

Naipaul's Reckoning With Empire

The Nobel laureate's legacy has much to say to charges of amnesia about colonialism

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In a recent book review in the *Wall Street Journal*, the Bengali writer Neel Mukherjee wrote that 'Britain has never had—and is unlikely to ever have—a systematic reckoning with its unsavory history, choosing willed oblivion instead.' The oblivion in question concerned the 'hypocrisy, venality and inhumanity of British colonialism'. In place of a systematic reckoning, Mukherjee believed, had come 'imperial nostalgia' which had, among other things, caused Britain's recent decision to free itself from the rule of Brussels.

Coming in the same month as the death of Nobel laureate VS Naipaul, these lines, common enough in contemporary writing on empire, seemed especially flat. Debate in the West in general and among Europeans in particular about the colonial past has been, for at least a century, nothing if not a thorough reckoning. It is difficult to imagine a historical phenomenon that has been subjected to a more vigorous empirical and ethical disputation, with new works from multiple perspectives pouring off the Western presses every day. Naipaul was part of that reckoning, and his legacy has much to say to charges of amnesia.

If one could pinpoint Naipaul's main approach, it was that Western empire was unique insofar as it was based on a 'universal civilisation' whose ideals could be widely applied. In his 1990 talk 'Our Universal Civilization' (reprinted in *The Writer and the World* of 2002), Naipaul laid claim to being part of that civilisation, not apart from it. What bothered him about anti-colonial writers was that they so often felt the allure of that same universal civilisation without admitting it. "The attraction existed; it was more than a need for education and skills. But the attraction wasn't admitted; and in that attraction, too humiliating for an old and proud people to admit, there lay disturbance—expressed in dandyism, mimicry, boasting, and rejection," he wrote in *Among the Believers* of 1981. Naipaul could have cited Mukherjee's journey from Catholic boy's school in Calcutta, then to Oxford and Cambridge, and finally to a writer's career in London (including book reviews in the daily diary of American capitalism, the *Wall Street Journal*) as emblematic of this.

When Naipaul wrote in *India: A Wounded Civilization* of 1977 that Indian elites were always dreaming of some great leap backwards to a unified *volk* under 'a vision of Ramraj' even as they sent their children to Cambridge, he was diagnosing a failed reckoning with empire that he found everywhere in the former colonial nations. Gandhi's tragedy, Naipaul often noted, especially in *An Area of Darkness* (1964), was



that his transformative 'colonial vision' upon returning from South Africa had been slowly smothered by Brahmanic smugness. The lawyer became a holy man, and once he was holy he was useless. 'Nothing remains of Gandhi in India but this.' A bumper sticker in Berkeley. Willing oblivion. Mukherjee's declamations about the 'inhumanity' of British empire and related musings on the evils of capitalism ("The whole capitalist order has a lot to answer for," he told *Publishers Weekly* last year) would have irked Naipaul, a dishonest separation from the universal civilisation that one so gladly accesses. Capitalism for me, socialism for the little people. Imperial delights for me, imperial reckoning for others.



It was in *Among the Believers* that Naipaul most cogently diagnosed this state of mind in the mullahs of Iran: 'The West, or the universal civilization it leads, is emotionally rejected. It undermines; it threatens. But at the same time it is needed, for its machines, goods, medicines, warplanes, and remittances from the emigrants, the hospitals that might have a cure for calcium deficiency, the universities that will provide master's degrees in mass media. All the rejection of the West is contained within the assumption that there will always exist out there a living, creative civilization, oddly neutral, open to all to appeal to.' This rejection of Western civilisation was worse than hypocrisy. It meant 'ceasing to strive intellectually'.

Indeed, the contrasting fates of Iran and India told Naipaul that colonialism was mostly a regenerative force. 'Iran never became a formal colony. Its fate was in some ways worse. When Europe, once so far away, made its presence felt, Iran dropped off the map,' he argued in *Beyond Belief* of 1998. By contrast, 'India, almost as soon as it became a British colony, began to be regenerated, began to receive the New Learning of Europe, to get the institutions that went with that learning.' When Naipaul lavished praise on the colonial architecture of the Raj, he was less interested in engineering than in soulfulness.

Even as colonial-era institutions were ravaged, people emigrated to the West, and poverty set in, anti-colonial movements stayed in power because it was so easy for mullahs, Afro-centrists and Gandhians to proclaim racial triumph over empire. Ralph Singh, the former colonial civil servant exiled from his Caribbean island by the anti-colonial revolution in *The Mimic Men* (1967), writes of how the black nationalists took pleasure in having British staff sent by aid programmes: 'It was what these ministers offered their followers: the spectacle of the black man served by the white; the revolution we claimed to have created.'

