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Naipaul's Women Revisited

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[**Abstract:** This article is a reconsideration of V.S. Naipaul's attitude toward women, following from the author's 2005 article "Naipaul's Women." Various recent statements Naipaul has made about female authors, including Diana Athill and Jane Austen, are examined in the light of his writings, both fact and fiction, about women in general and women writers in particular. Some consideration is also given to his relations with women in his personal life, including his sister and his wife. The final assessment is that Naipaul's impatient "off the cuff" statements about women in interviews and at public events are not reflected in his nonfiction writings.]

In a 2005 article published in the *South Asian Review*, I defended V.S. Naipaul against the common charge that he is a hater of women. I wrote that the belief that he is a misogynist seems to be based on a small sample of his fiction, and does not take into account the complexity of his oeuvre. I concluded that "women, in Naipaul's fiction, are rarely central but often important, and are not singled out for his anger or contempt" (Dooley, *Naipaul's Women* 101). Naipaul's recent novels, *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds*, are more misanthropic in general, I decided, than misogynist in particular. However, for various reasons I have begun to wonder recently why I should continue to defend him.

Re-reading my article six years later, I am struck by its intemperate tone. It is not that there is any point in particular on which I have changed my opinion, but I seem to have approached the work of my fellow scholars in an unattractive, and perhaps unreasonable, crusading spirit. I am, after all, a female and a writer myself, and since Naipaul has recently very publicly attacked women writers, I would probably be included among those whom he is criticizing. As he is singling out two writers whom I greatly admire, I thought it was perhaps time to revisit my examination of the subject, this time analyzing his attitude toward women both as writers and as fellow human beings. To this end, I will look at the criticisms that Naipaul has made of Diana Athill and Jane Austen, and then go on to consider his depictions of women in his last three major works of nonfiction.

Some would question if Naipaul deserves any attention at all: whether he has behaved so badly that we should just ignore him now. Laura Miller, for example, says that “there’s little evidence that Naipaul has ever behaved kindly to anyone” and that therefore perhaps we should “just scrap the whole thing” and refuse to read his books, despite their power (Miller). Patrick French points out in his biography that much of Naipaul’s public rudeness can be attributed to “picong,” a Trinidad expression that comes “from the French ‘piquant,’ meaning sharp or cutting, where the boundary between good and bad taste is deliberately blurred, and the listener sent reeling” (xiii). According to French, Naipaul’s devastating and aggressive manner in interviews is actually a means of defending himself:

His technique was to repeat things he had said before, but make them sound new, throwing out controversy like chaff to deflect attention from his real, inner, writerly self. . . . When academics berated him for his views, he responded in Trinidad street style, making it sound like British haughtiness. (410)

I am certainly not inclined to forgo the pleasure of his writing to make some kind of principled stand about his bad behavior. I can open just about any of his books at random and be mesmerized by the balance and grace of his sentences and the clarity of his insight—even if it is an insight that comes from a certain wilful blindness. He is expressing his own personal, idiosyncratic point of view, rather than a political point or a deeply reasoned argument, and it is not necessary to agree with his opinions to find him eminently readable.

Nevertheless, one cannot help but suspect that Naipaul is being hypocritical in various ways. For one, he hates being labelled. Diana Athill says that he cancelled his contract with Secker and Warburg because “when they announced *Guerrillas* in their catalogue they described him as ‘the West Indian novelist’” (Athill, *Stet* 232). The imposition of ideologies is a constant preoccupation in his writing. As I have written elsewhere, “For anyone to impose their beliefs about progress, human happiness, and correct behaviour upon others is a dangerous presumption. Naipaul’s dislike of causes no doubt arises from a personal fear of being subjected to such impositions” (Dooley, *VS Naipaul* 35). This being so, it seems doubly unfair for him to say that he believes women writers are “quite different. . . . I read a piece of writing and within a paragraph or two I know whether it is by a woman or not. I think [it is] unequal to me” (Fallon). In addition to running this article online, The *Guardian* posted a quiz featuring passages by ten unidentified authors, prompting readers to choose whether they thought a given passage was written by a man or a woman (*Naipaul Test*). I took the test myself, and I am quite ashamed to say that I achieved six

out of ten; but I only got such a high score because I recognized a passage from Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*. Most of the time I was just hazarding a guess, and several people I know scored lower than I did.

