



## An Intersection of Fact and Fiction: A Study of V.S.Naipaul's *The Middle Passage*

Pragnya Parimita Pradhan

Asst. Professor, Synergy Institute of Engg. & Technology  
Dhenkanal, Odisha, 759001, INDIA

**Abstract:** Many great writers have started their career in journalism before trying their hands at fiction. Journalism inculcated in them the power of keen observation and nurtured in them a respect for facts. It also taught them to be suspicious of rhetoric, abstractions and hypocrisy. The writers learned their craft as reporters of fact. As their craft matured, consciously or unconsciously the facts took the garb of fictional narrative simultaneously revealing the attitude of these writers. V.S.Naipaul started his career as a writer of fictions but ventured into the field of non-fiction by writing *The Middle Passage*. The book covers his year-long trip through Trinidad, British Guiana, Suriname, Martinique and Jamaica in 1961. Himself a West Indian, a Trinidadian of East Indian descent, Naipaul, in this book, conjures up a negative image of Trinidad. *The Middle Passage* marks the culmination of a phase of Naipaul's career where he examines his West Indian background on the basis of his remembered impressions of childhood and early youth. It is also an examination of his own relation to that society and of the reasons why he rejected it. The book shows a dexterous amalgamation of fact and fiction.

**Keywords:** fact, fiction, fictional narrative, non-fiction

"Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is ... created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants."

-Gloria Anzaldua

The above lines highlight the significance of a borderline which sometimes may be ill-defined. The porous nature of the borderland may open up fresh avenues for the germination of new ideas. Naipaul's travel writings symbolize the borderlands between fact and fiction. Naipaul seems to share the same platform with Ernest Hemingway by venturing into the field of nonfiction. Hemingway raised a few eyebrows by publishing *Death in the Afternoon* in 1932 when he was at the peak of his power and reputation as a fiction writer. Similarly Naipaul turned to nonfiction after he wrote *A House for Mr Biswas*, the masterpiece of his literary career. Hemingway had begun his career as a newspaper journalist; so *Death in the Afternoon* could be seen as a return to his beginnings as a fact writer. Critics have examined his newspaper days in light of the influences on the style and subject matter of the later fiction. Making a distinction between journalism and writing Hemingway elucidates, "In writing for a news paper, you told what happened and, with one trick and another, you communicated the emotion aided by the element of timeliness which gives a certain emotion to any account of something that has happened on that day". However his goal in his writing, as opposed to his journalism, was to create work that "would be as valid in a year or in ten years or, with luck and if you stated it purely enough, always." (Hemingway 3) He seemed to sum up: journalism was fleeting, while writing was permanent. Thus his aim in his extended nonfiction was always to create books that would acquire "a certain permanent value" (5) As Hemingway saw it, fiction had its source in the recollected and observed facts of experience, but if the work was to last the material had to be intensified through invention into a new and independent reality. He went on to elaborate: "Writing about anything actual was bad. It always killed it. The only writing that was any good was what you made up, what you imagined. That made everything come true." (7) The same aesthetic principle applied to nonfiction: to escape the death of topicality fact had to be mingled with invention, what was true with what was made up. Like Hemingway, Naipaul's nonfictions occupy the muddled area between fact and fiction. In his seminal essay *Toward a Theory of Non-fiction*, Eric Heyne comments that "There has been much confusion about theoretical issues concerning the distinction between fact and fiction, the qualities of literary status in nonfiction, and the responsibilities of the author in turning history into art. Further Heyne rejects the definitions of nonfiction: "literary non-fiction and fiction are fundamentally different, despite their resemblances in structure or technique, and this difference must be recognized by any theory that hopes to do justice to powerful nonfiction narratives" (480). In Connery's opinion, literary nonfiction is like a prose narrative which

employs rhetorical techniques of fiction (xiv). In the section "A Third way to tell the Story : American literary Journalism at the Turn of the century" of "Literary Journalism in the Twentieth century", Connery argues that literary journalism is driven by an impulse to tell the story in a new way. John Hellmann in his *Fables of Fact* says: "The terms 'new journalism' and 'nonfiction novel' both serve as names for a contemporary genre in which journalistic material is presented in the form of fiction. (1)

According to Genette, nonfiction may "fictionalize" itself without being transformed into fiction, just as fiction may "defictionalize" itself. This possibility "is the proof that genres can perfectly well change norms-norms that after all [ ... ] were imposed on them by no one but themselves". (83) Thus there exists a reciprocal relationship between fictional and factual writing. The so-called differences are self imposed. In this regard, Linda Hutcheon's arguments are noteworthy : "like the flower which shares Narcissus's name, the 'non-fictional novel' is a natural outgrowth of the old realistic tradition". She contends that the origins of novelistic self-consciousness may be found in early journal and epistolary novels which are concerned with "writing and reading within the structure of the novel itself", and where "the writer calls his reader's attention to the activity of writing as an event within the novel" (12,16).

Naipaul's life was a journey which he has expressed through a variety of narrative forms ranging from fiction to travelogues to autobiography and history. For him, travelling was not a journey to reach destinations of far off countries, but a new way of seeing things. His urge to travel was the symbolic manifestation of the tendency to experiment with the novel form. He felt that fiction is an inadequate vehicle to express the authenticity of details and voice. Thus he used travel writing to strike a balance between mere fictionalization and factual representation at the same time continuing to render his material in the form of literature. After writing his masterpiece *A House for Mr. Biswas*, he began to lose faith in the once great literary form's ability to express "the complexities of modern patchwork societies". Moreover, he felt that travelling would enable him to broaden his limited world view that was afforded to him in Trinidad and in London.

