

## **Travel Motive in V.S. Naipaul's Middle passage**

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Caribbean literature is the term generally accepted for the literature of the various territories of the Caribbean region. Literature in English specifically from the former British West Indies may be referred to as Anglo-Caribbean or, in historical contexts, West Indian literature; although in modern contexts the latter term is rare.

Most of these territories have become independent nations since the 1960s, though some retain colonial ties to the United Kingdom. They all share, apart from the English language, a number of political, cultural, and social ties which make it useful to consider their literary output in a single category. The more wide-ranging term "Caribbean literature" generally refers to the literature of all Caribbean territories regardless of language—whether written in English, Spanish, French, or Dutch, or one of numerous creoles.

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul is a Trinidad-born Nobel Prize-winning British writer known for his early novels set in Trinidad with a comic touch, later novels, which were bleak and his autobiographical chronicles of life and travels. Naipaul has published more than 30 books, both of fiction and nonfiction, over fifty years. Naipaul was knighted in 1989.

*The Middle Passage* is a book essentially about that perennial conjunction of historical misconduct with present and intrinsic human weakness: the colonial legacy. Mr. V. S. Naipaul describes and explains with control, the intolerance, despair, the spiritual chaos and material shortcomings of modern life in some societies where slavery was rampant. In form, the book is the travel account of what must have been on the whole a rather depressing Caribbean journey: Trinidad revisited, where the author, himself of Hindu descent, was born and bred; British Guiana, Surinam, Jamaica, Martinique.

Early examples of travel literature include Pausanias' *Description of Greece* in the 2nd century CE, and the travel journals of Ibn Jubayr (1145–1214) and Ibn Batutta (1304–1377),

both of whom recorded their travels across the known world in detail. The travel genre was a fairly common genre in medieval Arabic literature.

Travel literature became popular during the Song Dynasty (960–1279) of medieval China. The genre was called 'travel record literature' (youji wenxue), and was often written in narrative, prose, essay and diary style. Travel literature authors such as Fan Chengda (1126–1193) and XuXiake (1587–1641) incorporated a wealth of geographical and topographical information into their writing, while the 'daytrip essay' *Record of Stone Bell Mountain* by the noted poet and statesman Su Shi (1037–1101) presented a philosophical and moral argument as its central purpose.

One of the earliest known records of taking pleasure in travel, of travelling for the sake of travel and writing about it, is Petrarch's (1304–1374) ascent of Mount Ventoux in 1336. He states that he went to the mountaintop for the pleasure of seeing the top of the famous height. His companions who stayed at the bottom he called *frigida incuriositas* ("a cold lack of curiosity"). He then wrote about his climb, making allegorical comparisons between climbing the mountain and his own moral progress in life.

*The Middle Passage* is a travel book. If writing is inseparable from the writer's quality of mind, travel writing is inseparable also from his tastes, his idiosyncrasies, his general temperament—it is what happens to him when confronted by a column, a bird, a sage, a cheat, a riot; wine, fruit, dirt; the delay in the dust, the failing aeroplane. Mr. Naipaul is a novelist, a Nobel laureate, and a good interpreter. His values are rooted deep, his morale is cultured; when he is repelled, it is due to the cultural clash, his weapons are ironical exposition and resigned analysis; in fact, he is very civilized. He writes extremely well; he can be wonderfully visual; he is endowed with a sense of comedy which is at ease with the odd characters he meets on boats and trains, and he is brilliant delineating cat's-cradle conversations. He is not, on the evidence of this book, an inveterate traveller. As he puts it himself, "Travelling is often glamorous only in retrospect and at times would be insupportable without the many kindnesses encountered on the way." True enough. But that exact sentence could not have been written by Norman Douglas or Patrick Leigh-Farmer; D. H. Lawrence (to whose travel writings Mr. Naipaul's have also been compared) would not have so acknowledged the kindnesses encountered; and all three impart to their travelling a sense of vigour, discovery, pleasure, significance, sheer life, while V. S. Naipaul's gently stoic progress hardly becomes lustrous even in retrospect. They are infectious travellers, he is

not. He is adult though young, a little detached, fair and sad. He does not enjoy *himself*. He smokes too much and takes a little whiskey, mainly, one feels, to soothe his nerves; there is no fun in it. He is perfectly content to find himself at home reading such an intelligent book about it all.

