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A critical review of two books by Patrick French, *The World Is What It Is: The Authorized Biography of V. S. Naipaul* and *India: A Portrait*

Patrick French

PhD by Research Publications

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Abstract of Thesis

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This submission for the PhD by Research Publications consists of two published books by Patrick French, *The World Is What It Is: The Authorized Biography of V. S. Naipaul* (2008) and *India: A Portrait* (2011). The portfolio is accompanied by a critical review summarising the aims, objectives, methodology, results and conclusions of the books, and showing how they form a coherent body of work and contribute significantly to the expansion of knowledge.

The World Is What It Is (2008) is a biography of Nobel laureate V. S. Naipaul, positioning him within a Caribbean and early postcolonial literary lineage, despite his ancestral connections to India and his “stateless” claims as a world novelist. *India: A Portrait* (2011) is a study of Indian politics, economics and society since 1947, told mainly through the stories of individuals from different sections of society, and using historical background to analyse rapid recent social change in the period after economic “liberalization”.

The trajectory of the two publications is built around a conviction that individual experience can illuminate a larger period or civilization, and that our ideas of the unfamiliar, whether in the past or in different societies, can often be poorly grounded in the way people perceive themselves. In each case, the books challenge existing notions and use evidence based on detailed research and interviews in the field. In the case of *The World Is What It Is*, almost none of the archival material used had previously been studied, and in *India: A Portrait*, subjective one-to-one interviews were supplemented by new original data. For example, a survey was undertaken to determine what proportion of MPs in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of Parliament, were hereditary: this involved double-sourcing information on the family background of all 545 Indian MPs – and revealed that nepotism was more deeply embedded than had previously been realised.

Both books come out of a vision developed during two-and-a-half decades of research into colonial and postcolonial history. The guiding motivation has been to communicate a distinct historical view of the period before and after the end of the global British empire, in particular in South Asia and among its diaspora.

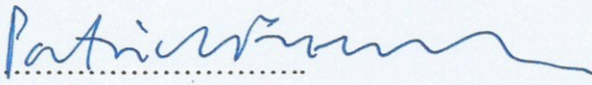
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Signed Declaration

I, Patrick French, composed this thesis. The work is my own, and it has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

SIGNED..........

DATE..........

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A critical review of two books by Patrick French, *The World Is What It Is: The Authorized Biography of V. S. Naipaul* and *India: A Portrait*

Introduction

Aim of the critical review

The University of Edinburgh's guidance for the degree of PhD by Research Publications specifies that the portfolio of published work submitted (in this case the two books *The World Is What It Is* and *India*), 'must be accompanied by an abstract and also by a general critical review by the student of all the submitted work.'

It further states (23.1): 'This critical review must summarise the aims, objectives, methodology, results and conclusions covered by all the work submitted in the portfolio. It must also indicate how the publications form a coherent body of work, what contribution the student has made to this work, and how the work contributes significantly to the expansion of knowledge.'¹

In order to fulfill these criteria, I have divided the critical review into sections summarizing and analysing each book, and divided each section into four, using the following structure: description of sources; description of methodology; description of key arguments; description of the book.

The University of Edinburgh guidelines further state (3.3) that:

- a. The submitted portfolio of published research must add up to a substantial and coherent body of work which would have taken the equivalent of three years of full-time study to accomplish. It must consist of either one or two books or at least six refereed journal articles or research papers, which are already in the public domain.

¹ 'Postgraduate Assessment Regulations for Research Degrees Academic Year 2014/15', http://www.docs.sasg.ed.ac.uk/academicsservices/regulations/pgr_assessmentregulations.pdf.

- b. The candidate should not submit material published more than ten years prior to the date when s/he is given permission to register for the degree.
- c. The critical review should:
 - i. Summarise the aims, objectives, methodology, results and conclusions covered by all the submitted work in the portfolio;
 - ii. Indicate how the publications form a coherent body of work, what contribution the candidate has made to this work and how the work contributes significantly to the expansion of knowledge;
 - iii. Be at least 10,000 words in length, but not more than 25,000 words in length.
- d. The abstract may be the same, or based upon, the synopsis provided at the initial assessment phase, and should fit onto one page of A4.
- e. The candidate must either be the sole author of the portfolio of published work or must be able to demonstrate in the critical review of the submitted work that s/he has made a major contribution to all of the work that has been produced by more than one author.²

To answer the points in Section 3.3 in turn:

- a. The submitted portfolio took the equivalent of around 8 years of full-time study to complete. I started work on *The World Is What It Is* in 2002, and it was published in 2007. Some of my research for *India* was already underway at this time, and the book itself was completed and published in 2011.
- b. All of the material was published within the past decade.
- c. The critical review seeks to fulfill these criteria. The main text is 17,000 words in length (not including footnotes and bibliography).
- d. The abstract is based upon the synopsis provided at the initial assessment phase.
- e. The portfolio is all my own work. I had some research assistance with transcribing recorded interviews and with gathering data on the family background and connections of Indian MPs, as I will explain later.

² 'College of Humanities and Social Science: PROCEDURES FOR APPLICATION AND AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF PhD (BY RESEARCH PUBLICATIONS)', PhD by Publication - Guidelines and Procedures, <http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/humanities-soc-sci/postgraduate/admin-guide>.

I will now introduce the critical review.

