Prologue
Lacrimae Rerum, *"The Tears of Things"*

I wrote my book on Bollywood cinema over twenty years ago as a personal recollection with, in the early chapters, an account of films I had seen to 1964, the year I left my homeland. This book, written twenty years later, has a similar personal edge but because its primary texts are literary and not filmic, it enters into felt life experiences (at once self-revealing and often private) of an even greater intensity and introspection. One such experience – minor and on the face of it insignificant – returned to me when I read a reference to a story from Booker T. Washington's book *Up from Slavery* (1901), which had been read to V. S. Naipaul by his father when he was a child. In this story a slave boy or a post-slavery boy is asked to make up a bed, at least this is how Naipaul remembered the story. The boy did not know how to sleep in a made-up bed, whether "to sleep on both sheets or between them or below both of them." Naipaul recalls that when he went to temperate England from tropical Trinidad he was faced with a similar dilemma because in Trinidad, as in my own homeland, the bed was made with "one sheet spread on the bed, another sheet or blanket folded, to be used as a loose cover during the night if it was needed."[1] Naipaul does not elaborate, but my own experience in Weir House, the boarding house for male students at Victoria University of Wellington, a university in another temperate land, may complete the account. On my first night, the matron gave me two sheets and a pillow case because blankets and a pillow were already in the room. With my own tropical experience and since the night was cold, I spread one sheet on the bed and a blanket over me. A few days later I replaced this sheet with the fresh second one. The following Sunday we were asked to drop our used sheet and the pillow case in the laundry and collect new ones. I had used both the sheets and so I returned them only to find that in turn I was given only one sheet. And so I slept, tropical style, with a fresh sheet on the bed and a blanket over me. This happened all year. The next year the warden relocated me to another room where the bed had already been made. It was only then – that is, a

year later – that I realized that the civilized sleeping custom was to sleep between the sheets and that you changed only one sheet each week, placing the top one as the bottom sheet the following week. Anecdotes of this kind – scattered throughout the Naipaul corpus – explain the connection I speak of. On Naipaul's death, Salman Rushdie tweeted the day after (August 12, 2018): "We disagreed all our lives, about politics, about literature, and I feel as sad as if I just lost a beloved elder brother." And on the same day, I made my one and only contribution to social media: "Dostoevsky once wrote, 'We all come out of Gogol's overcoat.' Inflecting it a little, 'We, children of indenture, all come out of Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*.'"

I begin to ask myself, along with Proust, the nature of this "unremembered state" and how suddenly memory works. My memory is blurred and so the names may not be correct. At Suva Grammar School, my English teacher in the upper sixth form (the "Scholarship" class) was Mrs Beaumont, wife of the colonial police commissioner, R. H. T. Beaumont, stationed in the capital city. This Mrs Beaumont, we were told, came with a good honours degree from London (which meant that it wasn't a third) and spoke fondly of Shakespeare and the painter Van Gogh. "Those marvellous whorls, the sky, the trees," she used to repeat about a painter who was undoubtedly gifted but totally alien to us, not because we may not have been curious but because she never showed us any prints of the great impressionist's works. Towards the end of term one (she stayed with us for only one term before her husband was sent to another, more impressive colony, possibly British Guiana), by which time we had effectively memorized *Henry IV Parts I* and *II*, Oliver Vinod, streetwise with city affectations, certainly less timid than us country kids, raised his hand and said, "Can we now read a novel? Over the weekend I borrowed a book from the Suva British Council Library and I can't put it down. It speaks to me, and I understand every page of it." Mrs Beaumont, outwardly stern and terribly English, admired readers and, of course, books, and asked Oliver to bring her the book the next day, which he did. She read it over the next few nights and days and then said to the class that the book was limited in its representation of society as a whole, the moral stance was defective, and the English, in places odd. "It won't do as a great work, and I think we should select a more mainstream novel, a Brontë, or Austen, perhaps even Steinbeck." Oliver was downcast, but no one else had read the book, and his defence found no ready supporters.

