

Review Essay

Authorized Honesty: *The World Is What It Is: The Authorized Biography of V. S. Naipaul*

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No acquaintance of V. S. Naipaul could possibly imagine that during the scattering of Pat Naipaul's ashes, the Quran was recited, but the author, highly acclaimed for both his fiction and non-fiction but also known for his hostility towards Islam, allowed the lapse and was even grateful. The recitation of Sura Fatiha in Arabic was performed by Naipaul's newly-wed wife Nadira, a Muslim woman from Pakistan with links in Kenya. Naipaul was too distraught to accompany her into the woods on Cooper's Hill; he stood by the car, crying the entire time. The location, near Gloucester, had memories for him, memories of Pat, wife of a forty-one year long marriage. Months earlier, the funeral at Salisbury Crematorium was austere and frugal. Curiously enough, Naipaul defended the minimalism to someone in Islamic terms: "It was chaste, it was Quranic in its purity" (480). There was no decent interval between the first wife's death and the second wedding. Naipaul had met Nadira in Pakistan while collecting materials for a new book on Islam (*Beyond Belief*) and had proposed to her when Pat was still alive but dying of cancer. She passed away in February of 1996; the wedding occurred in April; Pat's remains were dispersed in October.

Patrick French concludes his *The World Is What It Is: The Authorized Biography of V. S. Naipaul* with an unforgettable description of the bizarre moments of the scattering of Pat's ashes. Throughout the book, French narrates the life of a man who seems a bigot, a racist, a tightwad, a tyrannical husband, an adulterer, a frequenter of prostitutes—a thoroughgoing villain, one might conclude. Naipaul, however, baffles such characterization. He is also an author of remarkable talent, a loving son whose father Seepersad Naipaul was his greatest literary inspiration, not without generosity even to strangers on occasions, and a scathingly honest critic of his own conduct.

The biography offers extensive information on Naipaul's Indian/Trinidadian ancestry. His grandparents came to Trinidad from India around the late nineteenth century, but both parents were born on the island. The Naipauls were mostly cane cutters, but claimed to be Brahmins (members of the priestly caste) as well. French raises strong doubts as to their true caste origin. It is not clear if the name "Naipaul" is of Brahminic origin. It could have been given to Seepersad's father by the officials responsible for documenting indentured laborers, many of whom were completely illiterate. Other versions of the name exist in the archives, including "Nepaliah" (24). Naipaul felt that his dark-skinned paternal relations had Nepalese physical features; one of them indeed was Nepalese (18). Seepersad's parents had a troubled marriage. His mother had to leave his father because of his extremely violent rages; she even had a son by another man (17). This certainly was an aberrant conduct because traditional Hinduism does not allow remarriage even of widows.

In contrast, Naipaul's maternal grandparents claimed higher lineage. The grandfather, Kopil, later Capildeo Maharaj in Trinidad, was in all probability a Brahmin and possessed knowledge of Sanskrit and the scriptures. He married the daughter of his overseer, fathered many children, and became quite prosperous in Trinidad. All members of the Capildeo clan were proud of their founding patriarch's achievements, except for the days prior to his passing on a ship bound for India. He was on his way to India with another man's wife, with money raised through mortgage of most of his Trinidad property. Stories of the parents and grandparents are the materials of Naipaul's masterpiece novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*. In it the author figures as Anand, son of Biswas.

Naipaul went to Oxford on a scholarship to study English literature in 1950. His Oxford days were both exciting and depressing. He was better informed than most other students and impressed his teachers, but he suffered bouts of anxiety. Asthma was a recurrent problem, as were financial uncertainties and lack of feminine companionship. News from home was not cheerful. Seepersad was having job-related worries but was still adding more children to his impoverished family, fathering seven in his rather short life. Like the son, the father was prone to frequent depressive episodes. Not only was Seepersad haunted by poor job prospects; added to the disappointment was the huge frustration of being a failed writer. He could never find a publisher for his work.