The World Is What It Is and *India*, the two books in the submitted portfolio, connect to a larger corpus, with which they are consistent. Three earlier books on related subjects are not included in this submission since they fall outside the ten-year period prior to registration for the degree. The five books together, taken in total, were published between 1994-2011 and form a body of original work analysing the lives of disparate individuals in varied colonial and post-colonial Asian societies.

A brief outline of the three previous books follows, in order to provide intellectual context to the critical review. They are:

Younghusband: The Last Great Imperial Adventurer 1994 (London: Harper Collins; Milano: Sperling & Kupfer (Italian); Malaysia: Marco Polo (Chinese); New Delhi: Penguin (Hindi))

Liberty or Death: India's Journey to Independence and Division 1997 (London: Harper Collins; New Delhi: Penguin (Hindi); Amsterdam: Atlas (Dutch))

Tibet, Tibet: A Personal History of a Lost Land 2003 (London: Harper Collins; New York: Knopf; Moscow: ACT (Russian); Paris: Albin Michel (French); Prague: BB Art (Czech); New Delhi: Penguin (Hindi); Prague: Ushuaia (Polish))

Younghusband

I started work on this book during the final year of my MA degree in English Literature at the University of Edinburgh, when Francis Younghusband's private papers were opened to public access for the first time. *Younghusband: The Last Great Imperial Adventurer* is a biography of an everyman of the British empire – an explorer, soldier and administrator who became a mystic and free thinker. In the book I was seeking to challenge the idea that British imperial administrators had a monolithic approach to the world. In the case of Younghusband, it was his peculiarity that made him in many respects culturally representative: the period of high imperialism has many such crossover characters. I believe individuals like him,

through their life stories, can be revelatory, whether they were in key positions or were excluded from the mainstream.

Younghusband's peculiarity and his failure to fit into an expected pattern made it possible for me to use his life story to give an account of later British imperialism, when it was at its most intense and delusional. Many such colonial administrators appear to have been impersonating each other, operating in a virtual society where they were expected to conform to a stereotype. What Naipaul refers to as "mimicry" by the first generation of indigenous post-colonial leaders was also used by the later generation of British imperialists – acting a role to protect their status and enable them to function in societies they often misunderstood, but nominally ruled.

Liberty or Death

In this book, I used a similar process to *Younghusband* to illustrate some of the gaps, decisions and incomprehension between colleagues and rivals that led to significant and in many cases politically and humanly disastrous decisions in India during the 1940s. *Liberty or Death: India's Journey to Independence and Division* was a study of the Indian independence movement, the creation of Pakistan and Partition, the decline of British power in Asia and the proximate choices made by officials and politicians. It is also, in parts, a prequel to *India: A Portrait*.

The interaction of figures such as Jinnah, Patel, Nehru, Gandhi, Azad, Churchill, Attlee, Wavell, Linlithgow and Mountbatten had an impact on many millions of people. Using the *Transfer of Power* documents³ as my key source, it was possible to build up a narrative of decisions at this time of accelerated history, and to show how "leaders" failed to manage large social and quasi-religious popular movements at a time of great flux. The book also included previously undisclosed material from the declassified records of the British secret intelligence agency IPI (Indian Political Intelligence), after they were released into the public domain for the first time in

³ Mansergh, Nicholas, ed.-in-chief, *Constitutional Relations Between Britain and India: The Transfer of Power 1942-7* (12 volumes), London 1970-83.

1996 following representations I had made to the Cabinet Office under the “open government initiative” of the John Major government.⁴

Tibet, Tibet

Tibet, Tibet: A Personal History of a Lost Land was a technical departure from the book that preceded it, *Liberty or Death*, since it tried to use a different form of historical writing, switching out of chronology in order to show the current repercussions of the distant past. It used the structure of a journey (as if it were a travel book) as a mechanism to write about Tibetan history and the way it is often (mis)perceived. It was also a means to look at how political control and administration worked on the ground.

I interviewed people in depth in eastern and central Tibet, where little first-hand research had been done, and gave voice to outliers to the national narrative such as a Tibetan Red Guard who during the Cultural Revolution had smashed the Jokhang (Lhasa’s most sacred Buddhist temple); a former noblewoman turned communist who spent thirteen years in a prison camp for smudging Chairman Mao’s name on a painted poster; a young nun who had engaged in political protest; an idealistic Han cadre who devoted his life to “service” in Tibet; and a nomad whose tribe had largely starved to death in 1959-60. Almost all of the interviews in the Tibet Autonomous Region and in Tibetan parts of the People’s Republic of China had to be conducted in secrecy over several days, in some cases via an interpreter.

They often produced unknown context or new information. For example I provided the first account of the destruction of the ancient Muslim community of Lhasa, the Habaling Khache, in the late 1950s and 1960s; I was able to show that a sense of national identity was partially invented in exile, and that when Tibetans in Tibet and in Tibetan-minority regions of China held a strong affiliation to the Dalai Lama, it was conceptually more religious than nationalist; I corrected previous academic

⁴ ‘Indian Political Intelligence (IPI) Files, 1912-1950’, now in the Pacific & Africa Collections of the British Library. Some IPI files have recently been transferred to the National Archives.

analysis of Lhasa's "outcaste" Ragyaba community (who in pre-communist times were tasked with disposing of unclaimed corpses, tax-collecting, and producing human bones for use in state ceremonies). *Tibet, Tibet* also used documentary and archival research, looking at China's historic exertion of power in Tibet, the flexibility of social and theocratic structures in earlier centuries; and Twentieth Century British foreign policy and CIA involvement in Tibet. My book showed that the claim that 1.2 million Tibetans died as a result of Chinese communist rule was inaccurate and based on falsified data. I did further work in influential exiled Tibetan communities in India and Nepal, which in turn mirror modern ideas of "Tibetanness" back into Tibet. I explained the origin of the practice of self-immolation, which has now claimed more than 100 Tibetan lives, through my personal knowledge of the first "martyr" to kill himself in this way, Thubten Ngodup.