The book suffered the same fate during the years that followed when I read it casually, in snippets, in the Victoria University of Wellington

Library. It wasn't until I returned to Fiji to begin teaching in a high school that I remembered Oliver Vinod's novel again and bought a copy from Desai Book Depot, Suva's premier bookshop. One day during the long vacation, the flood waters rising in the Rewa River flats below our home, the threat of a hurricane never far away, and no window screens to keep mosquitoes out, I read this book more or less in one sitting. The only other member of my family who was in the house that day was my mother and she became my first listener as I read passages from this book to her. We spoke in a Hindi dialect to one another, but there were descriptions she understood and when I read her the final paragraph from the Prologue section of the book ("How terrible it would have been … to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one's portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated") she wiped a tear because at long last, after years of struggle, she finally owned a home, the house that my father built after many years of hard work, and in which he was to die, all alone with his wife, his sons long gone. It was a house with proper windows, glass slats, and curtains unlike the windows of the old, rented wooden house with the "shutter roughly jalousied, hinged at the top (the better to keep out the rain), and propped open with a stick," in Naipaul's memorable description in both *The Enigma of Arrival*[2] and *A Way in the World*.[3] There were other memories from the old rented house in Dilkusha ("Heart's Delight"), a Methodist mission enclave, named after the hunting lodge of the last Nawab of Oudh mentioned in *India: A Million Mutinies Now*.[4] There was the memory of "breaking the hibiscus twig," as Mr Biswas did each morning, to brush our teeth "with one of the crushed ends."[5] There was also the terrifying memory of the 1952 hurricane when, like Mr Biswas' house in Green Vale, the walls collapsed in the storm, the corrugated iron roof gave way, wind and rain swept through, and my father dragged us into the bathroom where the walls were of brick wearing, like Ramkhilawan in the novel, "a jutebag over his head and shoulders like a cape."[6] The mission quarters had an open fireplace that functioned as a stove, a *chulha*, and each evening there was the ritual of my mother placing a small "round of unleavened bread" in the fire, the ancient Hindu cooking ritual of sacrifice for the god of fire, factually noted by Naipaul[7] and earlier turned into the subject of an uneasy conversation in his only "English" novel, *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion*.[8] In her own house, the house that my mother now owned, the *chulha* was replaced by a primus for cooking. In the barracks in which Mr Biswas stayed during his short stay in Green Vale, he too had bought a "primus, since he couldn't manage the coal-pot."[9]

The magnificent novel that had moved my mother was V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*, the extraordinary account of the Indian plantation diaspora in the first half of the twentieth century. My mother heard only the short passages I read out to her, passages I felt she would relate to; I had lived through the entire reading process, which in the end left me emotionally exhausted. No other work of literature, not even those by Balzac, Melville, or Dostoevsky, writers lesser than Naipaul, and greater, had moved me as much during a first reading. It was a feeling later echoed by Amitav Ghosh who, responding to the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Naipaul, wrote, "Naipaul summoned in me an intensity and absorption that no other writer could evoke."[10] In the passage I had read to my mother, Naipaul had used two words "unnecessary" and "unaccommodated," both consciously borrowed from King Lear: "Age is unnecessary" (II.iv.152); and "unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal" (III.iv.105). While reading *A House for Mr Biswas*, I had noted that Mr Biswas had written the name of his first child – "Krishnadhar Haripratap Gokulnath Damodar Biswas" (assuming, of course, that the child would be male) – "on the back endpaper of the *Collins Clear-Type Shakespeare*."[11] "A work of fatiguing illegibility," Naipaul had noted, as this was the large, over 1,000-page volume, quite possibly the 1923 or 1928 edition edited by St John Ervine. Shakespeare would have made no sense to my mother but I showed her my own Collins Clear-Type edition of *William Shakespeare The Complete Works*, edited by Peter Alexander (1951; reprinted 1962). This edition was the "First Arts Prize" I received in my matriculation year at Suva Grammar School. The inscription of the award on the front leaf was dated December 4, 1963. My mother was very proud of the fact that it was such a hefty book. In our plantation lives we felt "unaccommodated" because we needed to belong, to find meaning in our lives, to learn the trappings of civilization, to own, like Mr Biswas, the "mystical" colonial book as a "material" object.