Jane Austen has long been a focus of Naipaul's contempt. The *Guardian* article, reporting on a recent interview at the Royal Geographical Society, quoted Naipaul as saying that he "couldn't possibly share [Austen's] sentimental ambitions, her sentimental sense of the world" (Fallon). But Naipaul first singled out Austen decades earlier. In a 2007 article on what I called his "blind spot" about Austen, I concluded that:

He has dismissed Austen as "essentially a writer for women" and though I do not believe he is absolutely a misogynist he has never shown a great interest in the world of women. The trappings of the female world of the early nineteenth century—accomplishments, sprigged muslin and marriage—seem irretrievably trivial to him and blind him to Austen's wit and penetration, despite the satire, irony and comedy which they so patently and consummately share. (Dooley, "What Trouble I have with Jane Austen" 38)

Despite his easy scorn of Austen, Naipaul shows little evidence of having read much of her work. He has admitted to having read *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* during his youth in Trinidad and finding them incomprehensible—and, presumably as a consequence, boring. More recently, he has read *Northanger Abbey* and found the heroine, Catherine, to be a "terrible vapid woman," with her "so-called love life" (Dhondy 21). As I discussed in my article, this is a seriously skewed reading of the novel: it is hard to see Catherine as vapid, and she never mentions love in the way he suggests.

I was interested to read a recent article by Janet Todd that discusses the animosity of nineteenth-century American writers to Jane Austen. She discusses the fact that the American man, in heroic mold, would define himself as against society, which, because it is "often gendered female, becomes an entrapping combination of the older generation, sex, love, family, house, and community" (Todd 29). She pursues this notion further, applying it not just to American men, but also to American male authors:

He is drawn into his own mythic creation, inventing a different form for his vision. As the hero does not accept the constraints of the house, so the author refuses the constraints of genre. The authentic writer-hero grows vast like the nation and what he creates must share his stature. (Todd 29)

There is much here that chimes with Naipaul's vision of himself as a writer, in particular his notion of the author as *sui generis*. He has said,

“You have to be very clear about the material that possesses you, and you’ve got to find the correct form for it . . . The one that feels true to you” (Burn). He sees himself as largely self-made, acknowledging few influences and role models: Joseph Conrad is one, his father Seepersad Naipaul another. He mentions Gogol, Balzac, and Orwell with admiration, but there is not a large body of complimentary references to other male writers to set against his remarks about their female counterparts. He is rarely warm and generous in his praise of any other writer. It is interesting, too, that Todd talks about the “constraints of the house” (29). One of Naipaul’s remarks quoted in the RGS interview was that a woman could not be his equal as a writer because “inevitably for a woman, she is not a complete master of a house, so that comes over in her writing too” (Fallon). Todd continues with an analysis of the American male writer’s particular problem with Austen:

All this is far from Jane Austen, who stands for almost everything such writers were trying to avoid. She is not mythic, she does not see the individual against the world, and she is not uncompromising. There is another factor of course. The universal man is just that: a man. His is a supremely masculine version of a supremely masculine type of individualistic, anti-social heroism. (Todd 29)

This perceptive assessment also resonates strongly with remarks Naipaul has made about Jane Austen, and with the views he has expressed (and implied) throughout his life about women and their role in society.

I do not fundamentally believe that Naipaul is as original and unique as he would have us think, and I went out of my way to identify some of his literary influences in my book. Nevertheless, I had been used to the idea of Naipaul as an original thinker, and perhaps I had fallen a little for the notion of his independence of mind and even his lack of intellectual forbears. However, Todd’s article about American male writers’ attitudes to Austen, and by extension the world of women writers, contains so many echoes of Naipaul that I am beginning to wonder if there is an area of unacknowledged influence to be explored there. This would be fertile territory for another article, but I will not pursue it here.

As for what Austen would have thought of Naipaul, it is only an amusing diversion to contemplate such a thing. But in Paul Theroux’s memoir, he is quoted as saying, “Dance? I’ve never danced. I’d be ashamed of it. It is something out of the jungle” (Theroux 276). Perhaps he subconsciously remembered, long ago, reading of Mr. Darcy saying contemptuously to Sir William Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice* that dancing “has the advantage . . . of being in vogue amongst the less polished societies of the world.—Every savage can dance” (Austen 25). Of course Mr. Darcy changes his mind: this is the

proud, unreconstructed Darcy of Chapter VI. Perhaps we could see Austen, in a fanciful anachronism, wittily avenging Naipaul's contempt for her, and mocking him, along with her hero, for such a pompous view of an innocent pastime.

