Trinidadian Racial Politics and Africa in V S Naipaul's <u>A Way in The World</u>

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A major strand in Naipaul's writings is the unravelment of the relations between the two main racial communities of Trinidad: the Afro-Caribbean and the East Indian. Not the least important factor in this is Naipaul's own membership of the smaller Indian community, about which he writes almost exclusively in his early novels and short stories set in Trinidad, the chief example being the acclaimed, <u>A House for Mr Biswas</u>. While later writings appear to have Africa as their main concern, relations between Indians and Africans continue to feature throughout Naipaul's work. Even where he is writing about the Black power movement in the Caribbean, the cult of Africanism in dictatorships like Mobuto's Zaire, or relations between Africans and Europeans in East Africa, the Indian community is either represented on the margins, through someone like Salim in A <u>Bend in the River</u>, or through the detached narrator, Naipaul himself, in, In a Free State. By means of these agents, Africa is continually undermined, and behind this subversion is the metalanguage of Trinidadian racial politics.

The self-referring intertextuality of Naipaul's writings, in which earlier pieces are re-written or re-oriented in later ones, is such that with the publication of a new work, we are able to review patterns and revise judgements as to authorial involvement in earlier ones. So while Naipaul's pre-occupations remain basically the same, he chooses to reveal himself obliquely in his

writings, sometimes appearing to revisit old terrains in order to re-focus, re-direct and re-emphasize past positions. This is particularly the case in Naipaul's balancing of Afro-Caribbean and Indian concerns in his novels; now, with the publication of A Way in the World, we are well positioned to make new readings of the texts in which representations of Africa predominantly feature.

A Way in the World is a summary text in the sense that it explicitly underscores the tension between the two communities, beginning in Trinidad, and later transposed into Africa. The last chapter, for example, is an apparently autobiographical account of a sabbatical Naipaul spent on an East African university campus, one resident of which, Richard, is a white apologist for the local regime; the same territory, it seems, as the African university where Indar teaches in A Bend in the River, and where the main Indian protagonist, Salim, is introduced to Raymond, an historian of the region who is unswervingly loyal to the President-cum-dictator of the newly independent state. The narrator's distaste for Richard, however, is offset by his encounter with Blair, a visiting politician from Trinidad whom Naipaul has described earlier in the work as a figure from his youth. The tense relationship between the two Trinidadians, one of Indian the other of African race, re-enacted in Africa, can be seen as a trope for the respective post-colonial journeys of the elites of each community.

These elites - and this is a recurrent pattern throughout Naipaul's writings - are to be found continually engaged with the fantasies of their respective communities. The fantasies of his own Indian community were predominantly private, whereas those of the Afro-Caribbean, developing from individualistic beginnings, built, a decade or so before the severing of colonial government, into fantasies of racial redemption which intensified in the late sixties and early seventies into the Black power movement. This

patterning itself inscribes the anxieties of the minority community,as is clear from remarks of the narrator in The Enigma of Arrival on the Black power riots in Trinidad in 1970:

I saw this anger from both sides: from the side of the Negroes, the people with the hair, and also from the side of the Asian-Indian community, the people mainly threatened, not black, not white [1].

It is one thing to argue, as C C Barfoot does, that what is at issue here is Naipaul's belief in the ethnic superiority over "the Negroes" of the Indian, who is "able to blend different worlds"[2]; quite another to see the statement as a basic cry for ethnic survival. So Singh, the colonial politician in The Mimic Men, while adopting the rhetoric of the colonized against the colonizer, is aware at a deeper level of the inter- communal fissures that result, after the withdrawal of the colonial power,in massacres, which he is powerless to mitigate, of his own community by the majority[3]. Singh's flight to the colonial centre, which parallels Naipaul's own move to Britain, represents an individualistic rather than a communal response to the seemingly inevitable marginalisation of the Indian minority back in the former colony.

The Afro-Caribbean deracine, also in semi-imposed exile at the metropolitan centre, is in contrast to his Indian fellow countryman, politically active, which means for Naipaul, engaged, chiefly for his own purposes, in unravelling his personal version of his community's fantasy. Lebrun,in A Way in the World, clearly parallels the career of C L R James,the radical author of The Black Jacobins. Having become persona non grata in the post-colonial Caribbean, he becomes a roving revolutionary who eventually finds his spiritual home in Africa, where in spite of his lifelong anti-racism and Marxist universalism, he ends up lending support to a nativist dictatorship.