Thirty-three years after my first reading of that classic twentieth-century novel, there was another moment, and that too is etched in my memory. In its press release of October 11, 2001, the Swedish Academy placed Naipaul in the European world of letters: "Naipaul is a modern philosophe, carrying the tradition that started originally with *Lettres Persanes* ['Persian Letters' by Montesquieu, 1721] and *Candide*. In a vigilant style, which has been deservedly admired, he transforms rage into precision and allows events to speak with their own inherent irony." The day after the Nobel Prize was announced I was on my way to Oxford from London on the London–Oxford Tube. I bought two newspapers, *The Times*

and *The Guardian*, to read their accounts of Naipaul.[12] At another time, Naipaul's win would have made front-page headlines. This week, the events in Afghanistan being what they were, *The Times* devoted page 15 to him and *The Guardian* page 12. *The Guardian* article in the paper's *Friday Review* section was by the noted West Indian-British writer Caryl Phillips. Phillips picked up on a key contradiction in Naipaul: a writer hostile towards half-baked, hybrid societies yet at the same time a product of that very same culture, himself a "towering contradiction to his own argument." Phillips too, like me, must acknowledge Naipaul's scandalous failure to go beyond his closed world, the failure that brought on him the critical ire of Edward Said, Chinua Achebe, George Lamming, and even Derek Walcott, Rushdie, and Phillips himself. But also like me, Phillips responds to Naipaul as someone to whom he can relate (after all, he wrote the screenplay of *The Mystic Masseur* for the Ismail Merchant film). And although Naipaul unforgivingly excluded any mention of Trinidad from his thank-you list when informed about the Nobel award (he mentioned Britain and his ancestral homeland India), it is the Caribbean, as Phillips says, that gave Naipaul his great theme: loss. Which is why, concludes Phillips, "throughout the Caribbean, people are celebrating this most dyspeptic of sons. Not so much, 'Well, done Sir Vidia,' but 'You hear about Vido? Naipaul's boy. He done good, eh?'" As for me, it has taken me another twenty years to master enough courage to address V. S. Naipaul's works in the broader context of world literature and let him read me. Sadly for my mother, this is not a book as hefty as my school prize.

Introduction

In a challenging and insightful essay on V. S. Naipaul, Terry Eagleton argues that Naipaul is "in a venerable line of literary refugees, several of them among the most eminent figures in modern 'English' literature … there was Joseph Conrad, the Pole … Henry James … T. S. Eliot."[1] It is not unusual to find the outsider casting "a sardonic eye on [the] sanctities" of the patrimonial centre even when, as it often happens, the émigré, like a Wittgenstein, a Karl Popper or a T. S. Eliot, aligns himself with a conservative "native" intellectual tradition. This intellectual tradition in Britain often implied an ironic attitude towards guiding ideas, an attitude, adds Eagleton, that in Naipaul, *in extremis*, produced a writer "so long on observation and so short on sympathy."[2] And this contradiction explains why his art is great but his politics outrageous, a binary that has led to the exclusion of Naipaul from both postcolonial theory and, by extension, "world" writing. The damnation, indeed, can be ferocious and bitter. One A. Sivanandan in fact damns him for writing too well: "Even to lay claim to their language and render it more exquisite than they is an act of self-betrayal – because they reclaim you in their language."[3] The quandary, summed up by Eagleton as "Great art, dreadful politics,"[4] finds a challenging defence in Homi Bhabha, who suggests that there is in the writer either an incommensurability, a bifurcation, a schizophrenia, that produces an unforgiveable reading of "Third World" history and its people or an artistic temperament so firmly located in an "anachronistic space" that the former, the incommensurability, energizes his aesthetic and gives it an imaginative power which otherwise would have been missing.[5] In the current "multicultural" understanding of world literature Naipaul, both inside and outside his literary archive, comes across with a ferocity that is at best perverse and prejudicial, at worst morally repugnant and dogmatic. It is an unusual predicament to be in for a writer from the periphery but it is precisely this predicament that, in the context of literary "worlding," allows Naipaul to offer extraordinary insights into how quotidian life worlds are actually lived

within colonial structures of power that provided no "abstract unity" to the field of literary expression, and ignored native or vernacular cultures.[6]