Diana Athill was Naipaul's editor at the London publisher Andre Deutsch for nearly thirty years. Though he mentions her with gratitude for her role in his career in *A Writer's People* (2007), he said in 2011 that her writing is "feminine tosh"—though he added, comically, "I don't mean this in any unkind way" (Flood). When asked to comment, Athill laughed off his opinion: "I can't say it made me feel very bad. It just made me laugh . . . I think one should just ignore it, take no notice really" (Flood). No doubt she is right not to take personal offence, but it is interesting to look at these kinds of statements in a larger context. Peter D. Fraser has pointed out that Naipaul tends to pontificate "on matters on which he is less of an expert than he thinks" when he is in "less considered mode (that is, neither in his fiction nor non-fiction but usually in interviews and slighter pieces)" (214). Naipaul is a sublime writer himself, and has written some perceptive criticism, so it might be contended that he is something of an expert when it comes to assessing the writing of others. He told Amer Hussein that "a good critic is someone who reads a text with a clear mind; most people are merely reading to find out what they already know" (160). However, it is difficult to reconcile his dismissal of Athill's writing with an unprejudiced reading of her work.

Athill is the author of several books, most of them memoirs. In one of her memoirs, *Make Believe*, she recounts her friendship with Hakim Jamal and Gale Benson, whose tragic and appalling story became the basis for Naipaul's novel *Guerrillas*.¹ It is an original and very candid book, clear-eyed and unsentimental. The sexual act is described in plain, direct language, and Athill's feelings toward Hakim are described in a way which might be seen as unfeminine:

For an instant I had felt piercingly something which I suppose men to feel more often than women: the alarming power of beauty. It was a physical sensation, as though a floor under my heart had given way and it was about to drop into a gulf of excruciatingly intense longing for this magical creature. Once my eyelids shut the image out, the feeling stopped. Afterwards I was pleased I'd had it, but even more pleased that it had only lasted a few seconds: how appalling to be lastingly the victim of such a feeling simply because of how someone looked! (Athill, *Make Believe* 29)

This matter-of-fact, unromantic tone when writing about love and sex is typical of Athill, and the fact that she describes the overwhelming feeling she had as more frequently felt by men than women perhaps increases the sense of transgressing traditional gender boundaries.

Athill has continued to write into her late 80s and beyond. She won the Costa Biography Award in 2008 with *Somewhere Towards the End*. In this memoir she talks frankly about the pains and pleasures of getting old and facing death, including the waning of sexuality that comes with age. It is difficult to see any of this as sentimental or “feminine tosh.” My suspicion—although one cannot really know for certain—is that Naipaul finds Athill’s frankness about sex and its pleasures extremely uncomfortable. In his own writing, sex almost always has an unpleasant and often violent dimension, as if he has never really got past the feeling he had in his twenties, when he wrote, “I cannot write Sex. . . . I would be embarrassed even at the moment of writing. My friends would laugh. My mother would be shocked, and with reason” (Naipaul, “London” 13). If I am right, then paradoxically, it is not the femininity in Athill’s books, but their failure to conform to his standards of femininity that bothers him. But then he may not have persisted with her books long enough to discover this aspect of them. If this is true, it is another area of hypocrisy: he said of the Indian response to his work, “I find that people who respond violently usually haven’t read the books. And I no longer forgive this” (Wheeler 44). One suspects that if he found them to be “feminine tosh,” then he might have decided not to read beyond the first few pages.

Naipaul merited his own chapter in Athill’s book about her career in publishing, *Stet*. She documents the difficulties involved in publishing the work of someone with such a prickly, over-sensitive nature. At first she and his other friends were careful not to offend him because of his race. But she found it increasingly difficult to like him:

I thought so highly of Vidia’s writing and felt his presence on our list to be so important that I simply could not allow myself not to like him. I was helped by a foundation of affection laid down during the early days of knowing him, and I was able to believe that his depressions hurt him far more than they hurt me. (Athill, *Stet* 226)

But then he wrote *Guerrillas*, the book based on the story of Athill’s friends Hakim Jamal and Gail Benson, and she “could not like the book” (Athill, *Stet* 227). She told him as much, though she later regretted it, and it led to his (temporary) departure from Andre Deutsch. When he thought better of it and came back to the fold, she says,

My private sun did go back behind a film of cloud, but in spite of that there was satisfaction in knowing that he thought himself better off with us than with them, and I had no doubt of the value of whatever books were still to come. (Athill, *Stet* 232)

If Naipaul read this book—which he may not have, as he dislikes reading about himself (“I’m not a debater. How can I be concerned about people who don’t like my work? . . . I don’t *read* these things.