In Naipaul's reckoning with empire also lay a sociological insight into the inescapable reciprocity and agency of all social interactions. Progressives bent on victim-victimiser approaches, especially when it came to colonialism, never grasped this. 'I did so much for them when they came here. I gave them the run of the ashram. I introduced them to everybody,' complains Mr Chandran in the 2001 novel *Half a Life* about Western visitors to India at the time of Independence. His wife replies: 'They did a lot for you too. They gave you your business. You can't deny it.' But they did deny it.

Naipaul's treatment of black Africa's 'liberation' movements was equally scolding, and there too—notably in *A Bend in the River* of 1979 and its journalistic antecedents—he found a political elite suckled on the idea that the colonial master was to blame for all mistakes, an infantilisation of the African that generations of anti-colonial scholars have continued. The Big Man Ruler created a training academy called the Domain where this fantasy was taught. 'The Domain was a hoax,' says the Muslim Indian shopkeeper who narrates the story. 'But at the same it was real because it was full of serious men (and a few women).' Willed oblivion on an official scale.

The nationalisations across Africa after colonialism were 'petty and bogus. They have often turned out to be a form of pillage and are part of no creative plan. They are as short-sighted, self-wounding, and nihilistic as they appear,' he wrote in the essay 'In a New King for Congo' of 1975. In the Congo, which Naipaul alone seemed to know had become a colony only in 1908 in place of the private rapacity of King Leopold II, there was 'a dismantling of what remains of the Belgian-created state'. European readers preferred the Domain-like fantasies of Adam Hochschild's 1998 *King Leopold's Ghost* with its false subtitle claiming the era was 'colonial' (the fiefdom 'was shared in no way with the Belgian government', Hochschild admits in the book). The Western reckoning with the king's abuses is deep. The Congolese reckoning with Belgian colonial success is absent.

If Naipaul saw one thing in Africa it was the weakening hold of the remnants of the colonial state over rival power centres. Moreover, that weakening was abetted by Western progressives who continued to indulge in their favourite pastime of imperial reckoning, as in *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*, the 2005 bestseller by Harvard Professor Caroline Elkins that celebrated a genocidal movement that the British suppressed with overwhelming Kenyan support. These Western champions of black fanatics are represented in *A Bend in the River* by Raymond, the 'Big Man's white man', who excuses every atrocity as an act of liberation from colonial forces. He falls silent when the terrors of the Big Man are mentioned since they fall outside of his obsession with colonial wrongs.

The colonial subjects who had migrated to the centre and taken up prominent positions without any sense of self-consciousness had been particularly irritating to Naipaul. There was, for instance, the inquisitorial University of Chicago Professor of Islamic Studies Fazlur Rahman 'sleeping safe and sound every night, protected by laws, and far away from the mischief he was wishing on his countrymen at home', Naipaul wrote. Rahman had fled Pakistan in 1969 after his state-sponsored project to impose an

'an Islamic vision' on the legal and administrative state ran into opposition. He died peacefully in Chicago in 1988. Naipaul saw the origins of 9/11 in the Islamic world's rebellion against modernity.

More recently, the Cambridge academic Priyamvada Gopal's refusal to teach her students because the working-class college porters do not address her by her formal title (which they do not do for anyone) highlighted Naipaul's point. In *Beyond Belief*, he described the South Asian children sent to Oxford and Cambridge who become the worst feudal lords upon graduation: 'They treated their workers and peasants like serfs. The peasants would touch the feet of the landlord in submission and greeting; it was more submission than greeting; and the landlord would not ask the peasant to rise.' His interlocutor Shahbaz, 'fresh from England, wanted to weep'. Naipaul, by contrast, was embarrassed when people in his rural community in Wiltshire treated him with deference or respect.

In that sense, Naipaul had reckoned with empire far more successfully than his rival diagnostician, Edward Said. The West gave Said a professorship at a leading university and showered him with adulation for every bitter attack on the West and its degenerate society. In between his holy utterances, Said indulged his passion for Western classical music at Carnegie Hall. Naipaul, by contrast, had to earn his keep in the market economy, which freed him from becoming an institutionalised totem, or asking anyone to touch his feet.