The Horror of Naipaul

Major postcolonial scholars (Rob Nixon and Benita Parry, to name just two) missed the intensity – an intensity that grew out of the insular and agitated sociality of a displaced Indian community in Trinidad – of Naipaul's likes and dislikes by "fabricating," as Dagmar Barnouw has suggested, "a massively homogeneous colonial identity as the foundation myth of postcolonialism."[7] The Naipaul critical bibliography is vast but Barnouw's presumption may be tested through a reading of essays by two important critics of Naipaul, that is, Edward Said and Sara Suleri. Said's point of entry in his essay "Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World"[8] is Salman Rushdie's oft-quoted 1984 essay "Outside the Whale,"[9] which Said reads as a manifesto about an open, inter-connected world in which everyone's history – chaotic, contingent, ephemeral as that history may be – is embedded. Rushdie's own essay had insinuated the importance of the "third" world intellectual who was both inside and outside the colonial enterprise and as such had to work actively towards change. Inside the whale there is only a Jonah espousing a "quietist philosophy."[10] Sadly such a worldview – and George Orwell is the target of Rushdie's essay – creates the passive postcolonial intellectual who, safely ensconced inside the comforts of the whale, is shut out from the complex narratives on "both sides of the colonial divide." For Said, the paradigm of this problematic "will remain the narrative form of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*."[11] Conrad understood both the placidity of the aesthetic (read from inside the whale) and the "unceasing storm, the continual quarrel, the dialectic of history" (read from outside the whale).[12] In other words, Conrad's "sovereign inclusiveness" adumbrates the presence of a field (the full experience of colonialism) without special historical privileges in it for "one party over all the others."[13] This "profoundly secular perspective" is missing from Naipaul because, Said argues, he "has allowed himself quite consciously to be turned into a witness for the Western prosecution."[14] Naipaul, Said genuinely believes, is not interested in the Third World because he writes for metropolitan intellectuals whose approval he so desperately desires. His "Islamic Journey" in *Among the Believers* (the only book that Said mentions) is scandalous. His understanding of the "actualities" of the Third World is "ignorant, illiterate, and cliché-ridden" and his racism is so disturbing that it would shame even the Turtons of E. M. Forster. The politics of blame turns squarely on

to the "wogs and darkies" and Naipaul is the standard bearer of the argument in favor of self-inflicted wounds. Naipaul cannot be a postcolonial intellectual because he has failed to expand and clarify the experience of colonialism, which continues to this day.

In a later essay in which the target text is Naipaul's second book on Islamic journeys (*Beyond Belief*), Said's criticism of Naipaul turns accusatory: what we have in Naipaul is "an intellectual catastrophe of the first order."[15] Apart from debunking Naipaul's thesis which Said reduces to nothing more than the suggestion that if all non-Arab converts to Islam are inauthentic, then all Christians except the Romans are inauthentic Christians because they too are converts, Said trivializes Naipaul's overriding thesis, which is the erasure of prior pre-Islamic histories by Islamic converts. To convert this reading – which in Naipaul's presentation is a lot more nuanced – and deflect it as the case of "a man of the Third World who sends back dispatches from the Third World to an implied audience of disenchanted Western liberals who can never hear bad enough things about all the Third World myths" is to trivialize Naipaul's argument and the complex history of Islam. After Said, Naipaul has no case to answer: he cannot be conscripted as a postcolonial writer and postcolonial theory has accepted this proposition with a conscious excision of this writer from it. There is no Naipaul of substance in Young, Lazarus, Moore-Gilbert, and Parry[16] to pick names of eminent postcolonial theorists at random. A pre-emptive closure shrouds Naipaul based on judgements that stipulate that he is insensitive to the power of capital in the international world order, that he is obsessed with Western civilization, and that he operates within a simplistic Manichean binary of us and them. The complex narrative of colonization where complicity with the imperialist agenda worked alongside outright opposition to it is set aside completely.

Thinking beyond the Horror

"What uneasy commerce can [then] be established between the postcolonial and the writer?" "Which imperial gestures must such a writer perform before he can delineate the relation of his language to the canon of fiction written in English?"[17] These questions, writes one of the most astute critics of Naipaul, Sara Suleri, find their exemplary test case in Naipaul's essay "Conrad's Darkness," where Naipaul struggles to "moor" his writing between a postcolonial cultural reality, with its "excessive novelty," and the "excessive anachronism" of the canon. In short, she asks, "Is it possible for a postcolonial writer to exist in the absence of the imperial theme?" (149).[18] Suleri concedes that Naipaul's example is isolated, unique, different, and