I'm nervous of being made self-conscious" [Schiff 137])—but if he did, then there may well be some hurt feelings implicated in his assessment of Athill's writing.

And what of other female writers? Patrick French says that during his time as a regular book reviewer for the *New Statesman*, from 1957-61, "he read extensively among women writers, and often gave them better reviews than the men" (French 195), particularly praising Muriel Spark, Edna O'Brien and Attia Hosein. He stopped reviewing regularly in 1961, writing in a *Times* article that he preferred to return to the classics, including the Brontës (French 196). But despite the admiration he expresses for these women writers, one searches in vain in his anthologized literary criticism for serious consideration of any female writer, and although he often discusses other male writers in the interviews collected in *Conversations with VS Naipaul*, the only references to women authors are the dismissive ones to Jane Austen that I have already discussed, and an admission that he does not know Virginia Woolf (Hussein 157).

Naipaul's attitude toward women more generally is revealed in a 1994 interview with Stephen Schiff:

I was an extremely passionate man, and utterly heterosexual—an adorer of women, all my life. What has happened now is that, with age, women have sunk in my esteem quite a bit. I'm no longer blinded by this way of looking at them. So in a way that's a kind of loss. One has lost this excitement about women. . . . But I adored women. I thought they were wonderful. I loved their voices. I loved the quality of their skin. I loved everything about them. (Schiff 145-46)

This objectification of women might explain the difficulty Naipaul has in taking their subjectivity seriously, which is a requirement for taking their writing seriously. It also, perhaps, adds weight to my suspicion that Athill's books make him uncomfortable partly because of their sexual frankness. If his esteem for a whole class of people is based solely on their physical attributes, he is not likely to be interested in their intellectual output, and is likely to be disconcerted when they coolly turn their gaze back on his sex, as Athill has—and indeed, as Austen often did.

The elephant in the room, as it were, in discussing Naipaul's attitude to women, is his first wife, Patricia.² One could read every one of Naipaul's nonfiction books without ever knowing he had such a thing as a wife. The index of *Conversations with VS Naipaul* contains neither an entry under Patricia Naipaul, nor any entries for "wife" or "marriage." In the interviews, however, she is an seemingly servile presence that occasionally appears, "brings tea and slips away" (Atlas 100). Sometimes she reproves him, and occasionally she irritates him.

In his 1991 interview, he was asked what his wife did: “‘She does nothing, nothing at all!’ he replied, laughing, as if the question were ridiculous” (Winokur 124). However, he later admitted that he leaned on her heavily as a listener and adviser as he wrote.

Patrick French had access to Patricia Naipaul’s diaries when writing Naipaul’s biography, and from them we learn what this dependence cost her. Their courtship is charted in letters, Naipaul’s wavering commitment to her prefiguring their fraught and difficult marriage. An intelligent woman who was just as highly educated as her husband, she found her own ambitions, to write or even simply to act in an undergraduate play, were squashed. Naipaul’s reaction when she was diagnosed with cancer in 1989 was a revealing mixture of rage and irritation at the interruption to his work, and shame at his rage. She underwent a mastectomy and was in remission for some years, but the cancer returned and she died in 1996, after forty years of marriage. She was devastated by the revelations he made in a 1994 interview about his sexual past. She already knew that there was a mistress, Margaret Gooding—another story there, of course—but she was unprepared for his announcement to the world that he had been, in the early days of their marriage, “a great prostitute man” (Schiff 145). Too late he realized what he had done, and he told French, “It could be said that I had killed her. It could be said. I feel a little bit that way” (French 471).

