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“The Overcrowded Barracoon”

Sir Vidiadhar Surajpershad Naipaul was born to Seepershad and Drobotie Naipaul (nee Capildeo) in 1932 in Chaguanas, Trinidad, the second of seven children. At the time of his birth, the population of Trinidad was a little over 40,000. Of these, about one third were Indians, employed as agricultural labourers, merchants, spirit vendors, clerks and shopkeepers. Some were lawyers, teachers or in government

service. Patrick French, Naipaul's biographer, says, "Indians had a higher death rate and a higher birth rate than any other social group...In popular legends in 1930s Trinidad Indians were depicted as poor, mean, rural, heathen, aggressive,, ethnically exclusive and illiterate."(*The World is What it is*, 13)

When Naipaul was born, his father was the staff correspondent for *Trinidad Guardian*, a job he quit two years or so later. After that he picked up odd jobs here and there, nothing that enabled him and his family to live independently of the Capildeos, his in-laws. "As a result he dangled all his life in half-dependence and half-esteem between these two powerful families"(*Finding the Centre*, 34), something that has been fictionally represented in *A House for Mr Biswas*. Much later, when he was an established writer himself, Naipaul could talk about his early years. To quote, "Disorder within, disorder without. Only my school life was ordered...But my family life...my life at home, in the street...was jumbled, without sequence."(*Finding the Centre*, 41)



In 1950 Naipaul won a Trinidad Government scholarship to study English at Oxford. He accepted the offer gladly, not because he wanted to be an academic, but because he thought it gave him an opportunity to get away from Trinidad and establish himself as a writer in England. So he could sense the urge of young people in Mauritius to get away from the country at a point of time when the economy was not booming. His father's failed attempts to set himself up as a writer/journalist whetted this desire. He imagined that in his three or four scholarship years at Oxford, his talents would be recognized and "...the books would start writing themselves." (*Finding the Centre*, 46)

In England, however Naipaul realized that he had no understanding of societies other than his own in Trinidad, and his life and reading in England did not provide him with material for a book. Later, he thought, "To become a writer, that noble thing, I had thought it necessary to leave. Actually to write, it was necessary to go back. It was the beginning of my self-knowledge." (*Finding the Centre*, 47) So while working for the BBC as a freelance, he sat at the typewriter in his room, sifting his Caribbean, or more specifically his Port of Spain memories, also borrowing from his grandfather's accounts of his experiences on the ship from India to West Indies.

Caribbean history records a long period of colonization. Whether the colonial masters were British, French or Dutch did not make a difference to the subject people. What mattered was its total impact which intensified over the years. In the words of a critic, "What remains startling about Caribbean history...is the stark transparency of its

European manufactures; of its populations, social structures, political organizations and the outside orchestration of the region's participation in the events of the larger world." (Mustafa, 31-32). Naipaul's early novels should be considered against the backdrop of this multiple colonialism.



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The choice of the East Indian Trinidadian community consisted largely of indentured immigrants and their descendants, working as agricultural labour. They were relatively newcomers to Trinidad and carried with them their experiences and their oddly insular outlook from the remote villages in British India, from where they had been recruited. They clung to their cultural roots that often manifested themselves in rituals and traditions as a form of security which the new environs did not offer them and they were not keen to try too hard

either. As a critic puts it, "The adherence to categories of caste, and their patterns all transmuted to the colonial settings of Trinidad's already stratified society." (Mustafa, 31-32)

Displacement and migration, two themes that recur in Naipaul's works, are deeply entrenched in his psyche and are part of his racial memory.