cannot represent the postcolonial condition as a whole. His is a peculiar moment, a peculiar history, mercifully unrepeatable, and he knows its obsolescence. Naipaul's time indeed is past; but it is the recognition that it has passed which sustains his craft, his "grimly perfect grammar," and gives his language a special kind of potency, a potency absent from every other postcolonial writer, for none excels him when it comes to that special mastery of the master's language. So, when he arrives at the postcolonial moment, much like Conrad he is disappointed: "arrival is always the scene of prior disappointment" (153). Much of the hostility towards Naipaul has arisen from poor reading practices or from reading practices so naively based on the need for a strident critique of imperialism as the transcendental entry point that Naipaul's complexity, his own contradictions – as a man and as a writer – are reduced to an unproblematic "ideological whiteness" (154).[19] This is not only wrong but also critically dangerous as Naipaul's own unease with Conrad and with the myths of imperialism are ignored even when he uncompromisingly acknowledges the burden of the canon of Western literature in any postcolonial endeavor. Suleri's central thesis is that "Naipaul makes the canon of Western literature an implicated witness to his mapping of the moment of postcolonial arrival" (155) as he "maps the complicity between postcolonial history and its imperial past" (156). Of course, no writer of world literature can avoid this; but the postcolonial writer has an added ideological responsibility: he must also show how the canon distorted perception and representation since it demanded not only allegiance but also subservience. Naipaul refuses to acknowledge or admit to the responsibility that comes with allegiance to the "Monolingualism of the Other";[20] he simply accepts it and transcends it through an absolutist belief in the aesthetic as a statement in its own right. Rarely, if ever, does he move away from language itself to critique the language's own ideological bias. When he does, it is invariably about the complicity of language in distorting the genocide of First Nation peoples by the Spanish or the absolute evil of slavery.

Against Said's criticism that Naipaul simply tells his metropolitan readers what they want to hear about the Third World, Suleri makes two points. First, these metropolitan readers give Naipaul more "authority than he asks for" (157), and second, the pragmatic "actualities" of the Third World are "never intentionally Naipaul's subject." His interest is in a critique of myth as a source of collective memory against real historical evidence.[21] Angry critiques must now be obsolete (although it persists as in Pascale Casanova's self-righteous denunciation of the award of the Nobel to Naipaul in 2001[22]) because he "has been there" before the postcolonial critics (Said included)

themselves. Suleri quotes Bhabha approvingly: "Naipaul 'translates' Conrad, from Africa to the Caribbean, in order to transform the despair of postcolonial history into an appeal for the autonomy of art … to fix his eye on the universal domain of English literature" (159). It follows that the literary and with it, its central engine of plot, narrative itself, become the foundational discourse of all his writings. It explains his obsessive dedication to form which meant that history (out of which alone can grow an uncompromising critique of power) can only be rendered through a literary genre: "The frightening category of history confronts the archaic category of romance" (160). Out of this collision, this violence, writes Suleri emerges "a self-punishing narrative voice" unsure of its place in history. So, how can one "redeem" Naipaul or, in a less dramatic fashion, respond to this crisis in postcolonial legitimation (where a writer is either "a figure of resistance" or is co-opted into metropolitan values and tastes) with reference to Naipaul?[23] How does a postcolonial aesthetic coming as it does from a difficult, self-professed "colonial" writer with an acute, nervous, even agitated sensibility, address in art the fact that the Empire happened and we are a product of that moment of imperialism?

One consequence of that historical reality is an obsession with "Englishness," and with it with the idea of the canon of English studies no less. As a consequence, Anglophone postcolonial writers are always shadowed by a sense of ennui, a melancholy, that leads them to simultaneously avow and disavow their Englishness in case they are read as *plus anglais que les anglais.* The avowal is a condition of a colonial sensibility that has built into it the legitimation of the canon. The postcolonial writer cannot do otherwise; he or she has to write within a tradition where his "individual talent" (after Eliot) is both within the intertextual Western tradition and outside of it. It is the latter, being outside of it, that marks out the disavowal as the postcolonial individual talent can only script itself at the level of radical difference. So how does one seek "accommodation" and, indeed, as noted already, legitimation? Postcolonial theory and criticism by and large disendorse such accommodation because the postcolonial not only disenfranchises the canon but also consciously works towards dismantling it. Creative use of language, and by extension a solidarity with what M. A. K. Halliday called "anti-languages," the secret language of the subaltern, is often seen as one of its markers.[24] In a similar vein, Said had spoken about vernacular energies, the power of languages marginalized by the "Monolingualism of the Other." Naipaul challenges this reading of the postcolonial through an inclusive act that incorporates the subaltern, vernacular, voice in a studied, detached rendition of the English language itself.