Naipaul’s relationship with his mother was also a vexed one, but he was close to his older sister Kamla. Many of the letters between the siblings were published in 1999 in Gillon Aitken’s collection *Letters Between a Father and Son*, along with the correspondence with his father Seepersad. Aitken wrote in his introduction that “there is an enlightening carelessness in the absence of reserve between Vidia [i.e. V.S. Naipaul] and his sister” (Naipaul, *Letters* xii). He seemed quite relaxed in his relations with her. In 1949 he wrote to her from Trinidad when she was studying in Benares:

My darling,

I want you to promise me one thing. I want you to promise that you will write a book in diary form about your stay in India. Try to stay at least 6 months—study conditions; analyse the character. Don’t be too bitter. Try to be humorous. . . . Your book will be a great success from the financial point of view. (*Letters* 8)

Kamla never wrote her book: she returned to Trinidad after their father’s death and worked as a teacher to support the family. (None of his sisters became writers, though his brother Shiva did and, before the shock of his early death, Naipaul was routinely disparaging about his “mediocrity” [French 425]).

Naipaul’s fictional female characters are, on the face of it, not particularly attractive. Athill speaks for many readers when she writes,

“He is not interested in writing about women, and when he does so usually does it with dislike” (Athill, *Stet* 224). However, few of Naipaul’s fictional characters of either sex are what one would call likeable, and in this respect, the men are not much better than the women. As I said in my 2005 article, “Women, in Naipaul’s fiction . . . are, on the whole, treated with no less, nor more, sympathy and respect than their husbands, brothers, sons, and lovers” (*Naipaul’s Women* 101). The fact that they are not central, that men hold the subject position in Naipaul’s fiction, could be interpreted as sexist, but Naipaul has always been a writer who needs to inhabit a subject position similar to his own in his characters, and I can imagine the outcry if he ever were to choose to write from a female point of view.

But another possible source of illumination of Naipaul’s attitude toward women is his nonfiction. One of the great pleasures of these books is the unexpected, though usually fleeting, personal connections he makes on his travels, and these are often with women. Sometimes the women he meets conform to a reassuring model of femininity, like the wife of a founding member of the Shiv Sena in *India: A Million Mutinies Now*: “Mrs Raote was a pale-complexioned, handsome woman; and, as so often in Indian homes, the simple and apparently artless devotion of the wife to her husband was something that made an impression” (43). A little later he explains the cost of this devotion in Hindu family life:

To be tormented by a mother-in-law was part of a young woman’s testing, part, almost, of growing up. Somehow the young woman survived; and then one day she became a mother-in-law herself, and had her own daughter-in-law to torment, to round off a life, to balance pain and joy. (49)

Another Indian woman he meets is less conventional. Mallika, wife of the Dalit poet Namdeo Dhasal, had written an autobiography in Marathi,

a story not only of love, but also of disillusion and pain . . . She was passionate about the freedom of women; but in her own life, because of her love for Namdeo, she found that she had lost some of her autonomy. (99)

He discusses her book with her for three hours, complimenting her on a particular image, drawing her out about the frank expression of her sexuality. After relating their discussion, he goes on:

The first part of Mallika’s book had ended. . . . “Male ego is the most hideous thing in our present society. Women find quite a pleasure in boosting it. . . . I do not believe that for anybody called Namdeo I should surrender my entire life.” But the book was also an account of her obsession with the man and his poetry and his cause, and her

consequent lack of freedom. The second part of the book ended:
 "This has been the journey of a defeated mind." (109)

How poignant, and ironic, that he should devote ten pages of his book discussing this autobiography, while his own wife wrote in her diary:

I really began to feel this urge to write, about the world in which I found myself, in the late sixties. . . . I was in daily contact with someone > – I will call him, for convenience sake, the Genius – < who could do the sort of writing I wanted to do, any sort of writing, superbly well. It wasn't his example which set me off, I was strangely dead to that, it was his character. He was once supposed to have said to a woman . . . whom he had just met at a party, 'It doesn't matter what you think.' He didn't need to say that to me. He made it painfully obvious. . . . I felt assaulted but I could not defend myself. (French 440-41)

Patricia's autobiography was never written.

In the Iran of *Beyond Belief*, in the mid-1990s, Naipaul met only a few women. He recalls his earlier visit:

In February 1980 I had seen young women in guerrilla garb among the students camped outside the seized US Embassy. . . . I remember one plump young woman, in her khakis, coming out of a low tent on this freezing afternoon with a mug of steaming tea for one of the men: her face bright with the idea of serving the revolution and the warriors of the revolution. . . . I don't think that young woman with the mug could have dreamed that the revolution to which she was contributing . . . would have ended in this way, with the old-fashioned tormenting of women. (225)

He talks about the sister of his guide, Mehrdad, who had

little chance of getting married, since too many men of suitable age had been killed in the eight-year war. She simply stayed at home when she came home from work: silent, full of inward rage, her unhappiness a shadow over the house. . . . It was too difficult for her to go out; and now she had lost the will. (225)