Significantly, the narrator/Naipaul acknowledges once having come under the older man's influence.An article written by Lebrun on Naipaul's early Trinidadian novels was a "revelation [which]... became a lasting part of my way of looking"[4]. As former colonials, both shared sympathies which could not, however, survive Naipaul's self-sustaining isolation.

This isolation is expressed earlier in the work as a consequence of a meeting between the narrator as a youth, and Evander, a Black lawyer, and his son. The lawyer's comprehension of Naipaul along with himself in his vision of a collective step forward for the "black race" and the "coloured races", promotes the following reaction:

I was moved, but at the same time embarrassed. I understood their feelings, shared them to some extent, but I wished, even with that understanding, to belong to myself. I couldn't support the idea of being part of a group. I would have felt tied down by it, and thought Evander's idea of a great racial movement forward too sentimental[5].

Another reiteration of Naipaul's oft-cited detachment from his colonial origins, we might say: the refusal to belong to a group which, in the infamous short passage from An Area of Darkness, Naipaul extended to his own Indian racial origins[6].Yet,just as significant as the rejection is the half- sympathy, the understanding of the Black father and son which, however reluctantly, joins the young Indian with his Afro-Caribbean compatriots.

In this sense - a sense that recurs in the novel - A Way in the World re-locates the writer within a Trinidadian space which he is no longer intent on exploring in exclusively Indian terms, as was the case in A House for Mr Biswas, but is now placed in juxtaposition with the Afro-Caribbean presence. If this Indian space has no more than a

liminal existence itself, this is because, overtly for the first time, Naipaul is ready to define his own liminality as a member of Trinidad's Indian community vis-a-vis the main narrative of its Afro-Caribbean one. The "well-defined racial division" of the island - "the Indian countryside, the African town", perforce leaves the Indians to cede priority to the Afro-Caribbean majority(7).

This explains why, although Africa features in the text, it is mainly in the context of its central importance to a new, strident Afro-Caribbean narrative; and even as the familiar Naipaulean strictures on the continent are revived, these are no longer submerged within borrowed pseudo-universal western constructs, such as the heart of darkness trope in A Bend in the River. Instead, while he does not try to hide his strong personal sense of its otherness, it is the Afro-Caribbean narrative which articulates Naipaul's dealings with Africa, threatening him at the same time as it engages his sympathies - behind it the shared metanarrative of the colonized's pain and depredation.

So it is that on the individual level, an apparently instinctive sympathy is demonstrated between Naipaul and his Afro-Caribbean compatriots: with "the middle-aged black man in bowler and pin-stripe suit stepping out of the bus queue in Regent Street in 1950 to show me photographs of his house and English wife"; with Lebrun the agitator and emigre, with whom Naipaul shares "shame, grief, sympathy, admiration, recognizing something of myself in his struggle"(8) ; and with Blair the career politician. Yet we may feel that, along with the West Indian in London, Naipaul's identity, for all the later sophistication of his novels and travel writing, has frozen in the mode of the first generation ex-colonized who sought absorption and acceptance at the metropolitan centre. Accordingly, there is an embedded self-satisfaction in the trajectory of failure that Naipaul

charts for Lebrun and Blair: the former's return to Africa in his last years is presented as a reversal of all he had previously stood for, especially in his reportedly racist rejection of Afro-European male-female relationships (made in spite of his own mixed-race daughter). And Blair's brutal murder while engaged upon an official investigation into finance in the African state is seen both as a tragic waste and an implicit indictment of his brand of politics. Naipaul makes it perfectly clear, in fact, that what had set himself and Blair apart from the beginning,up until their last meeting in East Africa, was what he calls the Black politics that had begun to emerge in the pre-independence meetings in Port of Spain's Woodford Square.

Everyone you saw on the street had a bit of this emotion locked up in himself. It was no secret. It was part of the unacknowledged cruelty of our setting, the thing we didn't want to go searching into. Now all those private emotions ran together in a common pool, where everyone found a blessing. Everyone, high and low, could now exchange his private emotion, which he sometimes distrusted, for the sacrament of the larger truth.

But while Evander had comprehened all 'men of colour' in this larger truth, for Naipaul the new politics was an Afro- Caribbean mystery: "The people who spoke were not all black or African, but the occasion was an African one; there could be no doubt about that"[9].

