignity and power he was allowed; he owed no loyalty to the island and scarcely any to his group.¹³

Hence Harbans absconds completely from the responsibility of his constituency immediately after he is elected to power, while Ganesh cedes to the colonial powers even his name. The Trinidadian according to Naipaul, is not only a natural eccentric and anarchist but he is also a man inhabiting a theatrical plane

¹⁰Karl Miller, "V. S. Naipaul and the New Order", Kenyon Review, XXIX (November, 1967), 685.

¹¹The Mimic Men, p. 192.

¹²The Middle Passage, p. 41.

¹³Ibid., p. 72.

of existence - burdened by a fantasy which is his cross. Deprived of the realm of dignity, precluded from heroism by the very context of his landscape, the colonial politician is seen as a play-actor, a man who can only thrive off the drama of the political situation since he lacks both the power and the ability to become involved in the real dynamic process. Politicians, no less than the average colonial, are mimic men - men who because they lack an authentic identity of their own, are forced to emulate the forms and manners of others.

Given his historic situation, or as Naipaul insists, his lack of it, the colonial politician is an easy figure of ridicule. As Singh writes his memoirs, he is constantly tormented by his role as imposter and is plagued by:

. . . an awareness of myself not as an individual but as a performer, in that child's game where every action of the victim is deemed to have been done at the command of his tormentor, and where even refusal is useless, for that too can be deemed to have been commanded, and the only end is tears and walking away.¹⁴

The frustration contingent to this conception of role is not unique to the politician. As in the early novels, politics provides but another ideal dramatic situation by which to explore the goals of individuals and to continue the dialogue on the nature of the human condition.

Singh's claim that he is no politician points to the fact that Naipaul is no politician either. Miller sees his subject matter as a type of "pre-politics",¹⁵ and indeed the

¹⁴The Mimic Men, p. 81.

¹⁵Miller, "V. S. Naipaul and the New Order", p. 685.

politics is the least impressive part of The Mimic Men. Naipaul's genius lies in his ability to explore and give dramatic expression to the individual dilemma rather than in any polemical attempt. However, the novel is about political action and Ralph Singh constantly makes statements about the political future of other places like Isabella. The view is bleak.

"The Colonial, of whatever society is a product of revolution; and the revolution takes place in the mind".¹⁶ So writes Naipaul in 1965. Naipaul's characters' careers of personal emancipation may be thought to be a metaphor for political autonomy. Mr. Biswas' enslavement to his inlaws could be interpreted as the new country's dependence on the old order. In The Mimic Men, Naipaul directly portrays the new order and completes the model of the emergent country. Singh the picturesque Asiatic and Brown the black renegade-romantic, rise to power at a time when the old order is at its weakest. Their association becomes a positive force at a time in colonial history when race consciousness and the displacement of the colonial power prepare a state of affairs ready for manipulation by those with the intellect ready to seize control:

Simply by coming forward - Browne and myself and The Socialist, all together - we put an end to the old order. It was like that.¹⁷

Singh and Browne commit the ultimate intellectual error of taking

¹⁶V. S. Naipaul, "East Indian", (The Reporter, 17 June, 1965), The Overcrowded Barracoon, p. 37.

¹⁷The Mimic Men, p. 190.

the idea for the real thing. The Socialist stood for the dignity of the races, the dignity of the working class, but dignity was a matter of sentiment rather than of decisive action. The dynamism of the movement they had initiated transcends both Singh and Browne. In a multiracial society the inevitable question of race rears its head:

Like monkeys pleading for evolution, each claiming to be whiter than the other, Indians and Negroes appeal to the unacknowledged white audience to see how much they despise one another. They despise one another by reference to the whites; and the irony is that their antagonism should have reached its peak today, when white prejudices have ceased to matter.¹⁸

Singh, the picturesque Asiatic, plays his final political role as scape-goat for the failures of the movement.

Ralph's first intention is to record the unnatural falseness and disorientation of this new order, but as he confesses:

I am too much a victim of that restlessness which was to have been my subject. And it must be confessed that in the dream of writing I was attracted less by the act and the labour than by the calm and the order which the act would have implied.¹⁹

Ralph's rage for order drives him to consider himself and it is here that critical analysis must begin. In his search for order, Ralph even begins to discern a pattern in the calamitous and chaotic events of his life - "From playacting to disorder: it is the pattern".²⁰ The complex hurt and particular frenzy which drive Ralph in his youth is but the insurgent spirit of

¹⁸The Middle Passage, p. 80.

¹⁹The Mimic Men, p. 32.

