

The Process of Writing as Reflected in Sir V.S. Naipaul's *Finding the Centre: Two Narratives*

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Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, a great travel writer, a prolific dissenter, a leading author of the English-speaking Caribbean and the Nobel and the Booker Prize winner for English literature, occupies a prominent place among the most widely read and admired literary figures of the 20th century English literature. V.S. Naipaul's travelling into the Caribbean world is well reflected in *Finding the Centre: Two Narratives* (1984). The book consists of two parts: "Prologue to an Autobiography" and "The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro." Written one after another, these two narrative pieces are offered as a travel book because they are about the process of writing. They seek in different ways to convince the reader about that process. In fact, both narratives reveal how the process of writing is, for Naipaul, a way of penetrating and finding the centre of worlds – both familiar and foreign. The title of the book has also many meanings – finding the centre of the narrative, the centre of the truth of every experience and the philosophical centre for one's belief. In preface to the travel book, Naipaul states:

If "Prologue to an autobiography" is an account, with the understanding of middle age, of the writer's beginnings, "The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro" shows this writer, in his latest development, going about one side of his business: travelling, adding to his knowledge of the world, exposing himself to new people and new relationships. "The crocodiles of Yamoussoukro" is about the Ivory Coast.¹

Naipaul's pair of narratives in *Finding the Centre: Two Narratives* seems unrelated at first. The first narrative is autobiographical while the other one is a reflection on superstition in the Ivory Coast. But the both appear to be circling the same themes in startling different ways.

Naipaul maintains the freelancers' room that was like a club for him. It was a place of chat, movement and separate anxieties of young or youngish men. That was the atmosphere in which Naipaul was trying to write something. According to him, to be a writer was to have the conviction that one could go on.

The ambition to be a writer was given to Naipaul by his father Sriprasad Naipaul who was a journalist for much of his working life. That was an unusual occupation for a Trinidad Indian of his generation. When Sriprasad Naipaul was born in 1906, the Indians of Trinidad were a separate community, mainly rural and Hindi-speaking, attached to the sugar estates of central and southern Trinidad. In 1929, Naipaul's father began to contribute occasional articles on Indian topics to the *Trinidad Guardian*. In 1932 when Naipaul was born, his father had become the *Guardian* staff correspondent in the little market town of Chaguanas which was in the heart of the sugar area and the Indian area of Trinidad.

The writer states:

Two years or so after I was born, my father left the *Guardian*, for reasons that were never clear to me. For some years he did odd jobs here and there, now attached to my mother's family, now going back to the protection of an uncle by marriage, a rich man founder and part owner of the biggest bus company in the island. Poor himself, with close relations who were still agricultural labourers, my father dangled all his life in a half-dependence and half-esteem between these two powerful families.²

He, further, says:

Poverty, cheated hopes, and death: those were the associations of the framed picture beside my father's bed. From the earliest stories and bits of stories my father had read to me before the upheaval of the move, I had arrived at the conviction – the conviction that is at the root of so much human anguish and passion, and corrupts so many lives – that there was justice in the world. The wish to be a writer was a development of that.³

Naipaul also mentions Gault Mac Gowan, the managing editor of the *Trinidad Guardian* from May 1929 to April 1934. According to Naipaul's father, it was Mac Gowan who had taught him how to write something better. His entire life Naipaul's father had for Mac Gowan the special devotion which the Hindus have for his guru. But when Mac Gowan left the *Trinidad Guardian* in 1934 as he had his contract with it, Naipaul's father once again stayed behind.

Naipaul, further, states:

He (Naipaul's father) became disturbed, fell ill, lost his job, and was idle and dependent four years. In 1938, in the house of my mother's mother in Port of Spain, he came fully into my life for the first time... I was writing about things I didn't know; and the book that came out was

very much my father's book. It was written out of his journalism and stories, out of his knowledge, knowledge he had got from the way of looking Mac Gowan had trained him in. It was written out of his writing.⁴

In spite of many ups and downs, difficulties, and strivings for existence Naipaul's father did not lose hope and raised his son to be a writer. All this made Naipaul feel as if he had "found the centre" with his father. After finishing the "Prologue to Autobiography," the writer went off at once to the Ivory Coast. According to him, 'African success' and 'France in Africa' were the glamorous ideas that had taken him to the Ivory Coast.

