

Not in their stars but in themselves

THE THIRD WORLD IN V. S. NAIPAUL

by Walter C. Clemens, Jr.

I first heard of V. S. Naipaul in 1977. Preparing for a Fulbright lectureship in Trinidad, I asked State Department experts what to read. Their answer: V. S. Naipaul. Today, if a student were to ask me what author to read to learn about the Third World, my answer would be the same: Naipaul.

What is the Third World? Political sociologists and economists proffer definitions and statistics. Naipaul gives us vivid images and stories about people who live there. His purposes have been literary and reportorial. They have also been deeply personal, for Naipaul has sought to escape and transcend the Hindu-Trinidad milieu in which he was raised.

Literature and reportage, done in the style of Naipaul (or Joseph Conrad, whose works were read to Naipaul at age ten) are no less valuable modes for understanding the Third World than the footnoted and statistic-filled analyses of the World Bank, the Institute for Policy Studies, or the *Institut mezhdunarodnykh otnoshenii i mirovoi ekonomiki*. What other writer would prepare the Western reader so well for the headlines flashing from around the Third World: "Resurgence of Peronism in Argentina"; "Right-wing Attacks Upon Khomeini"; "New Violence Against Malaysia's Chinese"?

Born in Trinidad in 1931, Naipaul lived there for eighteen years before moving to England, where he and his English wife now reside. His first works—novels such as *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1976) and the almost Tolstoian epic *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1976)—sprang from the transplanted Indian subculture of his childhood. Soon Naipaul wrote about the Caribbean generally, creating synthetic islands and characters such as those in *The Mimic Men* (1976) and retracing the region's history in nonfictional works such as *The Middle Passage* (1981).

Among the Believers, published by Knopf in 1981, was Naipaul's seventeenth book and his seventh work of nonfiction. In the roughly twenty-five years since publication of his first and most comic book, *The*

Mystic Masseur (1957), Naipaul has broadened his scope to take in nearly the entire Third World along with First World glimpses of Washington, Milan (*In a Free State* [1977]), and English life (*Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* [1977]) and vignettes of London as experienced by visiting Third Worlders, e.g., in *The Mimic Men*. There is almost nothing about the Second World of Communist countries except for some scenes of beehive Chinese in *In a Free State*. India (from which Naipaul's grandfather emigrated to Trinidad) has been explored in two nonfiction works, *An Area of Darkness* (1981) and *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977). The sixteenth to early nineteenth-century roots of South America have been studied in *The Loss of El Dorado* (1977; buttressed by much archival research in Spain and London), while recent Argentine history is dissected in *The Return of Eva Peron* (1980). At times Naipaul writes a journalistic essay, such as "Michael X and the Black Power Killings in Trinidad" or "A New King for the Congo" (both published in *The Return of Eva Peron*), and later expands them into novels. By accretion, Naipaul expands his view even wider.

Wherever Naipaul travels in the Third World, he finds many of the same characteristics: cultural sterility; social and economic paralysis; political posturing; and historical ignorance—not just of world history but of the local variety as well. But the most pervasive malaise retarding the Third World is parasitism: utilizing the technological and even the humanistic achievements of the West without possessing the discipline and skills required to generate those achievements; often without *wanting* to possess those skills; even without *recognizing* that these skills do not exist in one's own milieu.

Why are so many Third World countries in this predicament? Naipaul points to a form of culture shock. The West's resources—military, industrial, scientific—have overwhelmed the Third World, leaving an almost unbridgeable chasm. Many Third Worlders respond by denying that the chasm exists and by trying to acquire however they can whatever they can of the good life percolating outward from Western Europe and North America.

