NAIPAUL – INDIANNESS/ENGLISHNESS

Adina PAICU[*]

Abstract: *V.S. Naipaul, the main subject of this paper, is a British writer of Indian origin. His literary activity is a vast one covering different areas of interest. In 2001, he received the Nobel Prize for Literature and, in 1990, he was named Knight of the British Crown. The main themes presented in his novels are hybridity, nationalism, the lost/regain of the Indian identity, the effects of colonialism on the Indian people and post-colonialism. VS Naipaul's novels are, in the same time, autobiographical and travelogues. They present us a close and personal insight of both his country of adoption – England and of his birthplace – India. This paper intends to present the co-existence of Indianness and Englishness in Naipaul's literary activity and life. I structured my paper into three parts: the first part presents the close relation between Naipaul's autobiographical writing, his knowledge of India's past and the field of travel writing. The second part is concentrated on the co-existence of Indianness and Englishness in VS Naipaul's books and travelogues. The third part will focus on the writer's Indian trilogy where both these notions can be found. The paper will end with the Conclusions which underline, once again, the perfect combination between the Indian and British literature found in his books and the idea that, although Naipaul's has Indian descent, he is a fine representative of the British, contemporary literature.*

Keywords: *VS Naipaul, Indianness/Englishness, Indian trilogy.*

Introduction

As I presented in the abstract, the paper is structured into three parts: the first part presents the close relation between Naipaul's autobiographical writing and the field of travel writing. In the last thirty years or so, theoretical writing on autobiography has blossomed, autobiographies written from specifically female perspective or from the perspective of members of the ethnic minorities have proliferated, and the genre has been a fertile ground for experimental writing. Autobiographical writing can reflect some of the main preoccupations of postmodernism, which has often been defined in terms of questions about our knowledge of the past and the difficulty of articulating our relationship to it. Such issues abound in recent life-writing. With travel writing we situate ourselves in the much larger field of life-writing, with its numerous avenues for exploration. The ethno-historical significance and the narrative problematics confer travel-writing a privileged status much enhanced during the recent decades, and the reputation of a hitherto neglected genre rose considerably. Bookshops abound in travel guides, travel books – dutifully accompanied by conversation books in as many foreign languages – and the more history-conscious customers would look for the ancient Greek and Roman travelogues with an obvious rise in reputation towards the end of the twentieth century. Paul Theroux, Bruce Charwin, Ryszard Kapucinski and Robyn Davidson are widely acclaimed authors, to whom Naipaul should be dutifully added. Assessing his own writing, Naipaul stresses the specificity of his kind of 'travel writing' in which does more than describe the routs he follows in his travels:

[*] "Constantin Brancusi" University, Târgu-Jiu, paicu.adina@gmail.com

BDD-A30020 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 17:00:33 UTC)

"What I do is quite different. I travel on a theme. I travel to make an inquiry. I am not a journalist. I am taking with me the gifts of sympathy, observation, and curiosity that I developed as an imaginative writer. The books I write now, these inquires, are really constructive narratives."

In his *Aspects de la Biography* (1928), André Maurois theoretically justifies the biographer's perspective. According to him, "the modern biographer, if honest, will never say: Here is a great minister, a great writer. A legend has been built around his name. This legend and only this is the one I want to tell." No. He thinks: 'Here is a man. I am in the possession of a number of documents and testimonies of him. I want to try and draw a true portrait of him. What will it look like? I do not want to know the answer before finishing it.' Nevertheless, the 'historical' character is introduced by another 'historical' character, the author. And this particular author - in Naipaul's case – is neither Caribbean, nor Indian, and not even European. But, if we consider literature in English as post-colonial literature, our approach is entirely justifiable.

Another significant notion presented in this part is the meaning of the concept of travel writing as seen in Naipaul's non-fiction. My intention is to decipher the more or less hidden meanings that author inserted in both his novels and his travel writing, with the precise purpose, appropriate in the perspective of Naipaul's fiction – of making room for doubt and questioning and creating both a complex interior debate and many peer discussions. I am also considering the relation, if any, between biography, autobiography and the travel writing which might contain elements of both. Autobiography is a special literary genre, which situates itself somewhere between literature and history but its position is not clearly defined.

The second part of my paper answers the following questions that identify the degree of Indianness or Englishness reflected in VS Naipaul's literary activity and life: How much of an Indian is the Trinidad-born Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, a subject of the British crown? What is the extent of Naipaul's Indianness/Englishness?

"On the basis of his 13 books--novels, short-story collections, works of history and travel-- Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul is, at 44, one of the most significant and original writers in the world today. His last novel, "Guerrillas," was named by the editors of The New York Times Book Review as "probably the best novel of 1975." His admirers include Margaret Drabble, Alfred Kazin and Anthony Powell.