The second and final narrative part of *Finding the Centre: Two Narratives* is "The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro" which reflects Naipaul's visit to the Ivory Coast at the end of 1982. It is a journey exploring Black Africa and African magic on the Ivory Coast exhibiting how Naipaul's writing progresses out of exposure to other and other states of mind. Yamoussoukro, one of the wonders of Black Africa, is a place deep in the wet forests of the Ivory Coast. It used to be a village like some other West African bush villages where grass huts perished after two years. Yamoussoukro was also the seat of a regional tribal chief who was a very old man. With his French education, he first became what the French called a "colonial doctor." Later on, he became a politician and a protest leader. Soon he began to rule the Ivory Coast.

Naipaul writes:

He (the chief of the Ivory Coast) has used the French as technicians, advisers, administrators; and, with no ready-made mineral wealth, with the resources only of tropical forests and fields, he has made his country rich. So rich, that the Ivory Coast imports labour from its more depressed or chaotic African neighbours. Labour immigration, as much as natural increase, has raised the population from three million in 1960 to nine million today.⁵

The power and wisdom of the chief have caused the forests around Yamoussoukro to disappear. Where once were African fields, unused common land and wild trees, there were are now ordered and mechanized plantations. The entire ancestral village of Yamoussoukro – huts, common ground and the semi-sacred palaver tress – has been incorporated into the grounds of a new presidential palace with high walls of many long miles. Outside the blank walls that hide the president's ancestral village and the palaver trees from the common view, there is an artificial lake full of crocodiles. Naipaul states:

Down one side of the palace there is an artificial lake, and in this lake turtles and man-eating crocodiles have been introduced. These are totemic, emblematic creatures, and they belong to the president. There were no crocodiles in Yamoussoukro before.⁶

He, further, says:

The president's totemic crocodiles are fed with fresh meat everyday. People can go and watch.... The feeding ritual takes place in the afternoon, in bright light. There are the cars, the tourists in bright clothes, cameras. But the crocodiles are sacred, A live offering – a chicken – has to be made to them; it is part of the ritual. This element of sacrifice, this protracted display of power and cruelty, is as unsettling as it is meant to be and it seems to bring night and the forest close again to the dream of Yamoussoukro.⁷

The fury of the crocodiles was brought to light when Naipaul came to know about a palace – watchmen who had been killed on the sandy bank beside the causeway. A crocodile had laid its eggs in the sand. The watchman did not know it and walked past the spot. The crocodile rushed at him, seized him and dragged him into the water. There was another incident of a villager who had fallen over the iron rail into the lake and had been mangled by a crocodile. Here Naipaul puts a question if it was an accident or the man had been pushed as a forced sacrifice. Some people hold the view that the man was a voluntary sacrifice as he had been persuaded (perhaps by threat) to do all this in order to save his village from an evil.

Naipaul discovers that Yamoussoukro was the president's ennobling benefaction to his people – the people of the West African forest. Like the crocodile ritual or feeding, it was proof of both his right to rule and the justness of his rule. The writer realizes that the world of doing and development in Yamoussoukro contradicted with the crocodile ritual. He also thinks that the symbolism of the feeding the crocodiles as a ritual is complex and unclear. According to him, it could be a remnant of ancient Egyptian earth worshipping.

Moreover, the present travelogue reflects superstition, magic poison and so many more pervading the Ivory Coast. Magic and poison seemed to be the weapons of despair. The African culture, which was officially promoted and could at times seem to be only a source of tourist motifs, was an expression of African religion. A.P. Dani observes:

Naipaul's discovery of the African idea of an authority based on magic, poison, and captivity was a kind of intellectual adventure, a probing of "other states of mind," a kind of understanding through people who were mainly expatriates.⁸

Thus, *Finding the Centre: Two Narratives* adumbrates Naipaul's search for 'centre' of order and the process of growth. In the travel book, the writer, with irony, clarity and brilliance, brings out the unbroken correspondence between travel and fiction, and his auto biography and imaginary personages and events. He critically perceives the seemingly disconnected bits of history and social facts into the fine art of fiction, documentation, reportage and travelogue. In short, the book is a grand success.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. V.S. Naipaul, Foreword to *Finding the Centre*, New York: Vintage Books, 1984, pp. viii-ix.
2. V.S. Naipaul, *Finding the Centre*, op cit., p. 21.
3. Ibid., pp. 31-32.
4. Ibid., pp. 59-60.
5. Ibid., p. 75.
6. Ibid., pp. 76.
7. Ibid., p. 77-78.
8. A.P. Dani, "The Significance of Naipaul's *Finding the Centre*," Mohit K. Ray (ed.) *V.S. Naipaul: Critical Essays*, vol. II, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2002, p.48.
