

NAIPAUL AND LIFE WRITING

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ABSTRACT:

NAIPAUL AND LIFE WRITING, IS AN APPROACH TO NAIPAUL'S NON-FICTION WORK, WHICH CONNECTS HIS WRITING – OTHER THAN THE INDIAN TRILOGY – TO HIS NONFICTION. THE PURPOSE OF THIS CHAPTER IS MULTIFACETED: TO DELINEATE THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF NAIPAUL; TO IDENTIFY NAIPAUL'S POSITION AS A DIASPORIC WRITER BY DEFINING SUCH BASIC NOTIONS AS: DIASPORA, MOBILITY (MIGRATION AND HOME-COMING), GLOBALIZATION; TO DRAW UP A BIO-BIBLIOGRAPHICAL PORTRAIT OF SIR VIDYADHAR SURAJPRASAD NAIPAUL; TO COMMENT ON NAIPAUL'S POST-COLONIALISM AND INDIANNESS IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIAN DIASPORIC WRITING.

HIS WRITINGS CLOSELY REFLECT ALL REFERENCES TO THE WRITER'S "BIOGRAPHICAL AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL EXPERIENCES" – BOTH DIRECT AND INDIRECT. IT IS THEREFORE INTERESTING TO CONSIDER THE POSITIONING OF NAIPAUL'S REVIEWERS AND BIOGRAPHERS OPPOSITE TO THE BIOGRAPHICAL AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS ENCOUNTERED IN HIS WRITINGS.

THE MAIN OBJECTIVE OF MY RESEARCH IS TO FIND OUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NAIPAUL – THE HOMO VIATOR, AND NAIPAUL – THE HOMO (AUTO)BIOGRAPHICUS – AND THE EXTENT TO WHICH HIS NOVELS AND TRAVELOGUES MAY BE REGARDED AS BIOGRAPHIES OF THE FORMER SUBJECTS OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE. I AM ALSO CONSIDERING THE RELATION BETWEEN BIOGRAPHY, AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND TRAVEL WRITING WHICH MIGHT CONTAIN ELEMENTS OF BOTH. A SPECIAL MENTION WILL BE LATER MADE TO NAIPAUL'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVELS, WHICH DEFINITELY STRESS THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL DIMENSION OF HIS WRITINGS.

KEY WORDS: VS NAIPAUL, TRAVEL WRITING, DIASPORIC WRITER, BIOGRAPHICAL AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL EXPERIENCES

“The India where Gandhi and Nehru and the others operated was historical and real. The India from which we had come was impossibly remote, almost as imaginary as the land of the Ramayana, our Hindu epic. I lived easily with that darkness, that lack of knowledge. I never thought to inquire further.”

“Our own past was, like our idea of India, a dream.”
(Naipaul, Literary Occasions)

Introduction

This paper is built around **two major questions** at which its corpus will answer.

The first question is: *Before positioning Naipaul on the chess-board of postcolonial writing, it is necessary to consider his position as a British writer. How does he fit into the picture of a globalized culture? and the second is: What are the specific traits of Naipaul’s Indian travelogues? How do they fit into the context of travel writing as a literary genre further considered a subcategory of ‘life writing’? What is their relation to biography and autobiography?*

The paper’s corpus

Creative writing author and instructor, Sharon Lippincott starts her handbook on lifestory writing with the following explanation:

“Lifestory writing is the process of transforming your own essence into words on paper for other people to know – daring to expose not your actions and experiences, but your thoughts, your choices, your perceptions, and your feelings. It takes courage to bare your soul for the examination of future generations, and making the effort to share yourself with them is an act of great love” (Lippincott, 1)

An already (in)famous web source goes closer to a more scholarly approach, by stating the *fluidity* of the term “life writing” which is as comprehensive as to include “autobiography, biography, memoir, diaries, letters, testimonies, auto-ethnography, personal essays and, more recently, digital forms such as blogs and email” – almost everything that does not actually fit into the realm of fiction.[1]