V. S. Naipaul's first travel book takes us on a rich and emotional journey to a place of the greatest interest for him – his birthplace. In 1960, Dr Eric Williams, the first Prime Minister of independent Trinidad, invited V. S. Naipaul to revisit his native country and record his impressions. In this classic of modern travel writing he created a deft and remarkably prescient portrait of Trinidad and the Caribbean societies of four adjacent countries, Guyana, Surinam, Martinique and Jamaica. Haunted by the legacies of slavery and colonialism, and so thoroughly defined by the norms of Empire that it can scarcely comprehend its end, Naipaul catches this poor, topsy-turvy world at a critical moment, a time when racial and political assertion had yet to catch up – a perfect subject for the acute understanding and dazzling prose of this great writer.

'Naipaul travels with the artist's eye and ear and his observations are sharply discerning.' Evelyn Waugh 'Belongs in the same category of travel writing as Lawrence's books on Italy, Greene's on West Africa and Pritchett's on Spain' *New Statesman* 'Where earlier travellers enthused or recoiled, Mr Naipaul explains. His tone is critical but humane, and he tempers his inevitable indignation with an admirable sense of comedy.'

It can be taken on the surface as a descriptive travel book, an account of the author's voyage with somewhat disenchanted West Indians returning from England to their various islands; and then of his land journey to Trinidad, Martinique, Antigua and Jamaica. But the writer strikes deeper levels because he is born there and considers himself West Indian, a Trinidadian of East Indian descent, long absent from his native land and now a justifiably celebrated novelist. His book is the work of an insider looking on familiar scenes as if he were on the outside. He presents his observations in a straight forward way, stating the plight of islands as a matter of facts. Political immaturity, destructive, aping modernity are the common features he found in his visits.

Wherever Mr. Naipaul went, in British Guiana, in Surinam, Jamaica, he was confronted by these and other elements of the colonial legacy: poverty, racial conflict, rootlessness. Here are some of his analyses. The prejudices of race which he found in nearly every West Indian were in his view generated by self-contempt, and self-contempt had first been taught by the

missionaries: It is the basis of the faith of the heathen convert: And in these...territories, Christianity must be regarded as part of the colonial conditioning. It was the religion of the slave-owners and at first an exclusive racial faith. It bestowed righteousness on its possessors. It enabled the Dutch in Guiana to divide their (coloured) population into Christians and Negroes... And from this division, this fostering of competing sectional interests, derived an absence of community sense, an absence of pride and ultimately cynicism.

The people seem to be little concerned about the West Indian emigration to Britain. It was a lower-class thing: it was a black thing;...at another level, it was regarded with malicious pleasure as a means of embarrassing the British people, a form of revenge: and in this pleasure there was no thought for the emigrants or the dignity of the nation about which so much was being said and which was said to be “emergent.”

And Mr. Naipaul records the state of political judgment in British Guiana that wherever ministers go they are met with trivial complaints...surrounded by people who have favours to ask. That the government is elected does not matter, the people require it to be as paternalistic as before, if a little more benevolently; and a popular government must respond. “The people” have learnt their power, and the sensation is still so new that every new voter regards himself as a pressure group. In this way the people...beg, bribe and bully because this is the way they got things in the past...in this way the people are a threat to responsible government and a threat, finally, to their own leaders...

And Mr. Naipaul has this to say about the state of political judgment in British Guiana:

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And a last note. While in Surinam Mr. Naipaul had gone in search of a legend: He wanted to see the Lazy Negroes of Coronie, the idlest people in the colony, who, when slavery was abolished and the planters abandoned their land, settled down to a remote, detached existence, chasing out all newcomers of other races whose energy might disturb their calm.

He found no idyll. He found flatness, mosquitoes, neglect, a few coconuts, children in the mud, an old man pleased to see a visitor.

A derelict man in a derelict land...lost in a landscape which had never ceased to be unreal because the scene of an enforced and always temporary residence: the slaves kidnapped from one continent and abandoned on the unprofitable plantations of another, from which there could never more be escape. I was glad to leave Coronie, for, more than lazy Negroes; it held the full desolation that came to those who made the middle passage. Though it is more than fifty years since Naipal had written 'The Middle Passage' the book seems to have been written in contemporary theme.

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