Naipaul earned the B.A. with a Second Class at Oxford. The result disappointed him; one comfort was J. R. R. Tolkien thought Naipaul's "Anglo-Saxon paper was the best in the university" (115). Naipaul looked for jobs, but none came his way. Prospects were bleak not only for him alone, but for other university graduates as well at the time. Naipaul tried his luck in all possible places, including dozens of advertising firms, businesses in India and America, the Indian High Commission, the British Council, the BBC, and a couple of English newspapers. Returning to his home country—"a plantation," according to him—was not an option. His ambition to be a writer could not be realized there. Seepersad, now dead, was the proof of the fate of failed writers.

In these years of punishing apprehensions, anxieties, frequent asthma attacks, and guilt for not helping his family in Trinidad, Pat Hale, a student of history at Oxford, gave Naipaul solid succor. It was a difficult job because he was not the stuff of grace under pressure. The situation changed when BBC offered him the job of running a radio show called “Caribbean Voices” on a renewable contract. Naipaul’s writing career thrived in the coming years, but the years of misery after graduation left a deep scar on him. The existential angst that his fictional characters express was shaped by this episode of his life when he was often on the verge of complete collapse; once, he even attempted suicide (103).

The most useful part of French’s *Biography* is an abundance of such information, information that explains the geneses of an impressive number of books—how each was conceived, written, and published. The first reader and editor of Naipaul’s books was Pat; she remained a devoted wife in all the four decades following their marriage. Their relationship, on the other hand, lost the warmth of their youthful years in less than half that time. The reason at least in part was Naipaul’s sexual dissatisfaction, which had plagued him for years and which marriage intensified in him in double measure. He began visiting prostitutes on the sly, but even they could not give him what he was looking for: absolute control and abundant sex. There was also the matter of safety. He confided to French, “I always practiced safe sex. Safe sex is rather joyless sex” (183).

The opportunity to have abundant exciting sex came when Naipaul met Margaret Gooding in 1971 on a trip to Argentina. This relationship is the stuff of his own fiction. Romance appears rarely in his work, but when it does, it is usually a carnal union leading to disaster. One can recall Rafique and Laraine in *An Area of Darkness* or Salim and Yvette in *A Bend in the River*. Margaret had a family with children of her own, but she left them to be with Naipaul. He, on the other hand, enjoyed the sex but not her company as much. She lived in Argentina for the most part, except for taking excursions out of the country with him. These arrangements were not easy to plan; money was an issue; and she realized, “Vidia even expected her to pay for it” (327). He wanted nothing other than sex and was quite successful in extracting it from her. Completely in his thrall, she wrote in one of her many letters from Argentina that “he was vain to call his penis a god, but . . . she hoped to make a pilgrimage to the shrine” (329). Naipaul did not always read these letters but soon found a way to deal with the two women in his life. Pat was his official wife, living with him in their English home, editing his work, and attending parties thrown by friends with him. Margaret was the travel paramour, available when needed but snubbed when she sought attention. Pat accompanied Naipaul when he went to India and to East Africa to write *An Area of Darkness* and *In a Free State*. Years later Margaret went with him when he went to the US and India again to write *A Turn in the South* and *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. Margaret summed up the situation nicely in a letter—“Mama at home, a whore in Argentina” (328).

Apparently, Margaret served Naipaul’s carnal needs and Pat his intellectual ones. When he was planning to write *A Bend in the River*, Naipaul talked about the book first to Pat. In the following months, he went through acute mood swings, and Pat was the victim

of his outbursts. She was awakened in nights to be told of matters relating the to book, a job she was happy to perform for him. The concluding paragraph of the book, considered a literary masterpiece by many, came to Naipaul in a sort of esoteric trance—as did “Kubla Khan” to Coleridge—in the wee hours of the morning, at 12:30-1:30 AM. Highly satisfied with what he had accomplished with *A Bend in the River*, Naipaul went to the US to live with Margaret for a while (381).