²⁰Ibid., p. 184.

the colonial mind. The passivity that infuses him in his exile in London bespeaks the future of colonial politics:

I know that return to my island and to my political life is impossible. The pace of colonial events is quick . . . The career of the colonial politician is short and ends brutally. . . For those who lose, and nearly everyone in the end loses, there is only one course: flight. Flight to the greater disorder, the final emptiness: London and the home counties.²¹

A country that is seen as second-hand and barbarous can only breed incompetence and futility on all levels. Ralph's double deficiency of situation and temperament is rooted in the nature of the landscape of which he is a product. Failure rules pervasively in the derelict land. In earlier novels we witnessed the failure in the smallest of men; the more contemplative eye of The Mimic Men observes the failure in the best.

The theme of placelessness that appears elsewhere in Naipaul's fiction also infects the mood of The Mimic Men. Isabella is not only Trinidad, or Guyana, but "twenty other places". Ralph's quest is for an ideal landscape. Distress over his birth place leads to despair both about the place itself and any surrogates for it. In the end Ralph is infused by a sense of indifference to place.

I no longer dream of ideal landscapes or seek to attach myself to them. All landscapes turn to land, the gold of the imagination to the lead of the reality. . . I like the feeling of impermanence.²²

²¹Ibid., p. 8.

²²Ibid., pp. 10-12.

The affinity between mental state and setting apparent in The Mimic Men, is a further development of the type of subjective perception of landscape evident in A House for Mr. Biswas and Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion. Ralph's preference for mountains and snow as opposed to his natural tropical element, sun and sea, his idea of being shipwrecked on Isabella, reflects inner predilections and dilemmas: "We denied the landscape and the people we could see out of open doors and windows, we who took apples to the teacher and wrote essays about visits to temperate farms."²³ Ralph withdraws from the hot vulgarity of the tropical landscape of Isabella. He imagines himself an Aryan chieftain stalking the enemy amidst the Himalayan snows.

Geographical escape to a new country brings no relief to Ralph Singh. He simply transports a fractured psyche into a new landscape and the "god" of the city eludes him. It is in this light that The Mimic Men can be seen as the continuation of the story of the boy-narrator of Miguel Street. Like this latter, Ralph is aware even from youth of the incongruity between himself and his setting. Ralph's narrative is of himself and others like the boy-narrator, who, lacking the sense of a meaningful existence in their own setting, seek to find it in the landscape of others. This mimicry is encouraged by the deficiencies of their own context:

²³Ibid., p. 95.

To be born on an island like Isabella, an obscure New World transplantation, second-hand and barbarous, was to be born to disorder.²⁴

Ralph and his school friends view the foreign as "the true, pure world":

We, here on our island, handling books printed in this world, and using its goods, had been abandoned and forgotten. We pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World, one unknown corner of it, with all its reminders of the corruption that came so quickly to the new.²⁵

Nurtured on the feeling that true meaning was to be found elsewhere than on his native Isabella, Ralph immigrates to the sterile metropolis of London. The London of his student days is a city of intrigue - sexual exploits on the train to Oxford, dingy rooming houses and finally a mixed marriage to an equally desperate student. Sandra and Ralph are drawn to each other by their mutual aimlessness and despair.

Naipaul's fiction to this point has proven particularly devoid of sexual encounters. In The Mimic Men, the author uses the sexual metaphor to demonstrate the vast gulf that separates individuals and to describe man's essential aloneness:

We seek sex, and are left with two private bodies on a stained bed. The larger erotic dream, the god, has eluded us. It is so whenever, moving out of ourselves, we look for extensions of ourselves.²⁶

The horror of intimacy infects Ralph throughout his student days.

²⁴Ibid., p. 146.

²⁵Ibid., p. 18.

²⁶Ibid., p. 18.

Passing sexual encounters with au-pair girls from Europe save him from the embarrassment of actual emotional contact. Ralph remains emotionally crippled throughout his marriage with Sandra albeit that they are sexually well-matched. Ralph's emotional incapacity and aristocratic disdain is complemented by Sandra's own amorality. The marriage is ultimately sterile, the professed emotions, fraudulent. Ralph comes to see his marriage as "an episode in parenthesis".²⁷ Sex becomes a form of private rage for both Sandra and Ralph. For the latter, this rage is fed by the restlessness which

. . . took me to innumerable tainted rooms with drawn curtains and bedspreads suggesting other warm bodies. And once, more quickening of self disgust than any other thing, I had a sight of the prostitute's supper, peasant food, on a bare table in a back room.²⁸

The inner hollowness, the emotional crippling of which this attitude reeks, culminates in the course of Naipaul's fiction, in the ultimate, sterile figure of the homosexual, Bobby of In a Free State.

If Ralph is unable to find "an extension of himself" in a sexual partner, he is equally doomed to failure in his quest for "the god of the city". London remains for all its student charms, an alienating and alienated landscape:

It is with cities as it is with sex. We seek the physical city and find only a conglomeration of private cells. In the city as nowhere

²⁷Ibid., p. 251.