In summary: the three titles mentioned here (*Younghusband, Liberty or Death* and *Tibet, Tibet*) seek to reform and reinvigorate the writing of history, and attempt to discover the conceptual challenges that exist in societies that are dissimilar or largely unfamiliar to Western readers. Personal and biographical information is used to illuminate the pressures facing individuals at utterly different levels of society, from the high elite to the dispossessed, in several connected parts of Asia.

These books were followed first by *The World Is What It Is* (2008), and then by *India* (2011).

Critical Review

Analysis and summary of *The World Is What It Is*

1. Description of sources

McFarlin Library

Vidia Naipaul's personal and professional papers (and those of his first wife Patricia Naipaul) were sold to the McFarlin Library at the University of Tulsa in Oklahoma in 1993.⁵ I was asked to write his biography in 2001, and agreed on the condition that I could have full and exclusive access to his archives while I was in the process of research, quote from them freely, interview him at length and write without restriction. These conditions were accepted and honoured through the research, writing and publication in 2008 of the biography that followed, *The World Is What It Is: The Authorized Biography of V. S. Naipaul*.

The material in the McFarlin Library was on an eight- to ten-year time lag (meaning, for example, that papers from the year 2000 were transferred to Tulsa in 2008-2010). The archive consisted of 50,000-60,000 pieces of paper, most of which had been catalogued by the time I first saw them in 2002. I made five subsequent research visits to the McFarlin Library. In many cases I photocopied documents, but where possible I analysed, summarised and extracted information and key quotations from the archive as I went along.

I was the only person to have access to the Naipaul archive, apart from the librarians. The exception to this was manuscripts and typescripts of his published books, which were available for consultation by scholars. These "open" manuscripts and typescripts made up the largest physical part of the archive, and were not especially enlightening. With most novelists and poets, an examination of the different drafts of

⁵ A catalogue and detailed description of the V. S. Naipaul archives at the University of Tulsa can be found at <http://www.lib.utulsa.edu/speccoll/collections/naipaulvs/index.htm>.

literary creation can be important in a biographical study. They can be highly revealing of both the author's state of mind and the authorial logic used in the construction of a text.⁶ In Naipaul's case, it appeared his text had almost always been thought out in his mind before he put a word onto paper. The structure and language of his prose rarely altered between first draft and published book, except for minor corrections.⁷ Although other scholars have made critical and biographical use of this manuscript or typescript material since 1994, it has yielded little of academic value.⁸ My own experience was not different.

The substantive part of the Tulsa archive, which formed the basis of my primary source material for *The World Is What It Is*, consisted of V. S. Naipaul's working notes, personal jottings, extensive correspondence, creative projections, random notes, engagement diaries, travel notebooks, financial papers, audio and video recordings, photographs, press cuttings and private journals. Together, they made up an extraordinarily rich set of primary sources for a literary biographer.

In the case of Patricia Naipaul, the most important find was a diary she had kept from 1972-1995, running to hundreds of thousands of words, written by hand in 24 large notebooks, some of which were not completely legible. It appeared her husband had not read this diary, but was aware it had been written and wished for it to be sent to Tulsa. The diary was a collection of Patricia's private experiences, sometimes amended at a later date with a paper insertion. Although it was not a clear or well-structured narrative, it felt reliable, and contained no discernible inventions.

In *The World Is What It Is*, I described the diary as:

‘...an essential, unparalleled record of V.S. Naipaul's later life and work [which] reveals more about the creation of his subsequent books, and her role in their creation, than any other source. It puts Patricia Naipaul on a par with

⁶ Some examples of works that are intriguing in their different and changing forms include F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (the folio versions of which be compared online at <http://www.bovary.fr>).

⁷ *The Mimic Men* (1967) was possibly an exception.

⁸ See for instance Feder, Lillian, *Naipaul's Truth: The Making of a Writer*, Lanham 2001.

other great, tragic, literary spouses such as Sonia Tolstoy, Jane Carlyle and Leonard Woolf.⁹

V. S. Naipaul's own archives were full and detailed. They contained stories, memorabilia and letters written by his father Seepersad Naipaul and other family members including his siblings; Naipaul's own literary notebooks from the mid-1950s; illuminating day by day correspondence with Patricia during the years leading up to their marriage and afterwards; a large collection of book reviews and press cuttings; professional and personal correspondence, often in both directions; his working notebooks from his journeys from the late 1960s onwards, including those to Argentina and parts of South America, the West Indies, the United States, Congo and parts of West Africa, and repeat trips to India, Pakistan, Iran, Malaysia and Indonesia; a good collection of photographs and other images; audio and video material dating back to the 1960s, mainly of radio interviews and television programmes about him; and full sets of bank statements, accounts, tax records and other financial information dating to the 1970s. Naipaul had archived his working life scrupulously since his late teens.