The definition offered by the *PMLA* is even more comprehensive, including a large assortment of forms and different notions – such as memoirs, diaries, and journals, mixed media, hybrid forms, print, film, photography, notions of self, genre, life story, and new development (*MLA Newsletter* 29.1, Spring 1997: 11). Two years later, the *PMLA* Convention Program included: “Life Writing and the Visual” (the diary, family album, multimedia and women’s life writing); “Life Writing and Nature” (representations of the self in the desert or the garden); “Life Writing and Addiction” (sex, anorexia, and alcoholism) [2]. Obviously, life writing and cultural studies are joined together. Such a joint venture is supported by Stuart Hall who favours an all-including definition of cultural studies which he views as a mediator between “experience as a lived process” and “a textualized critique”. To paraphrase Mujeeb Ali Murshed Qasim, a perusal of Naipaul’s fiction and non-fiction leads us to the pertinent conclusion that his writings closely reflect all references to the writer’s “biographical and autobiographical experiences” – both direct and indirect. It is therefore interesting to consider the positioning of Naipaul’s reviewers and biographers opposite to the biographical and autobiographical elements encountered in his writings.

The main objective of the present stage of my research is to find out the relationship between Naipaul – the *homo viator*, and Naipaul – the *homo (auto) biographicus* – and the extent to which his novels and travelogues may be regarded as (auto)biographies. I am also considering the relation between biography, autobiography and travel writing which might contain elements of both. A special mention will be later made to Naipaul’s autobiographical novels, which definitely stress the autobiographical dimension of his writings. Here is **Fisher’s definition of autobiography**:

“Autobiography is a privileged genre where the reflexivity of human storytelling is foregrounded. Autobiography is not only a good place to observe how art follows life and

life art, but also a vehicle to reflect on the discovery and construction processes... of science and knowledge in general, including the human sciences and the cultural products studied under the rubric of the humanities.” (Fisher, 1994)

The multi-faceted writings of Naipaul have more than once placed him in a particular relationship to England, his colonial centre. If the 1980’s – with the imperial constructions and representations of the Orient – viewed him as an apologist of the British Empire, and a collaborator, Naipaul was later viewed as a casualty of imperialism, a victim of the colonial system. A possible explanation for this change of attitude is to be found in a different orientation of postcolonial critique, questioning the changes brought about by the colonized expatriates’ return to the UK.

Far from his childhood home in Port of Spain, Naipaul, the Oxford student, was exchanging letters with his father, gathering information that his father was willing to give regarding himself and his family, and building up his own life writing, extended along a number of fiction and non-fiction works. But Naipaul did not explicitly write his autobiography: he authorized Patrick French to write Naipaul’s “authorized” biography,[3] a particular subgenre, defined by Winslow as “a life written by a biographer who has been chosen or approved by the person or persons who have authority over the subject’s estate or literary remains, possibly a surviving family member or executor” (Winslow, 3). In an article published in 2008, Patrick French commented on the opportunity offered by Naipaul’s permission to write his authorized biography, which granted his unlimited access to more than 50,000 different documents existing on the shelves of the university library of Tulsa. This is how Patrick French remembers Naipaul’s letter of acceptance and their cooperation during the writing of the book:

“There was silence; then some months later a letter of acceptance came, written as if unwillingly in a fast, cramped hand, in violet ink. Over the five years since that letter, Naipaul has stuck scrupulously to our agreement; I have had no direction or restriction from him. He had the opportunity to read the completed manuscript, but requested no changes.”[4]

A biography based on such extensive resources triggered different reactions. In *Language in India*, Mujeeb Ali Murshed Qasim comments that French’s biography, by revealing facts about the life, achievements, and personality of the writer, helps the reader “to determine the central paradox of Naipaul’s writing,” because it “emphasizes the highly personal nature of his writing” (Qasim, 2011, p. 621-46).