Naipaul hoped that the end of the Cold War would cause a reckoning. Certainly, there was the beginning of what his fellow Caribbean exile, the black economist W Arthur Lewis, had called a 'creative' reckoning with empire as opposed to the 'protest' of the past. The London School of Economics Professor Tirthankar Roy's new book *A Business History of India* from Cambridge University Press, for instance, douses fiery claims of deindustrialisation and economic drain by the Raj. But home truths about India, or any other former colony, could never compete with the blandishments of holy men. 'The British pillaged the country thoroughly; during their rule, manufactures and crafts declined. This has to be accepted,' he wrote in *An Area of Darkness* (1964). It remains so. That Shashi Tharoor, a struggling politician for a party on the skids, should become a hero to the cause with a resounding 2015 denunciation of the Raj at the Oxford Union, later put into a 2016 book with a Naipaulian title *An Era of Darkness*, shows the enduring power of the protest identity. 'For the uneducated masses, quick to respond to racial stirrings and childishly pleased with destructive gestures, the protest leader will always be a hero,' Naipaul bemoaned in his return to the Caribbean book, *The Middle Passage* of 1962.

For that book, he visited Martinique: 'That France has here succeeded, as she has perhaps nowhere else, in her 'mission civilisatrice', there can be no doubt.' Locals agreed with Naipaul. They have opted to remain a colony of France ever since. Yet Western undergraduates are still assigned to read the bilious anti-colonial *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1950) of the Martiniquan poet Aimé Césaire, and tourists arrive today at the Aimé Césaire International Airport. The creative identity for French passports. The protest identity for public monuments.

There were to be sure after the Cold War new ideas in India, Africa and elsewhere that played down colonial victimisation in preference for a new emphasis on responsibility. But there were limits, which Naipaul came to accept. The Nigerian social activist Kelechi Okafor, who like Mukherjee denounces the empire from the comfort of London, made headlines last month when it was revealed that she had a white boyfriend. Her excuse: he's Polish. 'There is a huge difference between going out with a white Polish man and a white English man,' she explained in an essay for the BBC. The former had been

‘governed by outsiders’. The latter had engaged in ‘the transatlantic slave trade or colonisation’ and ‘didn’t know their true history’.

For Okafor, it was the white English man, not the black Nigerian woman with the Polish boyfriend, who needed an imperial reckoning. The Nigerian woman is a victim. Indeed, she cannot imagine herself as anything else, as an authentically free individual with a fate determined by someone other than Lord Lugard. All those white English men are by ascription descendants of slave-traders and colonial brutes. The ‘true history’ she urges on her white British readers does not reference Yoruba, Igbo and Fulani slave-trading or warfare. The black woman caught in the web of white guilt and pretending to be a ‘voice of conscience’. The Bengali novelist and the Nigerian dancer living in London and telling their English readers that they need a reckoning. Now that Naipaul is gone, there is no one to call for that sort of imperial reckoning.

The Tamil writer Meena Kandasamy is described in *Time* magazine as ‘an Indian poet, novelist and translator from Chennai’ who is ‘currently based’ in London. Her haughty attack on Naipaul in the magazine at his death declares that he ‘became an autonomous echo to the oppressive institutions of our time, internalizing the xenophobia and dehumanization that lay at the heart of colonialism’. He was, worse, ‘a brilliant and tormented reactionary artist in the service of unspeakable horror’. Kandasamy, all 34 years of her, has certainly learnt a mouthful of phrases with which to scotch the wicked and throw down the oppressors. Her Conradian echo is quaint. There is nothing so pleasing as a clutchful of aspersions hurled at Naipaul by an anti-colonial writer ‘currently living in London’ who, in addition to her poetry is a ‘social activist’ who enjoys the nickname ‘Ms. Militancy’.

This protesting Third World that dismayed Naipaul remains. It finds a happy home in the West where colonial reckoning is constant. Naipaul tried to save it from denying the same reckoning to itself. It responded by calling him names, using big words learnt in graduate seminars. It offered ‘hate as hope’, as Naipaul wrote of Eva Peron in 1977 in his essay on Argentina. That set of collected essays, *The Writer and the World* (2002), was edited by Pankaj Mishra, the man celebrated as ‘the next Said’. Mishra claimed that 9/11 was caused by Winston Churchill. He is yet another writer ‘currently living in London’ railing at the Raj with a white lover.

Anti-colonial critics have never had—and on present trajectory are unlikely to ever have—a systematic reckoning with their unsavoury history, choosing willed oblivion instead. Naipaul failed to bend that river. We continue to live with the consequences.

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