²⁸Ibid., p. 30.

else we are reminded that we are individuals, units. Yet the idea of the city remains; it is the god of the city that we pursue, in vain.²⁹

By immigrating to London, Ralph merely changes the scene of his existential struggle. The corruption from which he flees is within. Aligning himself with the metropolitan, "white" world and its values, only intensifies his feeling of inner hollowness.

Ralph's quest, no less than that of Mr. Biswas and Mr. Stone, is for a stay against transience. The photograph that Ralph accidentally discovers in his landlord's room arouses in him the same intimations of mortality that affected Mr. Stone. However, even more than the confrontation of life punctuated by death, Ralph is aggravated by the sense of life outliving its point.

I thought I should preserve the photograph. But I left it where I had found it. I thought: let it not happen to me. Death? But that comes to all. Well, then, let me leave more behind. Let my relics be honoured. Let me not be mocked. But even as I tried to put words to what I felt, I knew that my own journey, scarcely begun, had ended in the shipwreck which all my life I had sought to avoid.³⁰

The necessity of finding a purpose to existence lies at the heart of Singh's determination to establish order and coherence in his life by writing it up as a history. More than any document on colonial politics, The Mimic Men is a study in alienation, the pervasive and all-inclusive theme of Naipaul's fiction.

²⁹Ibid., p. 18.

³⁰Ibid., p. 7.

Naipaul's development of this theme is described by Hamner as incremental repetition, "in the sense that the overall impression of his extant works appears to build cumulatively, each new expression of a previous concept modifying and illuminating what has gone before".³¹ In The Mimic Men, Naipaul returns to the Caribbean scene and employs it in a manner that further delineates a sense of the Absurd.

The mimic men of whom the narrator is representative live an illusory existence. Their lives are rooted in fantasy. They resort to the acting out of roles and even while they are aware of the discrepancy of their act, they endeavour to live as though reality were what they pretend it is. Ralph seems to be aware of the existentialist concept of "bad faith" - "We become what we see of ourselves in others".³² He enacts the role of dandy, the extravagant colonial, complete with red cummerbund and indifferent to scholarship, in order to give others and himself the impression of an authentic existence. Ralph comments on his autobiographical attempt:

I find I have indeed been describing the youth and early manhood of a leader of some sort, a politician, or at least a disturber. I have established his isolation, his complex hurt and particular frenzy. And I believe I have also established, perhaps in this proclaimed frivolity, this lack of judgement and balance, the deep feeling of irrelevance and intrusion, his unsuitability for the role into which he was drawn, and his inevitable failure. From playacting to disorder: it is the pattern.³³

³¹Hamner, p. 124.

³²The Mimic Men, p. 100.

³³Ibid., p. 184.

Ralph is constantly aware of himself as an actor in an absurd drama, his every movement recorded by what he refers to as "the celestial camera". He remains sensitive to a conviction of fraudulence, but fails finally to discover his authentic selfhood. Hamner comments that men like Ralph, "are apparently exhausted by the absurdity that plagued them, like men of 'the lost generation', their sensibility to man's inability to realize the ideals that loom just beyond reach has made them cynical and self-destructive".³⁴ Ralph Singh's peculiar interpretation of his past, tempered by his static resignation crescendoes to his final escape into obscurity.

The basic dissatisfaction and alienation that plague Ralph from early childhood, result in his final passivity. The mimicry out of which he attempts to fashion an organized and meaningful existence leads to disillusionment. Lacking the ability to impose any controlling direction on his life, Ralph decides to withdraw from it. The Hindu bias of Singh's and Naipaul's sensibilities reveals itself here. The cyclic pattern of the novel is in keeping with its essentially Hindu ending. Singh's homelessness is celebrated as a virtue at the end.

It does not worry me now, as it worried me when I began this book, that at the age of forty I should find myself at the end of my active life . . . I feel, instead, I have lived through attachment and freed myself from one cycle of events. It gives me joy to find that in so doing I have also fulfilled the fourfold division of life prescribed by our Aryan ancestors. I have been student, householder and man of affairs, recluse.³⁵

³⁴Hamner, p. 58.

³⁵The Mimic Men, p. 250.

Ralph destroys the image of his "vulnerable flesh"³⁶ by resorting to the Hindu ideal of renunciation and detachment. This is a view quite similar to Naipaul's own announcement: "I find I have, without effort, achieved the Buddhist ideal of non-attachment".³⁷ The ineffectual posturings which mark Ralph's early life are relinquished for contemplative obscurity.