But French’s biography is also literary in that it offers an insight into the making of a writer, revealing his literary sensibility, and the intimate processes and personal events shaping his identity. Michael Benton comments on literary biography and on its appeal to prospective readers who are ready to accept the writer’s life, whatever its shortcomings, seeing it as an “essential condition of the creative being,” which romanticizes life into a pattern that “reflects the works” and

“... becomes a pattern at some level to be envied. If life could be lived vicariously, the writer’s life is the one we would choose; as biography, it offers a secondary life to share and enjoy alongside the secondary worlds created in the writer’s works.”[5]

What is interesting about French’s ‘authorized’ biography is that it is three-levelled: the first level covers the writer’s childhood in Trinidad, his education at the Queen’s Royal College and Oxford, and his apprenticeship at the BBC, supported by his strong ambition to become a successful writer; the second level is his mature, though unhappy relationship with Patricia Hale; finally, the biography deals with his journeys and

travel writing, his personal experiences in Trinidad, England, and the other countries in the Middle East, Asia, Africa, the Americas, the Caribbean. It is an experience which will be fully represented in Naipaul's novels and travelogues as well.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary offers several definitions for memoirs and autobiography. Summing up, we are dealing with a “historical account or biography written from personal knowledge or special sources,” a personal account of one's own life, meant to be published, which *may* take literary form. The literary form is not compulsory.

Generally speaking, memoirs – or autobiographies, as the case may be – are rather special categories of a diary, having certain sources and functions. Autobiographies are not written to remain unknown. Moreover, they have been written by artists or non-artistic personalities who use the word, the sound, and their art to justify themselves in front of their contemporaries and even posterity. They do not represent a justification by their own form, but by the events they describe and comment upon. It is very possible that they will later become literary works in themselves, and that the author will later be considered as their own character, but the initial function of memoirs has never been aesthetic.

The autobiographies written by different celebrities are justified as far as the respective celebrities are characterized by a richness of actions they accomplished, or events they witnessed or even ordered. Thus, we have the autobiographies of Saint-Simon, Churchill and De Gaulle, Chaplin and Louis Armstrong – to quote but a few. The question is: Are they literary works? Maybe not, but they have all the chances to retain this status. Actually, Philippe Lejeune had already stated that an autobiography is “*a retrospective narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality*” (Lejeune, 192-222) [6]

Qasim replies that, if the “source subject” decides to write his autobiography in order to depict his life or an event in a narrative form, with the purpose of revealing his experiences to an audience or to justify facts or events, then Naipaul's recording of his life and various experiences covers the most unexpected settings: to his native Trinidad and Tobago, and neighbouring Jamaica and Venezuela, we should add the great nations of the Asian continent – India, Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia and Malaysia – plus a number of African, and European countries not to mention the USA and South America. Then, according to Ghazoul, “autobiographical discourse is not only culturally conditioned; it is also symptomatic of the cultural moment. Thus it is important to explore the varieties of self-presentation, and not assume a fixed paradigm.”[7] Naipaul, the international traveller, offers an all-encompassing panorama of the human condition of his (and our) world, in his original blending of fiction and autobiography, his writings acquiring an undeniable confessional dimension. In *Finding the Centre* (1984), he confesses:

“A writer after a time carries his world with him, his own burden of experience, human experience and literary experience (one deepening the other); and I do believe – especially after writing ‘Prologue to an Autobiography’ – that I would have found equivalent connections with my past and myself wherever I had gone.” (FC, ix)

It is also interesting to mention the writer's view on his travels and the extent to which the experiences gained during his travels find way in his fiction: “I travelled as though I was on holiday, and then floundered, looking for the narrative. I had trouble with the ‘I’ of the travel writer; I thought that as traveller and narrator he was in unchallenged command and had to make big judgements.” (Reading and Writing, 30)

On a more theoretical level, the importance of autobiography has been repeatedly stressed by various theoreticians. For the time being, we shall cite Gunnthórunn

Gudmundsdóttir who, in *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing* considers that it “can capture and address many contemporary concerns, for example the status of the subject, the relations and representations of ethnicity and gender, and perhaps most importantly questions the individual’s relationship with his or her past” (Gudmundsdóttir, 1).

Referring to the different definitions of autobiography, Paul John Eakin complains about the temporary nature of all these attempts at defining autobiography, which, nevertheless, he sees as “instructive,” in that they reflect assumptions about what he calls “the slipperiest of literary genres,” and concedes that “the self and its experiences may somehow be represented in a text” (Eakin, 1999: 1-2, 99).

