

HEADLINE: A man for all people

SUBHEADLINE: A combination of undying sympathy and unflinching insight _ and a prodigious talent _ have made Sir V.S. Naipaul one of the world's foremost literary figures

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Here he is. Just two metres away from me, exactly as I imagined: short, elegant, with salt-and-pepper hair and beard framing a good-looking face hardly afflicted by time, although he is approaching 70, and two black marbles as his eyes _ sharp, alert, mirthful.

These two blasted metres seem impassable. The worldwide fame and recognition Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad (V.S.) Naipaul is enjoying, place him in a higher dimension and seem to protect him from any impromptu and unwelcome intrusion into his personal space.

My mind is buzzing with thoughts and anxiety. A journalist once famously had his interview cut short for failing to display sufficient knowledge of Naipaul's work.

The man looks friendly and approachable, yet impressive and intimidating. Will I experience his renowned abruptness, impatience, hair-trigger temper, or his very British courtesy?

With a kind and reassuring smile, Naipaul answers: ``Of course, we will have time to talk a little. You don't want too much I hope?" ``Whatever you can give, I'll take it," I reply. When dealing with such prominent figures, you need a sense of moderation. You are in no position to demand anything.

It turns out that on the day agreed upon for the interview, it is the tall and charming Lady Naipaul _ Nadira Khannum Naipaul, the writer's second wife _ who shows up instead, in a good mood and well-disposed for a long conversation. But of Sir V.S. Naipaul, not the slightest shadow of presence.

The world-famous writer, knighted in the 1990 New Year's Honours' List for services to literature, offered me his beloved wife for a talk _ a very rare privilege. ``My husband is not an ordinary person, darling," Lady Naipaul told me later with her hoarse voice, overflowing with self confidence. I would have bet on it.

The Grand Old Man of English Letters, often regarded as Britain's finest living writer, who has written some 27 books and won numerous literary prizes, is not just anybody.

Born of Indian ancestry in Trinidad in 1932, Naipaul worked hard from a young age to overcome poverty and prejudice, as well as nervous breakdowns (he once attempted to commit suicide). But after leaving Port of Spain where he received his primary and secondary education, he would soon shine at Oxford University on a Trinidadian government scholarship.

Following in his father's footsteps after graduation, Vidia Naipaul started his career as a freelance writer, before becoming a broadcaster for the BBC's Caribbean Voices and a regular fiction reviewer for the New Statesman.

He published his first books in the late 1950s. *Miguel Street* (1959), a farewell to Port of Spain, Trinidad, *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), often regarded as his masterpiece, which tells the tragicomic story of the search for independence and identity of a Brahmin Indian living in Trinidad.

Although based in London since the early 50s, he travelled extensively, starting by exploring the Caribbean, and then going further to India, South America, Africa, Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, and the United States. From this period of wide travel, Naipaul produced numerous books, including *The Middle Passage* (1962), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977), and *A Bend in the River* (1979), a pessimistic novel about Africa, proclaiming the corruptible nature of mankind.

Excelling as a novelist and travel writer, he was also a prolific producer of non-fictional works and social analyses, such as *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (1981), a troubled commentary on the post-colonial condition which Muslim readers accused of having a narrow and selective vision of Islam, and semi-autobiographical works like *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) and *A Way in the World* (1994). His latest books include *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples* (1998), a massive volume of intimate portraits from his journeys to non-Arab Islamic countries (Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan and Malaysia).

Although he has made himself some enemies along the way, Naipaul is not short of laurels, including the Hawthornden Prize in 1963, the prestigious Booker Prize for *In a Free State* (1971), the David Cohen British Literature Prize in 1993 and his knighthood in 1990, while being on the verge of receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature for many decades.

Refreshingly politically incorrect in the eyes of his admirers, Naipaul is never shy of controversy. Early last July, his blistering attack against British Prime Minister Tony Blair, whom he accuses of cultural vandalism, caused a great stir in Europe.

“Every day, you hear on the radio some minister from this appalling government saying something about how things are no longer just for the privileged few. This, of course, has destroyed the idea of civilisation in Britain. It began with a long process of reform, active socialist legislation in 1945. We now have a full socialist revolution and the bizarre thing is that it does not mean high culture becomes available to everybody,” Naipaul declared in the magazine *Tatler*.

“It is terrible, this aggressively plebeian culture that celebrates itself for being plebeian,” he continued. “It means plebeian culture is imposed on the country. For the first time in 50 years of living here, I feel depressed by a government, by their dreadful use of rhetoric, the misuse of language. I hate all their language. I think they don't believe half the things they say and they are trying to find words to cover up their lack of belief.”

Traces of this disgust for a government accused of “dumbing down” culture and of the distorted use of language could be heard in a speech the writer gave recently at the Oriental Hotel, on the occasion of the SEA Write Award dinner (See “Modern education”).

By the sweat of his own brow, armed with an extraordinary and penetrative intelligence, phenomenal general knowledge, and acute perceptiveness, Naipaul has succeeded in rising above the workaday world of ordinary people. From this height, and being the nomadic intellectual that he is, he can freely fly over continents or dig deep into the human psyche. And it doesn't matter that V.S. Naipaul, the man, has lots of quirks. V.S. Naipaul, the writer, has unrivalled talent and lots of readers.