Naipaul (pronounced Ny-Paul) is an Indian by descent, a Trinidadian by birth, a Briton by citizenship. He has lived in all three societies, and he has bitter feelings about them all: India is unwashed, Trinidad is unlearned, England is intellectually and culturally bankrupt. At best, each is a "second-rate" country. But he is no more critical of his native lands than of any other. Because of his background, he could be a card-carrying flag-waving member of the third world, but he supports no organization, cherishes no chauvinism. He is as cynical about emerging nations as he is about dying ones.

But whether he is talking about politics, literature or his own daily life, he ameliorates his cynicism with a rich, and even exhilarating, sense of humour. He has a huge, infectious laugh, usually directed against himself. Despite premonitions that he might be difficult to approach, in our conversations I found him exceedingly open, friendly and accessible.

He is a man split by his own contradictions. "My most difficult thing to overcome," he says, "was being torn in Trinidad. That crazy resort place! How on earth can you have serious writing from a crazy resort place?" Calypso, steel drums, "Island

BDD-A30020 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 17:00:33 UTC)

in the Sun" -- the image is the absolute antithesis of his ascetic genius. In Trinidad, and wherever he has gone, he has been an outsider. His alienation is the source of his malaise, but it is also the source of his art. When he visited India for the first time, he suddenly found himself for once in his life a member of the majority. Everyone looked like him--and it frightened him. "One does get addicted to being different," he says.

This "difference" is noticeable in his appearance and personality--he looks Indian, while his manner of dress and speech are those of a cultivated English gentleman--and it extends deep into the man and his work. As his friend Paul Theroux, an American novelist ("The Family Arsenal") who lives in London, says, "With Naipaul, his tradition begins with him." Although critics have compared his works to those of Conrad, Greene, Forster and others, he is the first of his kind. He is a colonial who writes about the empire--after its decline and fall. He is also, as Theroux points out, "a complete man of letters, a complete writer--like Edmund Wilson or V. S. Pritchett--who has a vision of society and pursues it."

That vision is of a society consuming itself. As a colonial, he condemns not only colonialism--for its burden of slavery that masquerades as patronage--but also the colonials, for idolizing and imitating the master, for being slavish "mimic men." Naipaul includes himself, or at least an earlier version of himself, in the charge. In the beginning his primary ambition was to go to England. "I had never wanted to stay in Trinidad," he wrote in his book "The Middle Passage." "When I was in fourth form I wrote a vow on the end-paper of Kennedy's 'Revised Latin' to leave within five years. I left after six, and for many years afterward in England, falling asleep in bedsitters with the electric fire on, I [was] awakened by the nightmare that I was back in tropical Trinidad." Naipaul meant the actual Trinidad of his childhood but the reference is also to a Trinidad of the minds. In his work he has continually searched for his roots. But wherever he has gone--to the India of his ancestors, back into Caribbean history in "The Loss of El Dorado" -- he has found dereliction. He has discovered another "Trinidad."[1]

"Naipaul's reputation, as a novelist and travel writer, has always been split. For John Thieme, editor of the Journal of Commonwealth Literature, he is a "remarkable forerunner of displacement and migrancy as the late 20th-century predicament". Resident in Britain since 1950, he has won all the major literary prizes - including the Booker in 1971 - and was knighted in 1990. He scooped the first David Cohen British literature prize for a lifetime's achievement in 1993, beating such contenders as William Golding, Ted Hughes and Iris Murdoch. In 2001 Sir Vidiadhar Surjprasad Naipaul received the most desired prize of all – the Nobel Prize.

With 26 books over a 45-year career, Naipaul has become the foremost literary interpreter of the third world for a British and American readership. Yet his pronouncements such as "Nothing was made in Trinidad" or "Africa has no future" have brought much hostility. The 1992 Nobel laureate, St Lucian poet Derek Walcott, who called him "VS Nightfall" in a poem, described him as "our finest writer of the English sentence", whose beautiful prose was "scarred by scrofula", by his "repulsion towards Negroes" and the "self-disfiguring sneer that is praised for its probity".

According to Edward Said, professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University, while Naipaul, in the west, is "considered a master novelist and an important witness to the disintegration and hypocrisy of the third world, in the postcolonial world he's a marked man as a purveyor of stereotypes and disgust for the

[1] https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/06/07/specials/naipaul-roots.html

BDD-A30020 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 17:00:33 UTC)

world that produced him - though that doesn't exclude people thinking he's a gifted writer."

Increasingly, Naipaul's public attacks have been on targets closer to home. He likened Tony Blair to a pirate whose "socialist revolution" had imposed a "plebeian culture". He has said Dickens "died from self-parody" and EM Forster knew nothing of India but "the garden boys whom he wished to seduce", and states that he does not have the time to read Salman Rushdie.