On the other hand, there are critics who consider that autobiography should be totally removed from literature (Frye, 2000: 72), some going as far as the modernists heralding the end of autobiography (Sprinker, 1980), or more conciliatory, such as Linda Anderson who comments on the centrality of autobiography as a main topic of the twentieth-century scholarly debates triggered by the main critical-philosophical schools – psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, feminism – which, have approached, from different perspectives, have “the self-evident nature of the subject and knowledge.” Poststructuralism is given credit because, according to Anderson, “*by positing language or discourse as both preceding and exceeding the subject, deposed the author from his or her central place as the source of meaning and undermined the unified subject of autobiography.*”[8]

Psychoanalysts – such as Sigmund Freud who, in his *Autobiographical Study*, provided the main directions to approach the psychoanalytical novel – found undeniable similarities between the content of a (written) autobiography and a person’s confession in the presence of a (psycho)analyst.

The theoretical approaches become more complex with Barthes and Foucault who both dismiss the notion of the author, while Romanian academician Eugen Simion considers the author’s presence as “inescapable.” In the “Introduction” to his seminal study, we read that

“Simion’s contribution to this scepticism, his doubt that the author is defunct, takes the form of examining the course of this idea in our century. [...] Simion is ever asking what we are to make of the curious state of affairs wherein the most vehement denials of the existence of an author invariably are attended not only by an exceptional degree of self-referentiality, not just as the person whose name happens to sit on the title page, but by a self-referentiality to that concept of author at the same time so thoroughly denounced.”[9]

It would be interesting to mention some other definitions of, or approaches to autobiography, such as those formulated by Donald Winslow, John Pilling, Georges Gusdorf, or Orla Vigsø. Thus, Donald J. Winslow defines autobiography as “the writing of one’s own history, the story of one’s life written by oneself ... before the term was introduced such words as apologia, apology, confessions, and memories were used.”[10] John Pilling writes that autobiography is, in most cases, liberal when applied to any kind of personal writing, revealing facts of the author’s life:

“There is also another shadowy area obtaining between autobiography (however defined) and the novel which is known, for one reason or another, to take its life from the facts of its author’s life. [Thus] I feel bound to acknowledge that I am concerned with what I take to be observable species existing within the bounds of a more or less ill-defined genre.”[11]

Georges Gusdorf, an authority in the study of autobiography, defines it as “the mirror in which the individual reflects his own image” (qtd. in Behrendt, 148), while Orla Vigsø, in his essay, *The Autobiographical Contract Revisited: The Case of Høeg and Riffbjerg*, develops upon Lejeune’s definition and identifies elements belonging to four different categories. First, the linguistic form of autobiography comprises narrative and prose. The subject covers the author’s individual life and personal history. There is an identity between the author, “whose name designates a real person” and the narrator. Regarding the narrator’s position, the Swedish researcher considers that “the narrator and protagonist are identical” and the “narration is retrospectively oriented.” According to Vigsø,

“the identity or non-identity between narrator and protagonist is decisive in distinguishing between autobiography and biography, while the question of the grammatical person used (first, second, or third) is used to distinguish between different sorts of biography and autobiography” (Vigsø, 2002).

Elizabeth Bruss thinks that any definition of autobiography depends on the distinctions done not only between fiction and non-fiction but also between “rhetorical and empirical first-person narration.” According to Bruss, “these distinctions are cultural artefacts and might be differently drawn, as they indeed once were and might become again, leading to the obsolescence of autobiography or at least its radical reformation” (qtd. in Adams, xiv). Distinguishing between fact and fiction might prove a difficult task. Writing about the autobiographical novel, Galya Diment reached the conclusion that

“the amount of autobiographical material in a writer’s work can frequently choose to sacrifice both their privacy and a large degree of their artistic detachment in order to achieve what they consider more important – the therapeutic benefits of a public confession, a desire to recapture and relive past experiences, or, simply, the easy availability of the material” (Diment, 57).

As a matter of fact, Naipaul’s fictional work abounds in both revealing and enriching autobiographical elements, from memories of his early youth in Trinidad, to his Oxford experiences and later travels all over the world, which renders his characters as easily recognizable.