Naipaul contradicts the *dependencia* theorists who

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blame underdevelopment of the Third World on the First. In effect, Naipaul concurs with David McClelland that underdevelopment derives from a cultural-psychological factor: a low need for achievement. Low devotion to the work ethic is compounded by almost infinite varieties of the "amoral familism" that Edward Banfield claims constitute "the moral basis of a backward society" in his 1958 work of that name. To be sure, the extended Hindu families portrayed in Naipaul's early Trinidad novels work hard—for themselves—but these families seldom cooperate with each other or with the still more individualistic blacks who make up over half the population on most Caribbean islands. One element of modernity, it seems, is sufficient trust to make contracts and enter long-term commitments, not just with fellow citizens outside one's family, but even with foreigners living in other lands.

Whence the cultural impoverishment and Hobbesian fears of the Third World? Much of the Caribbean and Latin America was depopulated of its native inhabitants and settled by pirates, soldiers, priests, and other freebooters, and by the slaves whom they coerced to work their estates. This pattern left vast regions of the New World with a rapacious, war-of-all-against-all outlook and even less disposed to mutual assistance than the southern Italian villages described by Banfield. North America, Australia, and New Zealand, by contrast, were settled largely by yeoman, most of whom accepted the Protestant rather than the Catholic view of work and who relied more on self-help than on slavery. (New Zealand, no less a colony than Argentina, "also with a past of native dispossession...had made some contribution to the world," Naipaul writes in *Eva*. "More gifted men and women have come from its population of three million than from the twenty-three millions of Argentines.")

While the backwardness of the Caribbean and Latin America may be due in part to the kinds of explorers and workers who settled there, the same alibi does not hold for the black African and Muslim countries studied by Naipaul. There, for the most part, indigenous peoples remain, also with a low need for achievement, scapegoating others for their problems. Their rage often erupts against the "Jews of Africa," such as the transplanted Indian merchant in *A Bend in the River* (1979) or the Overseas Chinese resented and villified in Malaysia and Indonesia.

BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Naipaul is not blind to the ways in which Europeans have exploited Latin America, Africa, and Asia. But he believes that the present causes of underdevelopment lie more *within* those societies than in their manipulation by metropolises of the West. Naipaul's interpretation implies severe limits to what can be achieved by "foreign aid" unless recipient peoples are ready and willing to utilize such aid. His message is painful to Third Worlders, but it pierces the heart of their dilemma: Even with foreign or oil revenues, for genuine advancement and self-respect people must learn to lift themselves by their own bootstraps.

Because Naipaul chastises the parasitism and

mimicry of the Third World, some readers presume he is a misanthrope. Several incidents in *In a Free State* hint at Naipaul's true feelings. In Egypt he stops a game where Italian tourists throw crumbs to waifs, who are whipped by a sort of concert master keeping them a certain distance from the stage. In *Among the Believers* he often asks Islamic fundamentalists why, if they seek justice, they do not simply attack the roots of inequality, rather than preaching the Koran. What can Naipaul—one man—do to alter the ways imbedded in the moral bases of backward societies? Perhaps by helping the world to understand the malady, the prospects for preventive medicine and for appropriate therapy will improve.

Himself a kind of displaced person, Naipaul's forte is the uprooted, the dislocated modern man, torn between tradition and modernity, between local roots and the cosmopolitan demands and opportunities of the twentieth century. Naipaul's characters are not driven by any large "ism" except religion—primarily, in his early works, Hinduism; more recently, Islam. His protagonists are most often motivated by a variety of personal concerns: coping with rootlessness; escaping from a domineering wife or in-laws; making one's own career or providing for one's offspring. The most driven of Naipaul's characters, those who took part in "The Killings in Trinidad," are mixed bloods and products of broken families. Like Eva Peron, many are illegitimate and poor, trying to ease deep psychic wounds.

Naipaul's searchlight, though piercing, somehow misses many salient features of Third World life, negative as well as positive. Thus, he writes rather little about militarism, environmental degradation (except for the human filth that disgusts him in India), starvation, infant mortality. Some of these problems, to be sure, might be alleviated if parasitism were replaced by self-sustaining growth. Such growth, however, is unlikely unless the vicious cycle of poverty and mutual distrust can be broken at several points simultaneously.