The situation was somewhat different when Naipaul went to Indonesia to collect materials for a book on Islam. Margaret accompanied him, only to be sent away when he found her presence too annoying. Pat was summoned from England with detailed instructions on travel arrangements (392). This was not the only sudden termination of Margaret’s companionship. There were other instances, including those with strong declarations of permanent rejection, but then passion rekindled. Naipaul would take months or even a year to respond to Margaret’s epistolary overtures, but respond he did until he met Nadira in 1996.

And Margaret’s devotion to Naipaul required sacrifices. Once when her entreaties to be with him went unheeded, she came to England on her own. Naipaul learned, however, that she had come to be with him by being the mistress of an Argentine banker who was financing the trip. Recalling the incident, Naipaul told French, “I was very violent with her for two days with my hand; my hand began to hurt . . . She didn’t mind it at all. She thought of it in terms of my passion for her” (348).

Obviously, Margaret was a woman of low self-esteem, but what about Pat? She was no better and fared worse. French reveals a pattern of torment to which she reacted with characteristic self-remonstrance: “it is perhaps my own fault” (407). The abuse ran deep. Paul Theroux’s *Sir Vidia’s Shadow*, published ten years before French’s biography, does not contradict French’s account of the Pat–Naipaul relationship though immediately after Theroux’s book, its credibility was questioned by many of Naipaul’s admirers. French does point out some incongruities surrounding a lunch at the Wiltshire residence of the Naipauls that Theroux reports in his book. There can be little to dispute his account of Pat, however. Her warm personality and deathly dedication to her husband were noted by others as well. In a review of French’s biography, James Woods recalls the setting of his interview with Naipaul. He mistook Pat as Naipaul’s secretary; then “only as the secretary showed me out, and novelist and servant briefly spoke to each other in the hall, did I realize that she was Naipaul’s wife.” Moni Malhotra, the IAS officer who had helped Naipaul on his first trip to India, wrote after observing the Naipauls in their Wiltshire home, “She was a very Indian wife in many respects—more Indian than most Indian wives—the way the woman sacrifices her own life for her husband. It was an unusual kind of relationship for an Englishwoman” (435).

Marital infidelity was not the only hurt; Naipaul, in later years of their marriage, rarely missed an opportunity to humiliate Pat. French quotes some of these remarks. “You know you are the only woman I know who has no skill” (332). And Pat wrote in her

diary, “Vidia said . . . [h]e doesn’t dislike me . . . I only irritate him” (398). Sometimes the tyranny manifested differently. A visitor to their Wiltshire home noted, “Pat Naipaul is apparently not allowed by Vidia to garden . . . if she does so clandestinely while he is resting in afternoon he will suddenly pull aside the curtains and denounce her from the window” (430). Pat had to yield always to her husband’s will. She even had to comfort him when he admitted to her his guilt over the affair with Margaret (330). The revelation did not mean he was going to stop; Pat just had to accept the other woman in his life. It may seem that he did not divorce her out of compassion though that was what he claimed: “I might have left her to look after herself. I couldn’t do that . . . I didn’t have the brutality” (348). Readers of the biography are likely to infer otherwise. Not only did Pat provide literary assistance to him, she cooked and washed for him for years (331), services the penny-pinching Naipaul would be loath to pay for.

Why keep ill-treating a woman who by all accounts was soft-spoken and held her husband in utmost awe? Christopher Hitchens offers an explanation in his review of the biography, “He used her as an unpaid editor and amanuensis, and then spurned her because he resented her knowledge of his weaker moments” (138). Pat was privy to all his weaknesses, which doesn’t mean she had power over him, but the knowledge that she knew them all deeply disturbed him. For a long time, though, Pat had no knowledge of his calls on prostitutes. When Naipaul revealed that he had been “a great prostitute man” in an interview with the *New Yorker* in 1994 and the disclosure became front-page caption, Pat was highly upset. Her cancer, on remission for years, returned and killed her soon.