He arranges to meet another woman, an expatriate who has returned to visit her elderly parents. During the visit he describes two versions of womanhood. A friend of Mrs. Seghir, divorced, was "friendly and fat, bursting out of her long skirt, and she had fat, greedy lips, made for food alone" (227). The malice of this portrait is somewhat tempered by the description of Mrs. Seghir's mother, helping her husband to the lunch table. "She, very small and thin, her eyes weak behind her glasses, was still wifely and solicitous: such emotions go on to the end: it was affecting" (228). This from the writer who criticizes Austen for her "sentimental ambitions, her sentimental sense of the world!" (Fallon). But perhaps we can trace some feeling for Patricia, who died

during the writing of this book, in this sentimental touch. Of course, only a couple of months after her death, he married again. It seems significant that Naipaul defines all of these women in terms of their marital statuses, though undoubtedly in contemporary Iranian society, marital status is an important factor in determining the limited range of freedoms a woman might enjoy.

As Naipaul describes it in *Beyond Belief*, Iran is an oppressive society for women, and if anything, Pakistan is worse. He writes angrily of the “older informal systems” that were showing through the more recent British institutions, including “the veiling and effective imprisoning of women, and giving men tomcatting rights over four women at a time, to use and discard at will” (251). He meets a woman who has been attacked and disfigured by her husband and his nephew, and who has escaped to a shelter for battered women. She is an example of the “people who are . . . voiceless and without representation.” Naipaul gives her a voice:

She said that nothing gave her pleasure now. All she wanted was to get her children back. But something had happened since she ran away from her husband: she was not frightened now. . . . “I am not supposed to feel pleasure or happiness.”

And suddenly she began to laugh. She was laughing at me, my strange questions, my clothes, the fact that I needed an interpreter to talk to her. The laughter had been building up inside her, and when it came she couldn’t control it, remembering only, for manners’ sake, to turn aside and cover her mouth and butchered nose with her palm. (255)

Typically, Naipaul tells this woman’s story as he hears it, including the problems he has understanding the details and the difficulties of communicating through an interpreter, but the final paragraph is especially characteristic in the way it punctures the tragedy of the situation with the woman’s own completely individual response to Naipaul, this incomprehensible being she was confronted with. It does not show the woman in a flattering light, but it jolts the reader out of an easy kind of pity.

Ten years later, Naipaul wrote *The Masque of Africa: Glimpses of African Belief*, published in 2010. It is soon quite clear that, with all the continent’s troubles, women have more power and independence in most of the African societies he visited than in the Islamic societies he visited. In fact, the first personal encounter he describes in the book is with a Ugandan woman, Susan: “She was a poet of merit and a literature teacher at Makerere. She was less than forty and slender and delicate, with a beautiful voice” (28). This is a surprise: he has found a woman writer, in fact a good woman writer, “a poet of merit.” Whether

this is a personal judgment or a matter of reputation, it is surely significant that this is the first thing we hear about her. Then, of course, comes the physical description. Naipaul always likes to give concrete details of the people he meets and the places he visits—and men are as carefully described as women. But this is an extremely sympathetic description of a woman with a terrible family history of persecution: “there was so much in her quick heart and mind that couldn’t be contained in a simple religious definition,” he says (28). In this elegant sentence, Naipaul acknowledges the individuality and complexity of this particular woman, with a respect and generosity that is often missing from such descriptions. In Nigeria, he takes a swipe at Islam when visiting a palace containing a harem: “Islam living out its good old ways at its African limits” (147). In this quote, Naipaul’s distaste for Islam’s polygamous culture surfaces once again, though treated here with genial irony instead of the forensic rage of his remarks about Pakistan in *Beyond Belief*, quoted above. In Gabon, on the other hand, in the forest, he is told that women “are the real power. A woman may not exercise power, but she gives it to her son. . . . This country was not made for men” (227). Naipaul makes no comment on this, but the man he is interviewing is clearly spooked by the power of these forest women, who are “witches” and who make “many ritual sacrifices” (227). The balance of power between the sexes in these societies is clearly quite different from that in the Islamic societies in other parts of Africa.