Naipaul, whose humour is often facetious, has of late been seen as a worthy heir to Evelyn Waugh - a good writer and a reactionary - whose son, Auberon, was a close friend. On stage at the National Theatre in 1990, Naipaul described Ayatollah Khomeini's 1989 fatwa against Rushdie as an "extreme form of literary criticism", then threw his head back and laughed. A decade earlier, asked by Elizabeth Hardwick what the dot on a Hindu woman's forehead meant, he replied, "It means, 'My head is empty." Naipaul is never short of champions of what is described as his fearless veracity. Jason Cowley, in the Observer last month, said he was a "cold, clear-eyed prophet, a scourge of sentimentality, irrationality and lazy, left-liberal prejudices".

Naipaul, 69, has always sought to position himself as a lone, stateless observer, devoid of ideology or affiliation, peers or rivals - a truth-teller without illusion. As Said says, "He's thought of as a witness against the postcolonial world because he's one of 'them'; that there's an intimacy with which he can tell the truth about their pretensions, lies, delusions, ideologies, follies." Yet how convincing are these claims? And how far does the writer's vision transcend the prejudices of the man?

Alastair Niven, a judge of the David Cohen prize, sees Naipaul as a "man of great fastidiousness, who finds life quite painful and distasteful, and of great charm when he wishes to display it". Yet he is also given to contemptuous rage. "'Creolized'? That comes from France. It has no meaning, like so many things that come from France... If ever you wish to meet intellectual frauds in quantity, go to Paris. "A sense of beleaguerment tips into bitterness, even malice. Claiming that a new book by his friend Farrukh Dhondy on the Trinidadian intellectual CLR James misrepresents his relations with James, Naipaul says: "All the time, it's false attribution, like Farrukh Dhondy on me sparring with James in 1950s London - it's a fantasy... Please speak about these absurd things that are attributed to me. This comes of too many interviews. You know, the monkey goes away and gets it all wrong, and no one corrects monkey." […]"[1]

The third part of my paper presents the writer's Indian trilogy where the notions of Indianness and Englishness are present. "In the Middle of the Journey", the opening essay of his 2002 collection *The Writer and the World*, is the first of the four devoted to India. Written as early as 1962, it describes Naipaul's first impressions of his shocking, total immersion in the immensity of the Indian subcontinent, which rendered him completely invisible, and erasing his individuality. And he explains: „This has been curiously deflating, for *all my life I have expected some recognition of my difference*; and it is only in India that I have recognized how necessary the stimulus is to me, how conditioned I have been by the multi-racial society of Trinidad and then by my life as an outsider in England. *To be a member of a minority community has always seemed to me attractive. To be one of four hundred and thirty-nine million Indians is terrifying.*" (TWW,5, emphasis added)

[1] https://www.theguardian.com/education/2001/sep/08/artandhumanities.highereducation

BDD-A30020 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 17:00:33 UTC)

The colonial's difference manifested itself in the colonizer's centre only; back to the colony, the difference is blurred, obliterated, and almost inexistent. The realization of the difference took Naipaul by surprise; during his Indian voyages, he came to terms to it.

In a 1998 interview, Naipaul confesses that the three books that form the Indian trilogy – written at different times and in different modes (autobiographical, analytical, and descriptive) – have to be taken "as a whole – as still existing, still relevant, still important." He does not hesitate to define himself as a writer – „a man writing a paragraph, a chapter, a section, a book" – a member of a craft, whose books represent the different stages of his craft. There is no trace of modesty in Naipaul's estimation of *India: An Area of Darkness* which he calls "an extraordinary piece of craft – an extraordinary mix of travel and memory and reading." It is not the writer's boastful remark that we are interested in, but his description of the book as a mixture of genres, even if not very precisely defined. Referring to *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, Naipaul explains the genesis of such a book: starting from the author's conclusion that the people are important, he mentions the importance of the writer's ability to extract information from the people interviewed:

> If you don't know how to talk with them, if you don't know how to get them to talk to you, there is no book..... The book happens during the actual travelling, although the writing takes time, as always. So the books are different bits of craft – always remember that I am a craftsman, changing the craft; I am trying to do new things all the time.

Naipaul's writings may be seen as ‚readerly' due to their references to characters involved in "scenes of reading".

Three main themes have been detected in Naipaul's work: (1) colonialism, and (2) influence, and (3) the tension between Naipaul's secularism (or atheism) and a sense of religious identity as a Hindu. The writer's relationship with religion is puzzling, intricate, and complex – as it comes obvious not only in his novels, but also in his books of non-fiction. [...] Naipaul's Indian trilogy, which takes the reader on a voyage from India that was ‚an area of darkness' that has lost its values and culture, to an India which is ‚a wounded civilization', where, as Naipaul later on discovers ‚a million mutinies' are happening. Naipaul's writings can be read as a record of the history of the first four decades of post-independence India. Instead of theorizing/fictionalizing India his travelogues offer a realistic picture of her society, culture, politics and economy.