Again, all of this material felt reliable, and I could find no falsifications. Some of the peripheral documentation gave a good insight into his daily life, such as household notes written between himself and Patricia. The numerous early family and other later photographs offered a culturally vivid insight into different stages of Naipaul's life. The financial papers showed, by means of a "deep dive" into tax returns and bank statements at particular points in his career, how precarious his finances had often been, which in turn sometimes made his actions more intelligible.¹⁰

Missing from the archives at Tulsa was written material that had been destroyed as a result of an administrative error in the 1980s at the south London warehouse where it was stored.¹¹ The most significant loss from a biographer or cultural historian's point

⁹ French, Patrick, *The World Is What It Is: The Authorized Biography of V. S. Naipaul*, London 2008, p. 307.

¹⁰ For example, Naipaul's gross income during the 1960s averaged less than £2,000 per year. *The World Is What It Is*, p. 252.

¹¹ See *The World Is What It Is*, pp. 461-462.

of view of was a novel Naipaul began in Trinidad in 1949, aged 17; the manuscript of an early book *The Shadow'd Livery*; his diaries from his often unhappy years at Oxford University; early travel journals and private diaries; the manuscripts of his first published books and much of his correspondence from the 1950s and Sixties.

When I interviewed V. S. Naipaul about this loss, he said: 'What the documents that were lost in the warehouse would have reported, even the little journals that I kept – scrappy things – was the rage I felt. That came from my own unhappiness. I was capable of immense anger.'

He insisted he had sought to preserve everything.

'I kept it for the record. I am a great believer in the record ... I destroyed nothing. I think the completeness of a record is what matters. I have great trouble reading other people's autobiographies because I feel it is doctored. So the stuff that was destroyed in the warehouse, lots of embarrassing things, that was part of the record.'¹²

This monumental approach towards his own past seemed to explain why I had been given complete access to the archives, and why no attempt had been made to censor or remove material before it went to Tulsa. Where possible, I would rely on external sources and later interviews to make up for any gaps caused by the absence of the early material that had been lost.

External sources

During the research and writing of *The World Is What It Is*, I also used primary sources including: academic and archival information held at University College, Oxford; the archives of Naipaul's literary agency, Gillon Aitken Associates; the André Deutsch archive at the University of Tulsa; radio scripts from the BBC show "Caribbean Voices" preserved on microfilm at the British Broadcasting Corporation Written Archives Centre in Caversham; cuttings of the *Illustrated Weekly of India* preserved at the archives of the *Times of India* in Mumbai; audio recordings held by

¹² See *The World Is What It Is*, p. 462 and accompanying footnote.

the National Sound Archive in London; land records from the National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago kept in Port of Spain (detailing the property dealings of Naipaul's maternal grandmother, Soogie Capildeo); letters in the C. L. R. James collection at the University of the West Indies, St Augustine Campus; and documents and letters in V. S. Naipaul's own private collection.

In addition, I obtained access to collections of letters, photographs and printed and written material (including early letters and school reports) that were in the possession of individuals including Savi Akal, Antonia Fraser, Eleanor Hale, Mira Inalsingh, Ralph Ironman, Marisa Masters, Margaret Murray, Kamla Tewari and Paul Theroux. Almost none of this material had been previously consulted by scholars. During my research, secondary sources filled in some particulars about the societal or political context of, for example, colonial Trinidad, 1950s London, West Indian history or post-war British literary life. Contemporary newspapers from different countries gave some local detail. But published material did not make a significant contribution to the biography.

My most important additional primary source was a series of interviews I conducted with Naipaul's family members, childhood contemporaries, friends, colleagues and foes from every stage of his life – around 80 people in total. As usually happens, people's memories of events could be at variance with each other. Where this was the case, I tried to explain succinctly in the text which account seemed to be more reliable. (See for example my analysis of the events of a single afternoon in 1974, done through the varying recollections of Paul Theroux and four others.¹³)

These interviews took place in the United Kingdom, the United States, Argentina, India, France and the West Indies. In each case I did them alone with the interviewee, and where possible in relaxed conditions. Most were recorded in broadcast quality (and particularly those I thought might have a long term historical or cultural significance) on magneto-optical discs. I also did twenty or so such conversations with V. S. Naipaul himself, each of which I recorded. I had assistance

¹³ See *The World Is What It Is*, pp. 356-357.

from a confidential transcription service in turning some of these audio recordings into a rough written transcript of each interview, which I was able to correct and edit.

To generalise about the subjective interview sources: the additional information provided by interviewees, while notably useful in clearing up uncertainties over chronology or factual gaps in my emerging text, produced fewer revealing insights than the written material in the McFarlin Library. The interviews had value in themselves as oral narratives, but could not always be used in the final book.

Only two people refused to be interviewed for the biography: Harold Pinter and Derek Walcott. The interactions with V. S. Naipaul himself – in which the principal of the biography was often strikingly frank, and spoke confessionally about topics and experiences that he had never discussed with anyone – provided me with essential material which I threaded through *The World Is What It Is* like an on-going commentary on the information derived from the contemporaneous written sources.

In conclusion, the range and quality of the primary source material for a biography were strong.