*The Middle Passage* is based on Naipaul's travel through the West Indies in 1960. It delineates his sense of disillusionment which he experiences after seeing the Island in disarray. "Nothing was created in the West Indies"(29) forms the epitome of his observation on the island. Naipaul expresses his deep concern for the Negroes and the East-Indians who have been transported to a new world. Uprooted from their native civilization, these people were subjected to harsh economic exploitation. The creation of a new society with a multi-cultural identity were like "Manufactured societies, labour camps, creations of empire". While the East Indians were able to retain their cultural practices, the Negroes failed to proclaim their cultural identity and yielded to the white man's culture. This earned them a sense of superiority over their fellow men in Africa. Thus in the West Indies, the whites enslaved people of other communities and unleashed their own regime crushing the rights of the non-whites:

"....., with Indians entering the Civil service and small-island Negroes muscling in on the taxi business, there has been a certain direct rivalry; but this is out-weighed by a long-standing division of labour which is taken so much for granted that Trinidadian are hardly aware of it. Coconut-sellers, for instance, are Indians; it would be unnatural and perhaps unwise to receive a coconut blank hand. No one, not even an Indian, will employ a mason or a carpenter who is not a Negro. The lower down the scale one goes the nicer the divisions of labour become. Negroes sale ice and its immediate by products shaved ice, "Presses", snowballs. Indians sell ice lollies. Before the war Indians swept the streets of Port of Spain; Negroes emptied the cesspits. Each felt a hearty contempt for the other.(85)

Derek C. Bowe remarks that there is a deeper basis for Naipaul's disgust. As a second generation Trinidadian whose grandfather had immigrated to Trinidad from Uttar Pradesh, India, Naipaul could not identify with the subcontinent. He felt as if he was deprived of his due share of recognition as the son of a journalist. England seemed to beckon him as a land of opportunity.

Naipaul's critical stance towards the Caribbean is expressed from the very beginning of the book: "There was such a crowd of immigrant type West Indians on the boat train platform at Waterloo that I was glad I was travelling first class to the West-Indies" (9). His description of mentally ill passengers as "Lunatics" exposes his insensitivity towards the Negroes. His detestation of these people seems unbridled:

"His light grey jacket was as long and loose as a short top coat' his yellow shirt was dirty and the frayed collar undone' his tie was slack and askew.... His face was grotesque. It seemed to have been smashed n form one check. One eye had narrowed; the thick lips had bunched into a circular swollen protuberance; the enormous nose was twisted. When, slowly he opened his mouth to spit, his face became even more distorted. He spat in slow intermittent dribbles. (10, 11)

Although from a pure literary point of view, these descriptions stand unparalleled what comes to the fore is the bottomless apathy of the writer towards everything Caribbean. When the boat reaches Trinidad, Naipaul says, "I began to feel all my old fear of Trinidad. I did not want to stay. I had left the security of the ship and had no assurance that I would ever leave the island again" (42).

In the opinion Bowe, Naipaul's ignorance about the achievement of West Indies is unsavoury. Even a casual look at West Indian history up to the point of the Middle Passage's publishing would have documented

the region's accomplishments. Firstly, Naipaul does not recognise the contribution of Sir Eric Williams, the internationally recognised historian and author of *Capitalism and Slavery*. The seminal work maintained that revenue from Britain's West Indian plantations provided her with the basis for her economic and industrial success. The writer's selective memory about West Indian accomplishment neglects mentioning the pioneering literary work of George Lamming, author of *In the castle of My Skin* and *The Pleasures of Exile*. It doesn't acknowledge the economic vision of Sir Arthur Lewis, who was later to be awarded a Nobel Prize. It belittles the poetry of another Caribbean Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott. It is surprising that a man of Naipaul's learning would go so far in his ingratitude that he would be unable to admit the benefits he got from the land. Trinidad's government awarded him a scholarship as an 18 year old Queen's Royal College student, which led to his reading of English at Oxford and his subsequent writing career. Ironically, for all his aversion to the West Indies, he is deeply indebted to it.

Thus *The Middle Passage* offers itself as a brilliant study of the amalgamation of fact and fiction as it shows the remarkable transformation of geographical, historical and social realities of the West Indies. It is as if Naipaul re-invents his travel experience from the bits and pieces of the notes which he has taken at the time of journey. This makes the travel narrative move around different time-space points. Critics have claimed that Naipaul's travel narratives deviate from reality as there is possibility of the distortion of his original observations. However, in the deft hands of the writer the final travel narrative acquires a chronological order and evolves as an organic whole.

#### Works Cited

- Anzaldua, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera*. 2nd. Ed. San Francisco. Aunt Lute Books. 1987; 1999. Print
- Connery, Thomas B. "Preface". Connery (ed.). *A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism : Representative Writers in an Emerging Genre*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1992, xi-xv. Print
- Genette, Gerard. *Fiction & Diction*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993 (1991). Print
- Hellmann, John. *Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as New Fiction*. Urbana et al. University of Illinois Press, 1981. Print
- Hemingway, Ernest. *Death in the Afternoon*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1958 (1932). Print
- Heyne, Eric. "Toward a Theory of Literary Nonfiction". *Modern Fiction Studies* 33.3 (Autumn 1987): 479-90. Print. Reprinted in Gale Research Company's *Literary Criticism Series*.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*. New York and London: Methuen, 1984. Print
- Naipaul, V.S. *The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited*. 1962. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd, 1969. Print.