Naipaul also misses some of the brightest and most promising aspects of the Third World: the balanced statesmanship of leaders such as Anwar el-Sadat; the disciplined scholarship of leaders such as Eric Williams and Julius Nyerere; the psychological support rendered to many Third Worlders by their extended families, limiting anomie and alienation even while poverty persists; the possibility that foreign investment and a changed climate may reverse an economic tailspin, as in Jamaica.

"WORLDS" IN COLLISION

Among the Believers is in some ways Naipaul's most ambitious work, for it takes him to four countries—Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia—seeking to comprehend the fundamentalist revival shaking the Islamic world and its neighbors. Though Naipaul did substantial homework, his Islamic journey lasted but seven months and was conducted in conditions making it difficult for Naipaul or any other observer to see the forest for the trees. Though each of the countries he studies is important in the world of Islam, his

or two Arabic countries as well.

Owing to Naipaul's longer immersion in Caribbean life and history, one can have some confidence that he understands the broader context in which his earliest stories occur. *Among the Believers* makes much greater demands on the author and his readers. Naipaul's selection of events and the overall picture he portrays depend excessively on chance meetings with individuals who deigned to talk with him—taxi drivers, writers, clergymen. And while Naipaul utilized a variety of European and Creole languages in his earlier work, his Islamic journey depends mightily upon translation. (For a thoughtful critique of *Among the Believers* see H. R. Trevor-Roper in *The New York Review of Books* [November 5, 1981].)

Naipaul condemns Iran's Islamic revolution because it has produced no more than temporary ecstasy and mass prayer rallies. Khomeini's rule has brought forward, not law and institutions, but anarchy, hysteria, and, for one of Naipaul's journalist acquaintances, an empty office. That office, with its typewriter and printing equipment, advertisers and distributors, depended on a complex, "materialist" society with its own hard rules, not simply faith. Islamic revival, Naipaul concludes, has not come from within but from the worldwide spread of twentieth-century civilization. The late twentieth century had given new meaning to old Islamic ideas of justice and shaken old static societies. And it is this century—not the Islamic faith—that can provide the answers: not just technology but institutions, legislation, economic systems.

Naipaul has as yet written little about communism, but he ends his Islamic journey with the prediction that, while Islamic fundamentalism looks backward, many disgruntled revolutionaries may still look to Russia for a vision of a society cleansed and purified, a society of believers.

EVEN AFTER SEVENTEEN BOOKS, SOME QUESTIONS remain unanswered. To what extent are residents of the Third World different from those of the First or Second? Is human nature somehow more depraved in the Third? Naipaul does not spell out his answer to this latter question, but it is, I infer, "Yes." Tradition, circumstance, and wealth have conspired to give the First World a civic culture and a work ethic rarely found in the Third. What may be tolerable in the First World as "intellectual diversions" (e.g., salon and street revolution in France, 1968) become "horrible realities" when transformed in "the less intellectually stable south," as in the guerrilla and police terror rocking Argentina before and after Naipaul's *Eva*.

Is Naipaul right? How does Mobutu compare with Hitler? Are the Argentine generals diverting and slaughtering their people for the Malvinas more reprehensible than superpower presidents squandering resources on overkill? Human nature, I fear, does not vary much from one culture to another. If First Worlders are more civil, they also are more lethal. For honor or other reasons, the British homefront backed its forces in the Falklands no less than the Argentines their boys in the Malvinas. Again, as it happened, the resources—human as well as material—of the First World overwhelmed the Third.

In the Middle East we see a melange of First and Third World forces struggling for supremacy; foreign and local arms, local blood—all contribute to the carnage.

If nuclear deterrence fails, Third World terror will look like child's play. Third Worlders have excuses, no matter how lame, for backwardness. What explanations justify the waste and destruction with which Americans and Russians threaten humanity? Given his sharp eye and tongue, Naipaul should return to Washington, visit Moscow, and then assay the "holy Land."

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