The measure of calmness that Ralph attains is fraught with artificiality. The order he seeks to impose on the events of his life is, after all, forced. He shuts out parenthetically all episodes that do not fit in with the pattern. Hamner notes that, "It is significant that around the 'active' part of his life he decides to place parentheses. This is the symbolic gesture he makes to create the semblance of order which has eluded him from the beginning".³⁸ The sterility and futility of his attempt is captured in Ralph's maxim: "So writing, for all its initial distortion, clarifies, and even becomes a process of life".³⁹ As always in Singh's psyche, the cold idea is substituted for and even considered to be better than the warm fact. Only Naipaul's brilliant evocation of an essentially hollow spirit allows this sentence to pass freely. The recording of life becomes an extension of it and like all other extensions Ralph as sought, it remains fraudulent.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 241.

³⁷ Naipaul, "London", p. 16.

³⁸ Hamner, p. 103.

³⁹ The Mimic Men, p. 251.

Earlier in his childhood, Ralph marvelled at the Asvamedha, the blood sacrifice of a horse. The ritualistic deed instilled in him both terror and nostalgia for a time and a culture lost. He saw the deed as a crystallization of a mood:

Was the act no more than it was, accompanied by simple Hindu ritual which anyone might have observed and copied? Or was it an attempt at the awesome sacrifice, the challenge to Nemesis, performed by a shipwrecked man on a desert island?⁴⁰

It is this challenge to fate and doom that is implied in the Hindu concept of renunciation. To free oneself from the cycle of life is to liberate the spirit from the vicissitudes of mortality - the impending sense of absurdity. That Singh comes to interpret his life in this manner is perhaps the greatest indication of wish-fulfillment. This ending, however, is in keeping with the Hindu metaphor by which Naipaul constantly endeavours to translate his vision of the Absurd.

It is significant that in "A Flag on the Island", Naipaul seeks to generate a more cosmopolitan atmosphere by adopting a protagonist from the outside world. As in Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion the attempt is toward a more universal appeal. Unlike Mr. Stone however, Frank is completely familiar with the Caribbean scene. Like Isabella in The Mimic Men, the nameless

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 142.

island ensures an atmosphere of placelessness. It has been argued that in the attempt to universalize his fiction Naipaul has damaged his sense of realism and has in effect gone the route of other self-exiled West Indian authors who critics say have lost the essential contact with the most familiar source of their material. However, emphasis on mental states in the later novels has not been in place of realism. The blending of fantasy and reality in "A Flag on the Island" is literally the attempt by the author to achieve the greater realism of metaphysical placelessness. Naipaul selects regional and localized details for their human association. In this way he ensures a greater sense of realism by employing the peculiarities of the regional scene to act as a metaphor for the larger existential encounter. Hamner notes:

As Naipaul makes clear with increasing assurance in successive novels beginning with A House for Mr. Biswas, background and surroundings influence the shaping of character, and character in turn gives human colour and meaning to the total environment.⁴¹

It comes as no surprise to hear the protagonist of "A Flag on the Island" asserting that "all landscapes are in the end only in the imagination".⁴²

In "A Flag on the Island", memory is used as the creative instrument not just for recovering but for constructing the past.

⁴¹Hamner, p. 81.

⁴²A Flag on the Island, p. 124.

Frank's apparently chaotic turns of memory sift his life into three separate but inter-connected periods, the present when he leaves the ship and makes a bemused tour of the island, the spontaneous revival of his past experiences, and the evocation of the hopeless shabbiness of his future. The disorder that tormented Ralph Singh is celebrated here in the evocation of the frenzied rush of Frank's disturbed sensibilities. Frank is aware of the distorting power of his mind:

In my moods I tell myself that the world is not being washed away; that there is time; that the blurring of fantasy with reality which gives me the feeling of helplessness exists only in my mind. But then I know that the mind is alien and unfriendly, and I am never able to regulate things.⁴³

Given its limited canvas, "A Flag on the Island" is as political a work as The Mimic Men. The changes that corrupt the island are a silent, invisible but chronic condition. The derelict land with its hollow past is particularly susceptible to infection by outside forces. Americanism with the peculiar values it denotes is seen as a cancer destroying even the little goodness that existed in the old order. In The Middle Passage Naipaul comments:

Modernity in Trinidad, then, turns out to be the extreme susceptibility of people who are unsure of themselves and having no taste or style of their own, are eager for instruction.⁴⁴

Frank displays the same concern for theatrics as Ralph

⁴³ Ibid., p. 132.

⁴⁴ The Middle Passage, p. 47.

Singh. He is constantly aware of fraudulence and directs his rage upon every manifestation of inauthenticity. From the changes evident in the islanders it is evident that "existence" for them implies a chronic state of "bad faith" - approving acceptance from the outside world. The derelict land was seen as chaotic and disordered but it was also the scene of authentic struggles for identity.