The first volume of the trilogy *India: An area of Darkness – Shiva has ceased to dance* offers the picture of India which Naipaul finds completely shattered with no central idea or will of her own, and discovers that nationalist elites have surrogated colonizers. The social political crisis India has been facing – to which one should add the corruption and inefficiency of the government – do not offer to many chances of recovery. His direct contact with India only caused Naipaul shock and despair. Overwhelmed with negative emotions, his first description of India lacks the necessary objectivity and detachment expected. Naipaul's search for India ends in bitterness, a bitterness that has carried over into his writing since that time. The notion of a search can, if we are to read Naipaul carefully, reveal only the simulacra; the copy of a copy from which there is no original. He discovered that he was not what he thought he was, which caused him a profound sense of anxiety. The danger resides in founding oneself, as Naipaul did, completely cut off from the past.

BDD-A30020 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 17:00:33 UTC)

The starting point of *India: A Wounded Civilization – trapdoors into a bottomless past,* the second volume of the trilogy, is the *Forward* to this second volume of the Indian trilogy, in which Naipaul openly states his difficulty at understanding the country of his ancestors from "the Gangetic plain". Estranged from India – a country he „cannot reject or be indifferent to it" – Naipaul confesses the contradiction in his feelings towards it: simultaneously "too close and too far", he grew up in a community characterized by both its homogeneity (as compared to the Indian community Mahatma Gandhi had found in South Africa) and its isolation from India (which accounts for his estrangement). If *An Area of Darkness* has been considered a much too personal reaction to the shocking realities of present-day India, and its orientation less analytical and cultural – far from the idyllic image of the Indo-Trinidadians – then *A Wounded Civilization* proves exactly to the opposite. Though it starts as an autobiography, the autobiographical element loses in force and importance, and Naipaul resorts to a close analysis of the cultural and economic realities he encounters in Indian societies.

The third volume of the trilogy is *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. It is an account of the writer's third visit to India, twenty-six years after his first voyage, described in *An Area of Darkness*. In the preface of this volume, Naipaul stresses two important ideas: that, after all those years, „the most important thing about India, the thing to be gone into and understood, and not seen from outside, was the people. "The second idea was the realization that far from being the poorest country in the world, India was "on the move", that „all over the vast country men and women had moved out of the cramped ways and expectations of their parents and grandparent, and were expecting more. This was the 'million mutinies' of the title; it was not guerrilla wars all round. Nearly every English-speaker would have some idea of the brief Indian Mutiny of 1857 when some mercenary Indian soldiers of the British East India Company, confused and angry, but with no clear end in view, mutinied against the British. Three million mutinies of my title suggests that what is happening now is a truer and more general way ahead."

Naipaul had a very explicit goal when writing his third Indian narrative: to atune the prejudice brought about by *An Area of Darkness*, which the author himself confessed to have been written „in a grip of neurosis". Naipaul's obsession with his nineteenth century Indian roots apparently found an answer in his third voyage to India twenty-eight years later, when Naipaul proves his maturity in dealing with the realities of India, openly and objectively.

Conclusions

This paper underlines the perfect combination between the Indian and the British literature found in Naipaul's books and the idea that, although he has an Indian descend Naipaul is a fine representative of the British contemporary literature.

References

Primary Sources

Naipaul, V.S. *India: An Area of Darkness – A Discovery of India*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1964. Print.

Naipaul, V.S. *India: A Wounded Civilization*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977; New York: Vintage, 2003 Print.

Naipaul, V.S. *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990. Reprinted with a new Introduction by VS Naipaul, London: Picador, 2010. Print

BDD-A30020 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 17:00:33 UTC)

Secondary Sources
Ahmad, Omair. "Defining Indianness: Multiple Voices", in Deccan Herald, 10 October 2012. URL: < http://www.deccanherald.com/content/171602/defining-indianness.htlm>.
Barnouw, Dagmar. *Naipaul's Strangers*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003. Print.
Boehmer, E. *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.Print.
Chacko, Sam. "Defining Indianness",
URL: <http://geography.about.com/od/indiamaps/a/Defining-Indianness.htm>, 14 Sept. 2010. Accessed September 15, 2011
Chakraborti, Basudeh. "The Essential of Indianness: Tolerance and Sacrifice in Indian PartitionFiction in English and in English Translation", in *Rupkatha Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, Summer Issue, Volume 1, Number 1, 2009. URL: www.rupkatha.com/0109essentialsofindindianness.pdf

Electronic Resources
https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/06/07/specials/naipaul-roots.html
accesat pe 23 iulie 2018
https://www.theguardian.com/education/2001/sep/08/artandhumanities.highereducation
accesat pe 24 iulie 2018

BDD-A30020 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 17:00:33 UTC)