Until now we have dealt with two interconnected dimensions of life writing: biography and autobiography, surveying authoritative criticism in the field. A few considerations regarding the autobiographical novel will offer an additional insight into Naipaul’s work. If “all writing is autobiography, reflecting self-interest, interpretation and narrative,” (Schmidt, 119) and confessional, as T. S. Eliot argued, [12] then Naipaul’s work is characterized by a similar autobiographical, confessional dimension. According to Bruce King, the author has always felt an imperious need to resort to “facts and experience,” and the temptation to merge and mix literary genres – “autobiography, self-analysis, fiction, facts, reportage, social and cultural analysis” to the purpose of creating “a meta-narrative which would explain the various influences on how it came into being” (King, 137). The realism of Naipaul’s novels consists in their being based upon realities – people and events – which the author has encountered in real life. Thus they become autobiographical. In an interview with Andrew Robinson (1992) Naipaul confesses:

“Simple people write simple things. The thing is, I am not a simple man. I have an interesting mind, a very analytical mind. And what I say tends to be interesting. And also very true. That’s all that I can do about it. I can’t lie. I can’t serve cause. I’ve never served a cause. A cause always corrupts.” (qtd. in Jussawala, 138)

Comparisons have been drawn between Naipaul's early fiction and French's so often cited *Authorized Biography* of 2008. To give an example, showing the nature of Naipaul's autobiographical writing, let us consider his early fiction and French's biography. The result is that fact and fiction are blurred in Naipaul's novels, which reveal Naipaul as a realist writer, who depicts many factual moments, events, memories, and circumstances in his works. More than often, comparisons have been drawn between Naipaul and Salman Rushdie, and Naipaul's realism has been contrasted with Rushdie's magic realism. The difference is that Naipaul has never resorted to magic realism, creating, instead, a new literary form which successfully combines fiction, reportage and autobiography. Naipaul's life experience is continuously enriched by his personal discovery of different lands and peoples, because – if we consider his confession in *Finding the Centre* – a writer “carries his world with him, his own burden of experience, human experience and literary experience” (FC, 10).

Linda Anderson focuses on the “intentionality” of the autobiographical writing and its role in the connection between author, narrator and protagonist. It is “intentionality” which “signals” the author's presence behind his text; it is the author who controls the meaning of the text, and who guarantees the “intentional meaning or truth of the text.” She concludes that “reading a text [...] leads back to the author as origin,” and “autobiographies are seen as providing proof of the validity and importance of a certain conception of authorship: authors who have authority over their own texts and whose writings can be read as forms of direct access to themselves” (Anderson, 2, 3).

But Naipaul is first and foremost an Indian. His perception of England is informed by his belonging to a minority that was once part of the British Empire. One cannot easily escape the past, and the search for one's roots is part of the plight of the self-conscious writer. Therefore, this dissertation is mostly devoted to Naipaul's much acclaimed Indian trilogy, which is essentially a critical evaluation of the history, culture and politics of the Indian sub-continent. The books take its reader on a voyage from an India that was ‘an area of darkness ’that has lost its values and culture to an India which is ‘a wounded civilization,’ where, as Naipaul later on discovers ‘a million mutinies’ are happening. Naipaul's writings can be read as a record of the history of the first four decades of post-independence India. Instead of theorizing/fictionalizing India his travelogues offer a realistic picture of her society, culture, politics and economy. In his first book, *An Area of Darkness*, he finds India a completely shattered country that has no central idea or will of her own, and discovers that nationalist elites have surrogated colonizers. In his second book, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, Naipaul analyses India's history and culture critically, and finds that India has been wounded by many centuries of foreign rule. The country is going through a complete chaos, and has no national ideology. Twenty-six years later, in *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, Naipaul talks about resurgent and enlightened India, that has found a central will and ideology, which he finds missing in his earlier visits, and declares India is poised now, and is a nation-in-the making.

It is important to note that the paradox which informs Naipaul's writing is, according to Leela Gandhi that

“if England is viewed as the land of opportunity, the place in which to ‘arrive’ decisively as a writer, it is also the scene of a terrible incarceration. The longing for England, thus, folds seamlessly into its antithesis, the desire for departure; a landscape once loved from afar proves, on closer acquaintance, to be tragically dystopian. This is the burden of Naipaul's autobiographical, The Enigma of Arrival (1987)” (Gandhi, 2005).