Once the island had seemed to me flagless. The island was a floating suspended place to which you brought your own flag if you wanted to . . . On the flagless island we, saluting the flag, were going back to America; Ma-Ho was going back to Canton as soon as the war was over; and the picture of Haile Selassie was there to remind Mr. Blackwhite, and to remind us, that he too had a place to go back to. "This place doesn't exist", he used to say, and he was wiser than any of us.⁴⁵

Americanism slowly strangles the individuality of the island and its inhabitants. The mood is one of hysteric nostalgia for a way of life lost. The genius for individuality by which Henry, Blackwhite and others ensured recognition in a stultifying atmosphere is replaced by common mediocrity, unified by modernity. Blackwhite changes from a romantic malcontent to a fashionable black writer. Priest, the itinerant preacher - cum -insurance salesman, is transformed into Gary Priestland, a television personality. Ma Ho's children become girls in frilly short skirts advertising for local rum. The code that existed in Henry's backyard was one of total freedom and genuine

⁴⁵A Flag on the Island, p. 132.

camaraderie informed by the sense of human loss and frustration. The gaiety was of a pure and untainted kind. When Frank returns to the island he finds that modernity has replaced the communal spirit of the island by ritual pretense. What there was of culture on the island has been degraded into a mockery of itself.

Men and women in fancy costumes which were like the waiters' costumes came out on to the stage and began doing a fancy folk dance. They symbolically picked cotton, symbolically cut cane, symbolically carried water. They squatted and swayed on the floor and moaned a dirge. From time to time a figure with a white mask over his face ran among them, cracking a whip; and they lifted their hands in pretty fear. "You see how us niggers suffered", Henry said . . . ⁴⁶

The smugness, the pretenses that have invaded the islanders' sensibilities, drive Frank to the brink of desperation. He identifies completely with the destructive forces of the hurricane. He agrees with Henry: "I wish the hurricane would come and blow away all this: I feel the world need this sort of thing every now and then. A clean break, a fresh start. But the damn world don't end. And we don't dead at the right time". ⁴⁷

The terror of the hurricane reunites Frank with his friends in the old manner. Death and annihilation infuse the islanders with a sense of the old communal spirit. But not for very long. As the storm abates, the island returns to the quotidian mundaneness - the Ma Ho girls do a little jingle on

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 189.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 191.

television:

And in the city where each exhausted person had once more to accommodate himself to his fate, to the life that had not been arrested, I went back to the hotel.⁴⁸

For Frank, the American, there remains only loneliness, even insanity.

The well-bred distaste and quiet desperation evident in earlier works is unleashed in a violent and torrential celebration of annihilation. The danse macabre that marks the story's end is perhaps the finest writing that Naipaul has achieved to date. The fanciful element that shrouds it pertains to Bergman's landscape, of the kind evidenced in "The Seventh Seal". But Naipaul is no avant garde writer nor is he an innovative philosopher. He returns to reality, to the indifferent machinations of a relentless universe which he sees as the only truth. He leaves his character as tormented as he was in the beginning - a fellow sufferer with Camus' Sisyphus.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 213.

CHAPTER FOUR

DISILLUSIONMENT: IN A FREE STATE

"An unfortunate word perhaps, with its juvenile, romantic 1950's associations";¹ these are the qualities Naipaul attributes to the word "rebellion" in "Indian Autobiographies". Rebellion is a concept that pervades all Naipaul's fiction and he uses it in the same sense as Albert Camus - "rebellion as a necessary way to freedom, offering society a look at itself, an opportunity for self-assessment, the possibility of achievement".² It is rebellion that Naipaul sees missing in societies where ritual and myth have provided all the answers. From The Mystic Masseur to "A Flag On the Island", Naipaul has explored the theme of rebellion in one form or another. In A Free State is also concerned with rebellion but it attacks the problem from the other side. It is a book about the absence of rebellion; about resignation and surrender.

In A Free State is therefore a study in disillusionment. Each of the characters depicted in the prose pieces which constitute the novel exemplify, to varying degrees, the decadence and emptiness consequent upon living inauthentically in a world which is devoid of meaning. This lack of meaning manifests

¹V. S. Naipaul, "Indian Autobiographies", The Overcrowded Barracoon, p. 59.

²Paul Theroux, V. S. Naipaul. An Introduction to His Works, (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1972), p. 115.

itself in the vision of cosmic homelessness that pervades the novel. The tone darkens to the verge of despair and the novelist himself must finally step into his own novel in order to initiate whatever positive action there may be.

The theme is not new to Naipaul. His entire literary career has been an attempt to demonstrate the inevitability of defeat and personal failure. From The Mystic Masseur to The Loss of El Dorado, the frustration of energy and personal desire has been the dominant idea treated. For the individual, West Indian or not, rebellion or non-acquiescence has been shown as a largely futile exercise. With its Epilogue, Prologue and, as it were, three "acts", the novel's structure suggests Greek tragedy. This reinforces the idea of a cosmic tragic vision which is repeated more and more emphatically as the novel progresses.