2. Description of methodology

Biography and the larger story

My objective in writing *The World Is What It Is* was to tell a global historical story through what was nominally the experience of a single person. Rather than being only about its subject, a biography can open a range of linked accounts of personal experience, both through the perceptions that others have of the principal individual and through the inevitable contradictions of a human life, which can never conform to a strict pattern.

In a biography, you always find the unexpected (such as people who hold opinions that seem contradictory, or do not equate with our idea of what such a person

“should” have been doing and thinking during that historical era). Ranajit Guha argues in *History at the Limit of World-History* that:

‘If the writing of history were to ground itself in such historicity, it would have a subject matter as comprehensive as the human condition itself. The world would open up with all of its pasts ready to serve for its narratives. No continent, no culture, no rank or condition of social being would be considered too small or too simple for its prose.’¹⁴

By “historicity”, Guha means the stories people tell about themselves, which serve to widen our experience of what history can be. He goes on to assert: ‘The novel is the quintessential narrative of experience.’¹⁵

I would meet Guha halfway and suggest biography is “the quintessential narrative of experience”, since formally it stands at a midpoint between the novel and historical writing. It encompasses many different areas of study. In its contemporary state (where it no longer serves a hagiographic purpose, as it did for earlier generations) the biography is a form of subaltern history and a form of global history. It requires a writer not to fictionalise, but to establish a narrative, as in a traditional novel, and to convey complex psychological experience at multiple levels.

My conception of the art of biography is that it should act as a sub-genre of history, providing a worm-hole view: in Naipaul’s case, it was a route into understanding the human impact of British imperialism, and the way that relationships between individuals play out as part of a disturbed imaginative and creative process. An individual story can tell part of a much larger story, in this instance about the period before and after decolonization (Trinidad and Tobago became independent in 1962), and the social change that enabled Naipaul to become what he became. My method of working drew on my previous experience of writing a full-length biography, *Younghusband*, but took into account the intense complexity of Naipaul’s evolving cultural milieu through the decades, and the way he was “claimed” or “rejected” by those who endeavoured to study and understand his work.

¹⁴ Guha, Ranajit, *History at the Limit of World-History*, New York 2002, p. 22.

¹⁵ Guha, p. 55.

My objective was to uncover the psychological and cultural pressures that helped to form V. S. Naipaul. Some of the guiding methodology or principles used in planning the book can be expressed as follows, in the form of five critical questions that I sought to answer when writing *The World Is What It Is*. What were the external forces – social, familial, personal, financial, ethnic, professional, political – acting on the principal? What were the internal impulses that made him behave in a particular way, and how did they link to the larger external forces and expectations? How were such events connected to the process of literary creativity, and how was that reflected specifically in his published work? Were the various versions of his own actions that he created in his fiction and nonfiction accurate? And was it possible to find linked lives within his peer group that placed the principal's biographical story into a larger social and historical context?

When I reached the end of the process of research at Tulsa, I catalogued the material I had collected by subject or theme (for instance: book reviews, caste, Oxford, religion) and by person (for instance: Kamla Tewari, Ruth Jhabvala, Andrew Salkey). I then established a life-long chronology – a process that can be surprisingly difficult in biography, since it is not always apparent in what order a set of letters or documents have been written, or what is cause and what is effect. I cross-referenced the date of each significant event with files that I had classified by subject / theme / person.

When it came to writing the biography, I decided the commentary provided by the interviews I had done with Naipaul, some of which covered the same ground from different angles, should be placed alongside versions of events drawn from contemporaneous writing that had survived in the archives. Actuality (in the form of documentation, such as a letter or journal entry) could be compared with memory (in the form of Naipaul's inevitably fallible descriptions or recollections – his own historicity) in order to demonstrate the adjustments and human imperfection in any subjective account of emotion. An example: Naipaul's refusal to buy his wife a wedding ring appears to have come from a fear of marriage and the consequences of

marrying someone of a different ethnicity, as well as a psychological denial that he was actually married. This is outlined in my narrative (pp. 152-156), and then rationalised retrospectively by Naipaul in his own words: ‘I had no interest in jewellery. I didn’t think it was important. I simply had no money.’ I took this to be an instance of memory, in the form of self-justification, seeking to transform or flatten the actuality.

Biography and incompleteness

I took several decisions at this stage, before I started writing, which influenced my use of the sources. I would end the biography in the year 1996, at a key turning point in Naipaul’s life, so as to provide a degree of distance or historical perspective, and enable me not to be constrained by the propriety involved in writing on the immediate past;¹⁶ I would exclude myself from the text, and not use the first person or be an obvious presence in the narrative; I would rely on a straightforward chronological, rather than thematic, sequence; I would not be didactic about moments in Naipaul’s life when he treated other people cruelly or made shocking and offensive remarks, but try to contextualise his actions or statements and let these speak for themselves; I would where possible communicate my own opinions on his work and life and the intersection between them indirectly, letting them work upon the reader by implication, as happens in a novel. So if for example Naipaul has a character in *Guerrillas* act violently in a way that echoes his own conduct a few pages earlier in my text, I would not feel the need to flag the connection, but rather let it be inferred.