As a member of the minority Indian community, Naipaul feels excluded from the emerging post-colonial order, not only in Trinidad, but wherever the new Afro-Caribbean narrative has extended its scope. He defines the gulf that separates himself and Blair in Africa in terms of the Trinidadian racial politics of the intervening years, which, despite the loosening of his ties with his native community, threaten Naipaul's fragile self-sufficiency:

I hadn't met Blair since 1950, and I didn't want to meet him now. I didn't like the politics he had gone into. The almost religious exaltation of the early days of the black movement had given way very quickly to the simplest kind of racial politics . In Trinidad that meant anti-Indian politics and constant anti-Indian agitation; it was how the vote of the Africa majority was to be secured. Though I was no longer living in Trinidad,I was affected. I found when I met people I had known there, evenpeople I had gone to school with, that the racial question couldn't be ignored. There was a self- consciousness on both sides, a new falsity. And I found, with every visit I made to Trinidad, that I was more and more cut off from the past[10].

In East Africa, Naipaul is an outsider too, unable even to find acceptance in the Indian community there. This double re-inforcement of his isolation - as an Indian alienated from the African majority, and as a Trinidadadian unacceptable to the Indians of East Africa - underscores the isolation of such characters as Indar and Salim, and the narrator who looks on with detachment at the racial antipathy between white and black in In a Free State. At the same time it feeds Naipaul's almost paranoic need to subvert the Afro-Caribbean narrative by de-constructing all things African.

There is a counterpoint, however, to the almost unseemly triumphalist account of Blair's death and last rites: this is found in a suggested reconciliation, for according to Naipaul, the eventual meeting between the two men did not take the negative form he had feared. In Naipaul's narrative, it is Blair who makes the overtures by telling several stories encoding racial messages, which Naipaul decodes as conciliatory in intent: "after the passion of his politics he could now be another kind of man, ready for new relationships." The implication is that racial politics have completed their assigned task; Naipaul appears to endorse Blair's own statement - "`I know that

the world I will be leaving is better than the one I came into'" - "and it was true: the revolution he had taken part in had succeeded"[11].

But would it be possible to return to the status quo ante the Black power riots, before the more recent attack on the Trinidad Parliament by Black religious extremists which Naipaul sees as a sort of infernal fulfilment of "the sacrament" of the Woodford Square meetings? One possible reading of A Way in the World is that the history of racial violence, going back to the massacre by the Spanish of the last aboriginal inhabitants of Trinidad, the Amerindians, remains incomplete.

Another reading is possible too: the unceremonious return of Blair's coffin to Trinidad inscribes the quiet, official end of the Afro-Caribbean narrative, which having fulfilled its term in Blair's lifetime, can now be buried. This reading would explain the triumphalism of the last pages of A Way in the World: first comes Blair's admission of the crudity of the "racial passion" by which he had lived out the fantasies of his native community and had achieved thereby a position in the world; then the irony of his death, which though a terrible waste, underscores the import of his overtures to Naipaul.In other words, with the weakening of the Afro-Caribbean narrative, the way could now be opened up again for the restoration, on an individual basis, of relationships across communal and racial lines. Of course all of this could be no more than wishful thinking on Naipaul's part. A Way in the World leaves us with no utopian breakthrough in terms of relations between the different races - the politics of the future remain uncertain. But we would be entitled to draw hope, perhaps, from Naipaul's assertion of the implicit oneness of human kind the publishers chose to misquote on the dustjacket of A Way in the World (the work as a whole, incidently, surely exonerating its author from the unjustified charge of racism) :

Most of us know the parents or grandparents we come from. But we go back and back, forever; we go back all of us to the very beginning; in our blood and bone and brain we carry the memories of thousands of beings [12].

References

1. V S Naipaul, The Enigma of Arrival, New York: Vintage Books, 1988, p.161. Italics mine.

2. C C Barfoot, "A House for Mr Biswas", in C C Barfoot and Theo D'Haen, eds., Shades of Empire in Colonial and Post-Colonial Literatures, Amsterdam / Atlanta : Rodopi, 1993, pp.249-268, p.268.

3. Naipaul, The Mimic Men, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969, p.241.
4. Naipaul, A Way in the World, London: Heinemann, 1994, p110.
5. ibid., pp15-16
6. Naipaul, An Area of Darkness, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979, p.46.
7. Naipaul, A Way in the World, p.33.
8. ibid, p.122.
9. ibid, pp.28-29.
10. ibid, p.355.
11. ibid, p.364.
12. ibid, p.9.

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