The metaphor of exile is appropriately Naipaul's medium for translating his view of reality. Whatever the geographical location, a cruise ship on the Mediterranean, Egypt, London, Washington D.C., or Africa, Naipaul's characters are all suspended ambivalently in "free states". Like the fictional characters in the stories, the tramp in the Prologue and the tourists in the Epilogue are also drifting about on the surface of life, observers incapable of catching hold of the human reality.

What is this reality? In "Tell Me Who To Kill", it is revealed symbolically in:

The rain and the house and the mud, the field at the back with the pará-grass bending down with the rain, the donkey and the smoke from the kitchen, my father in the gallery and my brother in the room on the floor, and that boy opening his mouth to scream, like in Rope.³

Only lovingly retained images from his favourite movies can explain reality to the nameless Trinidadian, who, in his defeat, becomes an Everyman. The narrator's unsettling discovery is that he cannot lay the cause for his tragedy upon any person.

O God, show me the enemy. Once you find out who the enemy is, you can kill him. But these people here they confuse me. Who hurt me? Who spoil my life? Tell me who to beat back.⁴

In reality the only enemy is the pará-grass and the mud. He has been determined by his very landscape for tragedy. His life is like an absurd drama. This is the fatalistic type of vision that rules Naipaul's fiction. All attempts at rebellion are finally futile. Any ideal of love or rising above one's station in life is to be shattered.

Yet, man trapped in his landscape must attempt to escape. In the Trinidadian setting, the pursuit of education becomes the only means of escape. Nurtured on American movies, success for the narrator of "Tell Me Who To Kill" becomes the emulation of the West. Dayo must be like Farley Granger. Mimicry of the West becomes the norm and faced with the reality of his rustic Indian family the narrator announces:

³V. S. Naipaul, In A Free State, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 102.

⁴Ibid., p. 102.

I get the ambition and shame for all of them.
 The ambition is like shame and the shame is
 like a secret, and it is always hurting.⁵

It is this sense of shame and ambition that induces the narrator to want the best for his younger brother, to put himself in debt in order that his brother should satisfy the highest ideal of his ambition, and finally, that instigates his emigration to London to ensure that his brother would not be a failure like Uncle Stephen's son. The narrator intuitively feels his defeat from the very moment he embarks upon his scheme and, indeed, both his curry house enterprise and his brother are failures. A murder somewhere in the past for which he has accepted guilt makes it impossible for him ever to return home.

Convinced from childhood that he has no life of his own, the narrator can only define himself in terms of his brother's future. This problem of self-definition runs throughout In A Free State. In "One Out of Many", Santosh always seeks to define himself in terms of another, first his master and then Prya. The Africans in "In a Free State", think it progressive to mimic the English style just as Bobby attempts to define himself in terms of Africa. The desire for anonymity reigns supreme. Bobby tries to blend into the African landscape with his native shirt and his employment of pidgin English. Santosh chooses to remain anonymous by hiding from society. Dayo's brother enjoys the anonymity allowed him by his job in a factory and his working

⁵Ibid., p. 65.

clothes. The desire for ordinariness, for anonymity, describes the attempt of the immigrant to blend into his new landscape, to emerge into the scheme of life. It is inevitable that their attempt is doomed to failure for their lives are based on issues outside of themselves. Dayo cannot be what his brother wants him to be. Santosh must realize that his master is as young as himself and hardly respected.

Naipaul's concern in the three works which make up In A Free State, is with the displaced person as he displays the many psychic realities of exile in our contemporary world. The displacement, for Naipaul, shows itself most powerfully in the cultural dimension. Santosh cannot come to terms with America. Because of his cultural alienation from them, Americans remain for him, people inhabiting a television existence. Nor can Santosh identify with the American Blacks, who by the very dictates of his religion are anathema to him. Yet he can identify with their rebellion. He translates his own inept rebellion into their insurrection. He revels in the burning-down of Washington.

In America, Santosh learns what it is to be an individual, but this lesson is painful for him since it goes against the grain of his religion and culture. All individualism does is disconcert him further and ossify him in the path of exile. The order, the harmony, the security of his Bombay life, are lost to him forever. Freeing himself, becoming an individual, has

taken Santosh out of the flow of Hindu life.

All that my freedom has brought me is the knowledge that I have a face and have a body, that I must feed this body and clothe this body for a certain number of years. Then it will be over.⁶

Santosh finds relief in self mortification. He marries the black hubshi woman. He becomes a stranger in his own house. He has gone further than the ideal of Hindu renunciation, he has resorted to self-castigation.

"One Out of Many" and "Tell Me Who To Kill" reveal the private anguish of men who are freed by immigration from the cultural boundaries which defined their lives but who are forced to pay the cost - detachment, fear and final impotence. They are finally unable ever to return to the true cultural home. This can be seen as the plight of the artist, Naipaul himself, who is an exile from his homeland, who can never fit back into the rhythm of island life because he has chosen to satirize and clinically analyse aspects of it that were once second nature to him. The "free state" is one of painful exile, made more acute by the nostalgia for the lost cultural home.