In the introduction to *The World Is What It Is*, I wrote the following explanation:

‘Where his statements are self-serving or eccentric, I have often let them stand without authorial intrusion ... My approach to writing a biography is as it was when I began my first book. I wrote then that the aim of the biographer should not be to sit in judgement, but to expose the subject with ruthless clarity to the calm eye of the reader ... Sometimes, a critic or biographer can

¹⁶ The “latest” material that I saw at the McFarlin Library came from the year 1999, because of the eight- to ten-year time lag on the transfer of papers.

see things the author cannot. In his Nobel lecture, V. S. Naipaul said that a writer's biography can never fully reveal the source of his books: "All the details of the life and the quirks and the friendships can be laid out for us, but the mystery of the writing will remain. No amount of documentation, however fascinating, can take us there. The biography of a writer – or even the autobiography – will always have this incompleteness." I would go further: a biography can never fully reveal the source of its subject.¹⁷

To take this a little further: the biographer is engaged in a wrestling match with the subject of a good literary biography, since writers, being fictionalisers, know how to spin their own tales. As Gideon Lewis-Kraus writes of Janet Malcolm's method:

'The premiss behind her writing about art is that artists are those best in control of their own stories ... they are accustomed to treating themselves like other people.'

So Lewis-Kraus writes that when Malcolm interviews a painter, he turns out to be keen to throw her off the scent. He is 'protean and elusive; the minute Malcolm pins him down, he reinvents himself. Ultimately what emerges from the piece is a thrilling stalemate, a rendering of precisely that reinvention.'¹⁸ The mystery of the writing will remain.

My thinking was that it should be possible in a literary biography to use the narrative structures and techniques found in fiction, and were indeed used by Naipaul himself in books such as *A Bend in the River* or *A Way in the World*. I wanted to work wherever possible by inference, leaving a degree of ambiguity, in an echo of the principal of the biography.

The combination of these literary and analytical methods was intended to mirror the fact that much of Naipaul's oeuvre is contested: there is less consensus about his work than that of most contemporary writers. Critics coming from different ideological positions, and even from different ethnicities, judge aspects of his books differently. He is understood contrarily in the Caribbean or the UK, or in India and

¹⁷ *The World Is What It Is*, pp. xvii-xviii.

¹⁸ *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 August 2013.

the USA. I outline this in more detail in the next section, “Description of key arguments”.

My methodology with regard to the source material was to place new information wherever possible in the nexus of historical, cultural, social, ethnic and literary studies. It was essential that the reader should be able to picture the physical context in which Naipaul lived at formative periods, and see how other people responded to a similar situation. (To take one example, see this depiction of his childhood:

‘Vegetarian food from their own land – pigeon peas, okra, rice, pumpkin, potato, spinach, green fig, chick peas, breadfruit, all spiced with masala in an approximation of north Indian cuisine – was cooked communally by the Maxis [maternal aunts] in a dingy, blackened kitchen. Men and boys dressed in shorts and shirts, the shirts usually made from flour bags, and wore long trousers when working in the fields. Barefoot around the house and yard, outside they wore “washekongs” – Salim collects a pair in *A Bend in the River*: “from *caoutchouc*, the French word for rubber, being patois for canvas shoes.”¹⁹) Returning the principal of the biography to his roots through the physicality of the past, and his own historicity, was central to my intention.

Biography as an adaptive genre

As a form of cultural production, biography is highly adaptive. Different generations and countries perceive its purpose in dissimilar ways. In most traditions, biography started out as a version of hagiography – a means to record and praise the life and important deeds of a leader, monarch or religious figure. In much of the world, biography indeed remains reverential.

Perhaps more than any other genre in the Anglophone literary tradition, biography has altered its intention over recent centuries, and even recent decades. At the end of the Eighteenth Century, Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson* was considered improper for its use of anecdote and novelistic description. In the Nineteenth Century

¹⁹ See *The World Is What It Is*, p. 26.

(reflecting British imperial and economic power), biographies grew to multiple volumes and entombed their principals in greatness. Their aim was to project authority, control and moral value. As Thomas Carlyle wrote in revolt against this: ‘How delicate, decent is English biography, bless its mealy mouth!’²⁰

A response to “Victorian” biography came in 1918 with Lytton Strachey’s influential *Eminent Victorians*, which started a vogue for the debunking Life. By the 1960s or Seventies, it had become acceptable or even necessary in the biographical tradition to cover every area of a subject’s life, including sexuality and intimate thoughts and relationships, which led to significant psychological insights into human behaviour.²¹ Parallel to this, in an effort to recover or reconstitute “missing” parts of history, sub-genres emerged like psychobiography, group biography and feminist biography.

My own strategy borrows elements from these approaches, but I believe none can work effectively as a methodology, since they are conceptually too restrictive. A biography should be feminist by instinct: the reason a book such as Claire Tomalin’s *The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens* (London 1990) or Brenda Maddox’s *Nora Joyce: A Biography* (London 1988) needed to be written was because Ternan and Nora Joyce had been written out of history. They had been excluded from, respectively, Forster’s three volume *The Life of Charles Dickens* and Ellmann’s *James Joyce*. My objective was to incorporate Patricia Naipaul into the *same* biography as her husband, not to have her as an adjunct. Leon Edel’s notion of “literary psychology” is too amorphous and romantic, with its conviction that a biographer can find explanations for artistic achievement, since

²⁰ Quoted *London Review of Books*, 19 July 1984.