A few words about them would enable us to more fully appreciate his works, including the essay 'The Overcrowded Barracoon' from the collection with the same title. Historically speaking, migration has been an ongoing process from the medieval times. Overseas migration was rare in pre-colonial India but in the nineteenth century it started off as an offshoot of colonialism. In the 1830s, many people migrated from India, mainly as unskilled labour to work on British owned plantations in Mauritius, the Caribbeans and Fiji. European imperialist expansion in the nineteenth century with its new industrial and commercial ventures, especially plantation, created the initial milieu for large scale migration which generated expanding demands for labour. In most cases, the colonial government and planters, working in tandem, did not consider it economically or politically correct to recruit indigenous people. This perhaps led to the strained relationship between people of Indian origin and the indigenous people in the Caribbeans and others among these erstwhile colonies. A coalition including the two types, collapsed sometime back in Fiji, after a coup led by General Rambuka, an indigenous army officer captured power. The community that suffered most during the coup and its fallout were the people of Indian origin.

Generally speaking, three main types of emigration and settlement in the colonial, and in some cases postcolonial period, stand out from others. They are a) the Kangani system in Sri Lanka and Malaysia b) indentured labour in the Caribbeans, Mauritius and Fiji and c) free emigration to East Africa and at a later period to UK of unskilled and semi-skilled labour. A word about indenture as it concerns VS Naipaul. Indenture basically was a contract by which the emigrant agreed to work for a given employer for a period of five years for a specified wage. At the end of five years, he/she was free to reindenture or work elsewhere in the same colony; at ten years, one was entitled to subsidized airfare to the country of origin. Many people opted not to go back but bought a small plot of land and stayed on as cultivators. Since most of them never went to school, they were not able to pronounce the word 'agreement' which specified the terms and conditions of indenture, they referred to it as 'gimit' and called themselves 'gimitiyas'. Naipaul's grandparents on both sides were 'gimitiyas'. This is something which enabled him to fully empathize with the experience of emigration that was a road taken not entirely out of one's free will.



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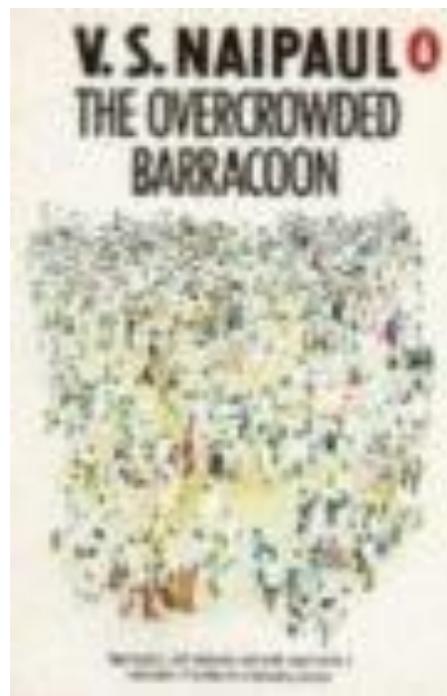
The fact that the full title of the essay under study is “Mauritius: The Overcrowded Barracoon”, indicates that it is place specific. It was originally a *Sunday Times* feature, first published on 16 July 1972. Later when it was published along with some other essays in book form (Andre Deutsch, 1972, Penguin, 1976), the word ‘Mauritius’ was dropped, possibly to take away the place specificity, at least from the title, so that it has a stronger general impact. It takes up emigration in a later time frame, in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s when young people of Mauritius were “obsessed with the idea of escape”, the term ‘escape’ standing for successfully emigrating to England and getting a job there. The urge to emigrate was so strong that those who could not manage it, found Mauritius as restrictive as a prison, “sugar cane and sugar cane, ending in the sea, and the diseased coconut trees blighted by the rhinoceros beetle.” (p. 279) This can be compared to Naipaul’s urge to leave Trinidad for England in whatever way he could. His ambition of

course was not to get a job but become a writer, but the common factor is the lack of recognition in local society for someone born there.