Despite his English sophistication, Naipaul is still very much a writer of the so-called "Third World". Imperialism, even in decay, is the unforgettable experience with which he tries to come to terms. In his earlier Trinidad novels, he drew attention to the destruction by imperialism of cultural authenticity. This is the dilemma of every Third-Worlder who has emerged from the colonial era. Even after independence, the

⁶Ibid., p. 58.

Third World has to come to terms with its colonial heritage and its peculiar history forged in servility and cultural subjugation. One may laugh at the King's photograph in "the English style", but the tragedy is implicit. Bobby and Linda, despite their romantic longings, must be expelled from Africa. This is the reality of the colonial backlash, the price that must be paid for enforcing an alien culture on a conquered people.

For Linda, as for Bobby, Africa remains the "dark continent" portrayed by the European colonists. They speak of "the smell of Africa", "the mystery", "the forest language", unable to penetrate the sheer inscrutability of African culture. Naipaul constantly refers to the facelessness of the Africans. From the Zulu in the bar, to the soldiers on military manoeuvres, the idea of cultural duplicity is evident. Moving towards political freedom, it is the "darker" side of Africa, the mystery reflected in the ambiguous laughter, that imposes itself menacingly on the colonial minds of Bobby and Linda.

In the first two stories, Naipaul describes the plight of the victims of colonialism. The metaphor of cultural exile is extended into a universal anguish for a way of life lost forever. In "In A Free State", Naipaul is documenting the type of neuroses that invented and tried to penetrate the colonial system. Bobby and Linda, the people on the compound, the Colonel, are all actors of colonialism on the vast African stage, each

misunderstanding Africa, each trying to see in her something she is not. They infect their view of Africa with their own personal neuroses. Africa becomes symbolic mental landscape aiding in Naipaul's characterisation. Naipaul's concern is with the depiction of landscape in so far as it throws light upon the psyches of his characters.

There is little physical action in the story. The primary focus of the novel is the disclosure of the conflicting personalities of the two main characters, Bobby and Linda. Above the emotional pressures generated in the car, external tensions are ever-present. Bad roads in a hostile country are symbolically the price these white expatriates must pay for their neutrality, for their "white-settler" freedom.

We first meet Bobby as he attempts to seduce a young Zulu boy. We identify with him as he voices an appreciation of the natives and scenery. As the trip southward continues, it becomes apparent that his love for Africa and Africans is a self-delusion. Africa has provided the landscape in which Bobby can adjust to his homosexuality, but its therapeutic qualities are belied by Bobby's inability to communicate with others. Mutual antagonism marks his relationship with Linda. This is due not only to her sex but also to her snobbery, which throws light upon Bobby's own liberal pretenses. In spite of Bobby's protestations of concern and respect for the natives, it is obvious that he does not really understand Africa. He tries as hard as possible to blend into the landscape by express-

ing his admiration for Africans and his sense of guilt at the colonial experience - "If I come into the world again I want to come with your colour".⁷ On the last page of "In A Free State", Bobby's personal unfitness for aiding in the development of a new African state is made explicit. Africa is not his home, as he contended. He is an expatriate and is a victim of the same colonial prejudices that have already driven many of his white colleagues out of the country. He remains in the state of exile already inhabited by Santosh and the nameless Trinidadian, in the painfully "free state" of homelessness.

Bobby's liberal attitudes are a pathetic substitute for real rebellion against colonial attitudes. His ineptness is revealed in the way in which he allows himself to be imposed upon by the very people to whom he extends his "courtesy". We can compare him to the old Colonel who transfers his rebellion against the new political state into ineffectual anger. The Colonel clings to the lifeless trappings of the dying colonial culture by trying to instill fear into his domestic staff. Yet he knows deep within him that he is doomed to be murdered by them. The tramp in the Prologue sets the direction for the attempt at rebellion - futile and ineffective.

For Naipaul and his characters, there is no geographical determination to happiness. Crude reality asserts itself regardless of place. Bobby, Santosh, Dayo's brother, Naipaul himself,

⁷Ibid., p. 107.

have tried to make new homes in foreign lands. Undermining the efforts of each is the fact that they have merely transposed their old selves and dilemmas into new settings. The metaphysical anguish, the need to find meaning remains, but it is intensified by the cultural alienation that is consequent upon immigration. In the very quest for "freedom", they have crippled any chance of returning home to the true state of belonging and indeed, to true freedom.