²¹ See for example Lee, Hermione, *Virginia Woolf*, London 1996 and Skidelsky, Robert, *John Maynard Keynes: Hopes Betrayed, 1883-1920*, London 1986. Both biographies alter the way we understand the workings of power in Britain in the first half of the Twentieth Century. With Keynes, the interplay of the personal, the social and the public had a significant political and economic impact. See G. C. Harcourt & Sean Turnell, ‘On Skidelsky’s Keynes’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 40, No. 47, November 19-25, 2005. Woolf wrote about the purpose of modern biography in a 1927 essay, ‘The New Biography’, and suggested the biographer should try using the imaginative techniques of the novelist.

everything is hidden and waiting to be discovered.²² To re-quote Naipaul, the biography of a writer must always have an element of incompleteness.

As far as the art of biography can be theorised, I was drawn to Ray Monk's view that, formally, it is a non-theoretical activity, and therefore philosophically interesting. (Monk is a biographer as well as a philosopher.) To theorise too fully, he argues, is to lose the instinct towards flexible interpretations: if a biographer seeks to make an argument that the subject of a book must be seen in a certain way, it puts too much focus on the author's ideology and not enough on the subject's. A biographer cannot take sides. Or to put it another way, Freud's writing on Leonardo da Vinci's childhood will tell you more about Freud than it does about da Vinci.²³ A biography destabilises category and rests on ambiguity: like the stories people tell about themselves, it opens up new possibilities.

3. Description of key arguments

A unique cultural warp

V. S. Naipaul's literary career has lasted for more than sixty years, an abnormally long time for any writer. His work was first broadcast on the BBC Colonial Service in 1951, his first novel was published in 1957 and he is still writing today, in 2015. Because of this longevity, his critical reputation has been through phases which can be loosely periodised: in the Fifties in Britain, he was patronised; in the Sixties he was accommodated within the Western canon; in the Seventies his politics and ideology were challenged; in the Eighties and since, he was treated as an odd and even unfathomable case all of his own.

In 1980 Joan Didion wrote: 'It is hard not to note a certain turning in the air when V.S. Naipaul is mentioned, a hint of taint, a suggestion of favor about to go moot ...

²² See Edel, Leon, *Stuff of Sleep and Dreams: Experiments in Literary Psychology*, New York 1982.

²³ Ray Monk, 'Life without Theory: Biography as an Exemplar of Philosophical Understanding', *Poetics Today* Vol. 28, No. 3, Fall 2007.

Increasingly now he is consigned to this role of the special case, the victim of a unique cultural warp...²⁴ Critics took a position on his work, linking him to larger cultural debates. He was made to represent both betrayal and truth. Edward Said judged in 1986 that in his recent books, Naipaul had used, ‘the tritest, cheapest and the easiest of colonial mythologies about wogs and darkies,’ and in doing so, ‘allowed himself quite consciously to be turned into a witness for the Western prosecution.’²⁵ Against this, a conservative writer like David Pryce-Jones could represent him as a fearless exposé of veracity about the places he described, less a pessimist than a realist: ‘Challenging guilt in the name of truth-telling, Naipaul has changed the recent climate of opinion as no other English-language writer has done.’²⁶

These proxy wars – using the author to stand in for a conceptual position, while he nearly always refused to engage directly in the specifics of the debate (pretending for example that he did not know how to pronounce Said’s name) – appear to have been encouraged by Naipaul’s habit of confronting interviewers and making provocative public statements.²⁷ As a *New York Times* journalist wrote, ‘In his interviews as in his life, Naipaul is famously irascible, difficult, contradictory, an ideological lightning rod. Yet in his writing, he is an artist on whom nothing is lost.’²⁸ As one of his students at Wesleyan, Banning Eyre, concluded in 1981, his reputation for being outrageous displaced the subtlety of his writing: ‘V.S. Naipaul became widely known as a terrible ogre: a sexist, a racist, a snob – people knew him as these without even knowing he was a famous novelist.’²⁹ To an extent this was a form of self-defence on Naipaul’s part, to protect his “writerly” self by displaying an antagonistic persona.

I will now outline in more detail some of the principal approaches and academic debates about V. S. Naipaul’s work down the years.

²⁴ *New York Review of Books*, 12 June 1980.

²⁵ ‘Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World’, in *Salmagundi*, Spring/Summer 1986.

²⁶ *Harpers & Queen*, July 1980. See also Barnouw, Dagmar, *Naipaul’s Strangers*, Bloomington 2003.

²⁷ See Jussawalla, Feroza, ed., *Conversations with V.S. Naipaul*, Jackson 1997, pp. 75-92.

²⁸ *New York Times*, 7 August 2005.

²⁹ *Wesleyan: The Wesleyan University Alumnus*, Spring 1981.

Inside and outside the canon

In the critical response in Britain in the 1950s to Naipaul's first three books, positive reactions were frequently accompanied by the reductive, racially driven language of that period. Because of his ethnic and geographical origins, Naipaul's work was assumed to be peripheral and less important than the white mainstream. A review of the novel *The Mystic Masseur* claimed: 'The characters in it are as excitable as children...' ³⁰ The author was an 'exotic gentleman', the creator of 'yet another piece of intuitive or slaphappy West Indian fiction as pleasant, muddled and inconsequent as the Trinidadian Hindus it describes.' He was described as one of the new 'calypso novelists' who were putting 'colour and punch into British writing.' ³¹