CONCLUSIONS:

One conclusion would be that Naipaul's autobiographical writings concentrate on self-discovery, identity crisis, and a continual memory from his early childhood to old age, each of which is a related part of the material of Buckley's 'ideal' autobiography. And Naipaul commented on his writing process as a process based on intuition, which allowed him "to find the subjects" and he made no secret of his intuitive approach to his subjects: "I have written intuitively. I have an idea when I start, I have a shape; but I will fully understand what I have written only after some years" (*TW*, 6). For Naipaul, a novel is an "investigation of society which reports back to society how it is changing" (King 5). Mustafa remarks that, by "Inaugurating the autobiographical inflection that will come to full measure in the next decade, Naipaul's reflections are a mixture of literary critique and professional self-definition" (Mustafa, 141). Insightful Naipaul bases his writing on his extensive readings in history, which eventually will be at the very core of his writing.

Considering the different shades of meaning and also the connotations of both biography and autobiography, we come to the conclusion that there are similarities and differences between the two. One similarity is that both of them reveal the life aspects of a particular subject, and depict factual events, and bring the audience closer to the author-character. Then, we are reading a biography if the book is written by someone else about the subject, and an autobiography, if the subject creates the work him/herself. The composer of the work makes the difference.

An interesting example is the already mentioned "authorized biography" of Naipaul, written by Patrick French: in this particular case, the biographer is dealing with a living subject who did authorize him to write the biography, giving him open access to a huge archive of letters and manuscripts. French does not hesitate to reveal to the audience the controversial, contradictory, and not too easy to capture personality of the writer. In this way, French's book fully fits into the frame of Abrams' definition of biography which should connote "a relatively full account of a particular person's life, involving the attempt to set forth character, temperament, and milieu, as well as the subject's activities and experiences" (Abrams 22).

I have already stressed the difficulty of placing Naipaul's Indian travelogues into a well-defined genre category. There is another aspect which baffled Naipaul's readers and critics alike: his travelogues in countries of the Third World contain statements about the independent nations of the Indian subcontinent, Africa and South America, which are not always favourable. In "The Rediscovery of India", Zahiri comes to the conclusion that these narratives contain "negative representations of the struggles of these countries in the throes of shedding their colonial deficiencies and moving towards a future that holds greater promises of accomplishment, progress, and self-sufficiency" (Zahiri, 2005).

An explanation may be found in Naipaul's responses as a diasporic writer directed towards such concepts as home, homeland, and native ethos. Even in the case of Naipaul, such responses cannot be homogenous. One reason is that the main feature of the Indian diaspora is not its unity. The distance that each diasporic writer travels in space and time away from his homeland, in a way decides his responses towards both his filiative and affiliative spaces.

Also the different native backgrounds of the diasporic writers exert a strong influence upon their poetics of negotiation in the alien land. Indian diaspora, spread as it is across space, time and native languages, reveals a range of response towards the homeland, its institutions and nationalist icons. Naipaul, the Indian diasporic writer, encounters

different dimensions and realities of his ancestors’ native land which, unfortunately, is alien to him. It partly explains his obsessive references to religion, society, politics, and the almost obsessive recurrence of certain motifs in all his writings connected, more or less, to India: mimicry of the West, Gandhism, the response to Islam, colonialism and postcolonialism, the unavoidable, intimate connections between the former colony (India, in this case), and the colonial centre of the former British Empire.

Naipaul’s work reveals the author’s extensive literary heritage. In his writing he draws on a tradition of displaced writers (James Joyce, T.S. Eliot and Joseph Conrad, among others). This said, the literary influences in his work are difficult to delineate. The texts in this study reflect Naipaul’s creative engagement with and revisionism of modernist aesthetics. To capture both the subjectivity and sociality of the colonial condition Naipaul enters the spatial, temporal and cultural territories of colonisation through a literary persona who is either directly or indirectly affiliated with the Western literary tradition. He uses his various literary personas and his “extra-traditionalism” to re-inscribe and re-write the English text and English landscape from the migrant’s perspective.

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