Several times in Africa, Naipaul employs female guides and even a female bodyguard. Fatima, in South Africa, is a woman of color who has “literary ambitions” and whose character has been shaped by Apartheid. “Someone less remarkable would have been crushed,” Naipaul says (285), and he uses her story as an example of the difficulties of finding an identity in a country where, even after the end of Apartheid, “race was all in all” (288). What a contrast to his tart response to a discussion between Indian writers Shashi Deshpande and Nayantara Sahgal in February 2002: “My life is short. I can’t listen to banality. This thing about colonialism, this thing about gender oppression, the very word oppression wearies me” (Gibbons). This is perhaps an example of Naipaul allowing his irritation to get the better of him in “less considered mode,” as Fraser has it (214), or an example of the “picong” French describes, “where the boundary between good and bad taste is deliberately blurred” (xiii). This, of course, hardly excuses his bad behavior and discourtesy to his fellow authors.

Where does all of this leave us? In Naipaul’s three most recent nonfiction books, there is little evidence of any animosity toward women. Some are criticized, but, as I found in my study of attitudes toward women in his novels, his criticism of women is not

disproportionate when compared with his criticism of men. Usually his women are treated with respect, their stories and opinions given equal weight to men's. Naipaul's women are often described in physical terms, but so are his men, and it is part of Naipaul's method to give his reader a clear picture of the places and people he meets. Also, there are several woman writers among those he interviews.

Writing these books is, of course, quite a different matter from speaking "off the cuff" in interviews or at public talks, where for some reason Naipaul too often allows his petty irritations free reign. This might partly be explained by something he said in a 1990 interview. Travelling in the southern states of the USA, he "began to feel that the people he met could help [in constructing a picture] more than he had permitted in the past. He would let them talk, keeping himself much more in the background" (Robinson 111). This idea seems to require taking people of either sex on their own terms and allowing them an independent voice to a degree that he might not feel necessary in his life outside of writing; or, as French suggests, his provocative statements may be designed as a means of defending his "writerly self" (410). The outrageous sexism of his remarks about women writers would not, of course, have been unusual in the years when he was struggling to make his mark, before the feminist movement took off in the 1960s and '70s—in the days of Kingsley Amis, Evelyn Waugh and their ilk. As French points out, Naipaul's use of "picong" is devastating, with the Oxford accent, the beautifully modulated voice, and the expression of venomous opinions more at home on a Port of Spain street corner. But although this might be the explanation for how the behavior began, it is hardly an excuse for its continuance well beyond the time when Naipaul needed to assert himself in a world that was inclined to treat him with disregard. In *The Enigma of Arrival* he wrote of how, before he could make a beginning, "man and writer" had to "[come] together again"; that "both were really the same" (Naipaul, *Enigma* 135). But can one, after all, divide the man from the writer? Looking at the things he says alongside the things he writes, it may be the only way to redeem him. Otherwise, he stands condemned for hypocrisy, for labelling women in a way he hates to be labelled himself, for writing from exactly the personal and subjective point of view, and sometimes with a sentimental tone, that he despises in women writers, and for judging the writing of women authors without having necessarily read it. As James Ley wrote in the *Australian Book Review*, "if we start purging the corpus of modern literature of scoundrels, egotists, adulterers, cranks, dipsomaniacs, hypocrites, perverts, depressives, religious nuts, and political crackpots, there will be precious little left" (Ley 32).

It is to be hoped that the heat of these controversies will fade with time, as is usually the case. After all, though what Mark Twain or Alexander Pope say of their contemporaries is still of historical interest, it has little bearing on the place of their work in the literary canon. Naipaul has admitted that he is not free from bias: "For works to last, they must have a certain clear-sightedness. And to achieve that, one perhaps needs a few prejudices" (Hardwick 47). These prejudices, advantageous perhaps when balanced by the considered act of writing, may lead to impatient and intemperate behavior in a person, when under pressure or in an uncongenial situation. But the seduction of his writing, in a distinguished corpus of books published across a career spanning more than half a century, will endure as Naipaul's true legacy to the literary world, long after the scandal of his verbal outbursts becomes merely a historical curiosity.

Notes

1. Jamal and Benson were both involved in the Black Power movement in Trinidad. Benson, Jamal's lover, was murdered there by Black Power leader Michael X in 1971. Jamal was killed in Boston in 1973, apparently as a result of a factional dispute within the movement.

2. The following section relies heavily on my review of Patrick French's biography of Naipaul, *The World Is What It Is*, in the *South Asian Review* 28.1 (2007) 206-09.

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