Dissatisfaction with life on the island bred a sense of deep discontent for Naipaul. Hence the short but loaded statement “the symptoms of depression; dizziness, a heaviness in the head, an inability to concentrate.” (p.290) One senses that Naipaul possibly experienced all this in England too, when he was a struggling young writer there, living on whatever little he earned, freelancing for BBC. The physical poverty, malnutrition and resultant depression reminded him of India which he had visited ten years earlier and written about. (*An Area of Darkness*) Yet he was keenly aware that Mauritius was a different country, here people had a different perspective. To quote, “Mauritius is not India, there is no longer that knowledge of fate, *karma*, in which distress is absorbed. Everyone is responsible for himself, *everyone* is genteel.” (p.291)

The essay tells us what Naipaul saw as the crux of the problem - an inability of the local economy to stand on its own feet, to cut off the umbilical cord with the colonizer. Though a politically independent country, Mauritius, according to Naipaul was, “an abandoned imperial barracoon, incapable of economic or cultural autonomy.” (p.292) Thirty six years later, Mauritius made a lot of progress and grew to be a very popular tourist destination as well as a hot favourite of feature and ad film makers. The blue sea, the azure skies, the soothing greenery of the landscape, the temperate climate and the easy going nature of the

people, indeed make it a favoured beach destination. It has a sound economy and not many would like to get away. Anyone who has been to Mauritius recently is bound to wonder why Naipaul wrote such a desperate piece on it. It is possible that his prejudices against Trinidad ruled his writing also on Mauritius as the two places share a colonial history. His analysis of the political scene in Mauritius is rather superficial and journalistic. Yet some of Naipaul's journalistic pieces have transcended their time frame and are readable today. "The Overcrowded Barracoon" is *not* one of them.



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Summary

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul was born to Seepershad and Drobotie Naipaul in 1932 in Chaguanas, Trinidad. In 1950 he was awarded a Trinidad Government scholarship to study English at Oxford. He accepted it as he wanted to establish himself as a writer in English. Once there, he realized he could write only on Trinidad, on displacement and migration, two themes deeply entrenched in his psyche. "The Overcrowded Barracoon", originally a *Sunday Times* feature, takes up emigration in the late '60s and early '70s when young people in Mauritius had a strong urge to emigrate to England to get a job. Those who could not manage it, were discontented, something depicted graphically in the essay. Possibly, Naipaul experienced this discontent in Trinidad and later in London, as a struggling young writer. Mauritius has a sound economy today and essay like "The Overcrowded Barracoon" is no longer relevant.

Books

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), A Flag on the Island (1967), The Mimic Men (1967), The Loss of El Dorado (1969), In a Free State (1971), The Overcrowded Barracoon (1972), Guerrillas (1975), India: A Wounded Civilization (1977), A Bend

in the River (1979), *The Return of Eva Peron and the Killings in Trinidad* (1980), *Among the Believers* (1981), *Finding the Centre* (1984), *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), *A Turn in the South* (1989), *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990), *A Way in the World* (1994), *Beyond Belief* (1998), *Half a Life* (2001), *The Writer and the World Essays* (2002), *Literary Occasions Essays* (2003), *Magic Seeds* (2004), *A Writers People* (2006)

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Nixon, Rob, *London Calling: V.S. Naipaul Post Colonial Mandarin* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1992).

Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands* (Viking, New Delhi, 1991).

Thieme, John. "Searching for a Centre: The Writing of VS Naipaul". *Third World Quarterly* 9.4(1987) 1352-1365. JSTOR.

Prizes and Honours

John Llewellyn Rhys Prize for *The Mystic Masseur*

Somerset Maugham Award for *Miguel Street*

Hawthornden Prize

WH Smith Award

Hummingbird Gold Medal for 'loyal and devoted service to Trinidad and Tobago'

Booker Prize for *In a Free State*

Bennett Award in 1980

Jerusalem Prize in 1983

British Book Awards Prize for the best travel book of the year in 1990 for *India: A Million Mutinies Now*

Knighthood in 1990

Trinity Cross in 1990 from the Government of Trinidad

The first David Cohen British Literature Prize in 1993

Nobel Prize in literature for *Half a Life*