The perspective of In A Free State is characteristically bleak. The decay and desolation of life, as Naipaul sees it, is conveyed in the following description:

The blackness grew intense very quickly. The pale walls of villas set far back in gloomy overgrown gardens were barely visible; verandahs were like part of the surrounding blackness. There were no fires here. The trees were low above the lane; the sense of openness had gone.⁸

Rebellion or non-acquiescence have been shown to be futile in a meaningless world, where the symbolic centres of culture are shattered, never to be retrieved. How are we to interpret the action of the artist in the Epilogue? Naipaul himself comments, "I felt exposed, futile and wanted only to be back at my table".⁹ The sense of injustice translated into decisive action becomes embarrassing. The embarrassment stems in part, perhaps, from the artist's recognition that in the entire scheme of things,

⁸Ibid., p. 188.

⁹Ibid., p. 243.

his intrusion into the Egyptian landscape is effective only for a short while. As soon as he leaves, the injustice resumes. His rebellion, like the tramp's, is ineffectual. The novel lacks a moral centre precisely because it conveys no sense of a positive alternative. It denies the effectiveness of action as a means of expunging the sense of injustice and anger dramatized in the novel. The most the novelist can do is intellectualize and, surely enough, the Epilogue of In A Free State finds Naipaul nostalgically hypothesising a pastoral state of innocence.

Perhaps that had been the only pure time,
at the beginning when the ancient artist,
knowing no other land, had learned to look
at his own land and had seen it as complete.¹⁰

For Naipaul, the colonial artist, son of indentured immigrants, there can be no pure time. He has seen too many lands. His cultural roots have been shaken. He can never truly return to the cultural home. It is lost, perhaps for ever, and with it has been lost all sense of meaning. The tragic tone turns into the elegiac. The flight toward freedom has been for Naipaul and continues to be for his characters, a flight towards imprisonment.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 246.

CONCLUSION

Rebellion, flight, rootlessness, alienation, dependency: they are all related concepts in Naipaul's work. In the elaborate expression of these themes in his essays, travel books and novels, Naipaul has illustrated his essential doctrine of the moral and social role of the artist. Naipaul maintains that each artist is bound to impose his "vision" on the world and that the artist who fails to do so abandons half of his responsibility. This does not imply facile didacticism. Naipaul's fictional work adheres to the factual harshness of reality but is devoid of didactic prescriptions for the edification of man. What he is advocating, is a turning away from the type of literature which fails to rise above a "documentary" reporting of reality:

The violence some of us are resisting is not the violence which is a counter of story-telling. It is the violence which is clinical and documentary in intention and makes no statement beyond that of bodily pain and degradation. It is like the obscene photograph. It deals anonymously with anonymous flesh, quickened only by pleasure or pain; and this anonymity is a denial of art.¹

The artist who refuses to contribute to this dereliction of artistic responsibility prevalent in contemporary literature, must produce something meaningful out of brute reality. This is the task that Naipaul has assumed for himself and it is one

¹V. S. Naipaul, "The Documentary Heresy", Twentieth Century, CLXXIII (Winter, 1964), 107.

that he has pursued diligently. The contemplative bias of Naipaul's sensibility has transformed harsh reality into an experience that in its very subtlety leads the reader to desire improvement in the quality of life.

It may be argued that in the age of Roland Barthes and Alain Robbe-Grillet, Naipaul's novels are completely lacking in the type of experimentation in form that is connected with the modern novel. Indeed Naipaul seems to be working in the same direction as novelists such as Saul Bellow and John Fowles who are trying, independently, to revive some of the old genres of the novel in order to put an end to the too frequent obituaries pronounced on the novel. Indeed the ideas put forward in "The Documentary Heresy", make it almost certain that Naipaul would deplore "Le Nouveau Roman", as "the profoundest type of violation, the final dereliction of artistic responsibility".²

By the standards of this "lesser vision", "man is what he is; he need no longer aspire".³ However, Naipaul rejects the kind of egalitarian levelling that refuses to distinguish individuals from the mass. Naipaul argues that social and human improvement, the instigation of which is the purpose of the novel, must necessarily begin with a positive recognition of difference. Dissatisfaction with mediocrity, the right kind of "snobbery", can herald improvement.

²Ibid., p. 108.

³Ibid., p. 108.

Dickens was horrified by the low. . . .Orwell wondered whether this didn't mean that there was something "unreal" in Dickens' attack upon society. Unreal? We may ask whether Dickens' attitude - passion, snobbery and fear fully avowed, as it is in the statement, "I do not want to be like them" - isn't more constructive and in the end less corrupting than the doctrinaire romanticism which is used to fault him.⁴

Indeed, "snobbery and fear fully avowed", verging on nervous hysteria is the dominant face of Naipaul's attitude as revealed in his works. What is striking about this attitude is its very sincerity, its unashamedly human expression of doubt and, at times, of impotence. In this special blend of humility and arrogance lies true genius.

⁴V. S. Naipaul, "What's Wrong With Being a Snob?", Saturday Evening Post, CCKL. (June 3, 1967), 12, 18.

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