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***V.S. Naipaul's Journeys: From Periphery to Center* by Sanjay Krishnan (Columbia University Press, 2020)**

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, who was born in Trinidad in 1932, died in England in August 2018. In the period since Naipaul's death many obituaries have appeared, but despite his Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001, little recent academic scholarship on his work has been published, and few international meetings have been devoted to his work. He is at present more noteworthy for being controversial than for being one of the great writers of the twentieth century. One cannot yet write about Naipaul without first confronting this fact in one way or another.

One of the few substantial pieces of scholarship to appear since Naipaul's death is Sanjay Krishnan's book *V.S. Naipaul's Journeys*. Krishnan addresses this question of reputation directly and with considerable subtlety:

My hope is that this book will pave the way toward more complex assessments of Naipaul's work that are no longer defined by the aim of defending or denouncing the man on ideological grounds, but are instead informed by contextualised close readings of what he wrote. ...Throughout the book, I examine the different ways Naipaul's manner of mining his own life story and history enables the reader to see, often in surprising ways, the connections between the writer's subjectivity and that of peoples in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. (19)

Naipaul's Journeys is not a survey of the complete oeuvre, but presents readings of selected works in some detail. Krishnan takes his reader through the three stages he identifies in Naipaul's career. The first phase concerns the early fiction, culminating in the extraordinary feat that is *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961). However, the book is not as chronologically determined as

this implies. The first chapter deals with *Miguel Street*, the series of linked short stories that was Naipaul's first publishable work (though not actually published until 1959, after two more formally traditional novels had appeared). Paired with *Miguel Street* is Naipaul's first travel book, *The Middle Passage* (1962), written after *A House for Mr Biswas*. This approach allows Krishnan to analyse the early fiction that Naipaul wrote in his early 20s through the prism of the slightly later non-fiction:

Naipaul's interest in the subtle similarities and differences between disadvantaged groups in different places arose from an exploration of places and groups both familiar and new to him. ...In *Miguel Street*, we see Naipaul beginning to discover his material and taking his first, mostly intuitive, steps toward forming a connected picture of the complex, multifaceted colonial situation by which he had been shaped. ...This phase of early self-education culminated in the journeys Naipaul took in 1961 in order to write *The Middle Passage*. (50-51)

Krishnan argues persuasively that the way Naipaul used his own life story and experiences, including his interactions with the people he met on his travels, enabled him to create "an original form of postcolonial writing" (21).

The second part of the book, "The Middle Period 1962-1980", begins with a chapter on two non-fiction books, *The Middle Passage* (again) and *An Area of Darkness* (1964). Then Krishnan himself takes a path less travelled by concentrating on the non-fiction account "Michael X and the Killings in Trinidad" rather than *Guerrillas*, the novel based on that material, alongside two non-fiction books, *The Loss of El Dorado* and *India: A Wounded Civilization*. He then undertakes detailed readings of the story "In a Free State" (part of the novel of that name) and the novel *A Bend in the River*. This selective approach allows him to drill deep into these works and analyse Naipaul's work in new and interesting ways, both sympathetic and critical.

Although Naipaul had been experimenting with form from the start, attempting to find ways to tackle the material he was compelled to write about, it was not until the 1980s that he felt he had solved the problem adequately. In Part Three, "Late Works: 1981-2010", Krishnan begins with a chapter on the pivotal 1987 work *The Enigma of Arrival*, the work in which Naipaul decisively begins exploring "different ways of writing about his own life, mingling autobiography with fiction and history, such that the boundary between fact and fiction is often troubled" (161). I would argue that Naipaul had been "working through rather than suppressing his disorientation" (172) in various ways from at least as early as *The Middle Passage*, but, as Krishnan points out, it is in the 1980s that this becomes a sustained and explicit practice.

Krishnan also discusses the increasing importance Naipaul placed on letting the people he met speak for themselves, with the effect that the "sweeping statements" he often made about historical and social trends is contradicted by the personal accounts he records. Krishnan does not discuss Naipaul's treatment of women and gender issues in any detail, but Naipaul's approach to these subjects provides an interesting example of his tendency to allow his encounters with individuals to contradict opinions he expressed at other times. His notorious public attacks on feminism and his dismissive statements about women are tempered by the

respect and admiration he shows to some individual women, particularly in his later non-fiction. As Krishnan writes, sometimes Naipaul “did get things wrong” (229). But, while acknowledging this fact, he emphasises how crucial it is to appreciate that Naipaul was a creative writer rather than a politician or a journalist and “his sustained effort to understand historical patterns or events cannot be disentangled from his attempt to give literary form to his struggle to become a writer” (228).

While I do not agree with all of Krishnan’s assessments – I don’t see the two last novels as “quietly humorous” (233) but as dark, troubling and ultimately unsatisfying – the importance of his nuanced approach to Naipaul’s life and work cannot be overstated. He would like readers to understand that “Naipaul’s writing offers the reader an historically grounded engagement with... intractable issues, in ways that reveal the traces of its own disorientation, resentment, and prejudice” (244). So, on the one hand we must acknowledge Naipaul the individual; the role of his unique perspective in the construction of his view of the history and current predicament of the world in which he travelled and wrote. But on the other hand, Krishnan’s book is a plea “not to defend or denounce Naipaul the man” (229). This is perhaps a delicate balancing act for the reader. It can be difficult not to react against Naipaul’s more controversial and unpalatable statements, and to see the way he places himself and his own sensibilities in the foreground as egoism rather than candour, but if this leads to rejection or repudiation of his work much that is valuable will be missed.

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