French’s interviews with Naipaul expose many unsavory facts. They also demonstrate Naipaul’s honesty in assuming responsibility for his actions. Recalling the revelation on prostitutes and its disastrous effect on Pat’s cancer, he acknowledged to French, “this cancer business can come with great distress and grief” (459). In an earlier interview with French, when assessing Margaret’s effect on his life, Naipaul had told French, “I was liberated. She [Pat] was destroyed. It was inevitable” (313). French frequently juxtaposes the despicable Naipaul with the self-recriminating Naipaul; the latter shows remarkable integrity.

French, however, makes no attempt to water down Naipaul’s racism. Early in the biography, French has explained “picong,” a Trinidadian verbal posturing that infringes propriety and deliberately infuriates the listener. Presumably, Naipaul’s many oral outrages that French quotes in the book are the esteemed author’s picong moments. Those at the receiving end of his callous contempt are not likely to see humor in comments such as “[someone] doing disreputable things like mixing with Bengalis—and other criminals” (xi) and “a banana a day will keep the Jamaican away” (188). Then there is the grand generalization on Africans. Upon hearing the murder of a white Englishwoman by members of a black cult in Trinidad—the materials for *Guerillas*—Naipaul commented, “[l]unacy and servility: they remain the ingredients of the Negro character” (298).

One cannot be sure if the last statement is an attempt at picong because Naipaul’s undisguised contempt for Africans and Caribbean blacks consistently appears

throughout the biography. And his fondness for the “N” word, noted by many in his private conversations, is reminiscent of a Faulknerian Southern bigot. An Indian journalist noted Naipaul’s outrage at the impregnation of an Indian film actress by the West Indian cricketer Viv Richards: “How could she have a child by that nigger?” (439). Years before he got the Nobel Prize, when asked about his chance of getting the coveted honor, Naipaul responded, “Of course I won’t get it, they’ll give it to some nigger or other” (442). A dig at Derek Walcott? Perhaps. Walcott got the Prize in 1992, nine years before Naipaul, which, as French points out, made Naipaul’s prospects of ever winning the Prize rather uncertain because region has a role in the award (451).

The World Is What It Is: The Authorized Biography of V. S. Naipaul reveals the highly complex personality of a much admired author of our times. French portrays a talented man, a tortured soul, and a torturer; undoubtedly, his biography will prove invaluable to Naipaul scholars for years to come. The curious fact is that though French raises doubts regarding Theroux’s account of certain events in his *Sir Vidia’s Shadow*, Theroux’s portrait of Naipaul, in fact, appears kinder in comparison to the one that French presents. Theroux himself acknowledges in his review of French’s biography that he “didn’t know the half of all the horrors” and that his own memoir had offered a gentler Naipaul because of legal concerns. In the same piece, Theroux also describes Naipaul as “the ultimate Caliban with a college degree and a knighthood casting no shadow” and thinks French has destroyed Naipaul’s reputation forever. (It is pertinent to mention that Naipaul and Theroux made up their differences in 2011 in a public event where both authors were invited, ending a much-publicized literary spat that lasted fifteen years.) One wonders why Naipaul, so irked by *Sir Vidia’s Shadow*, actually helped French in writing the biography that would make highly shocking revelations regarding his character, even admitting to him that “a less than candid biography would be pointless” (xiv). It cannot be ignored that *Sir Vidia’s Shadow* preceded Naipaul’s winning of the Nobel Prize in 2001 while *Biography* followed it in 2008 when his personal reputation could have little or no effect on his literary reputation. He was seventy-six; had authored more than two dozen books; and had won the highest literary honor of the world. French offers also this reasoning: “his willingness to allow such a book to be published in his lifetime was at once an act of narcissism and humility” (xiv). The latter is hard to detect in what French portrays.

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