Less than a decade later, this had begun to change. The established novelist Anthony Powell, who became a significant mentor, wrote in 1961 after the publication of *A House for Mr Biswas* that Naipaul should be recognised as 'this country's most talented and promising younger writer.' ³² By "this country", Powell meant the United Kingdom, and successive critics sought to "claim" him in a similar way (though Dennis Potter objected to 'that once so virulently acquisitive "our"' being applied to Naipaul). In a study in 1973, William Walsh placed Naipaul's fiction within the "Great Tradition" of his own teacher at Cambridge, F. R. Leavis. ³³ Alfred Kazin did something similar, suggesting Naipaul's position was unique and that he was 'a writer as astonishing as the Orwell who came out of Burma, the Conrad who came out of the British Merchant Navy.' (Joseph Conrad would often be invoked to explain Naipaul.) Kazin conveniently excluded Trinidad, the country of origin where the highly formative first 18 years of his life has been spent, stating: 'Naipaul is a colonial brought up in English schools, on English ways, and the pretended

³⁰ Quoted in Donnell, Alison and Lawson Welsh, Sarah, *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*, London 1996, p. 265.

³¹ See *The World Is What It Is*, pp. 179-182.

³² Powell, Anthony, *Miscellaneous Verdicts: Writings on Writers 1946-1989*, London 1990, p. 391.

³³ Walsh, William, V. S. *Naipaul*, Edinburgh 1973.

reasonableness of the English mind.’³⁴ But Naipaul himself asserted, during an interview in 1981, that he was aware from when he began writing that the modern world was going through a time of historical and political flux, and he sought consciously to avoid writing ‘the imperialist period novel.’³⁵

Kazin’s canonical view of “English ways” dovetailed with the proposition that Naipaul was a uniquely authentic voice of what was at the time called the Third World; the fact he was a scourge, and yet came from the “Third World”, made his assessments seem trustworthy to a certain audience. He represented his place of birth and countries like it that had been affected by European colonialism not, as Derek Walcott would, as a confluence of proactive, generative cultures, but as a “borrowed” or “half-made” society – a place that should be judged by how it connected to the strength and veracity of the imperial or post-imperial metropolis and its culturally specific ideas of progress. In his travel books, Naipaul portrayed communities that were unaltered by ethnic variety (or were tied more closely to their ancestral cultural heritage, as in parts of India) as superior.

Naipaul liked to present himself as displaced by history, and suggested this made him uniquely insightful – implying he was driven by objective, external forces rather by internal psychological or purely practical compulsions. The idea that he was a rootless, stateless, hyper-perceptive global observer linked collusively with a British and later an American critical reaction placing him *inside* the canon, in what could be perceived as the empire making good in an act of self-conscious, postcolonial generosity. In *The World Is What It Is*, I show how his emotions and even pathology at times of stress were more important. His choices were less about history and more about his personal circumstances.

While I noted his enduring triangulation between Trinidad, Britain and India, I was not convinced that Naipaul was created by history. There seemed here to be a degree of self-mythologisation. The suggestion that he was a minion of imperialism,

³⁴ *New York Review of Books*, 30 December 1971.

³⁵ See Jussawalla, Feroza, ed., *Conversations with V.S. Naipaul*, Jackson 1997, p. 78.

interested only in targeting a Western audience, in turn ignored the complexity, ambiguity and reversals in his work. I found it significant that he dealt repeatedly in his novels with deracinated protagonists – migrants between one continent and another who had been displaced by the explosions of colonial or postcolonial events (for example, the characters in *A House for Mr Biswas*, *The Mimic Men*, *Guerillas*, *A Bend in the River*, *The Enigma of Arrival*, *A Way in the World* and *Half a Life*) – and yet he was often presumed to be segregated, and turning his back on his own history.

Naipaul's self-presentation was powerfully affective in driving the critical response to his work, and in framing the way others began to perceive both him and the formerly colonised countries that he wrote about. For example the political scientist Kirk Meighoo titled a book, *Politics in a 'Half-Made Society': Trinidad and Tobago, 1925-2001*, (Kingston 2003). A similar projection can be found in an introductory essay by Pankaj Mishra to a collection of writings by V. S. Naipaul, *The Writer and the World* (2002). Mishra mirrors Naipaul's own analysis and language, writing seemingly instinctively of 'ill-adapted borrowings', 'half-modern societies' and 'the colonial habits of dependence and mimicry'. He even claims for Naipaul a 'vigorous humanism', and links his work to 'the great movements of history that had produced and marked him,' creating 'one of the most brilliant – and by far the unlikeliest – literary careers of the last hundred years.'³⁶

It would be wrong, though, to suggest that Naipaul had a critical pass. Almost as soon as his reputation rose, he was identified as a thinker out of step with progressive thought, and therefore as a spokesman for colonialism and its neologies. H.B. Singh described Naipaul in 1969 in *Literature and Ideology* as 'a despicable lackey of neo-colonialism and imperialism.'³⁷ Naipaul's Barbadian contemporary and occasional friend George Lamming wrote in 1960 that he came across as 'a colonial, ashamed of his cultural background' who sought to prove himself by aspiring to 'the peaks of a "superior" culture whose values are gravely in doubt,' and that his fiction was

³⁶ Naipaul, V.S., *The Writer and the World*, London 2002, pp. vii-vx.

³⁷ Quoted Hamner, Robert D., ed., *Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul*, Washington 1977, p. xxvii.

unable to ‘move beyond a castrated satire.’³⁸ Feminist critics questioned the sexual politics of his fiction. Ramabai Espinet argues in “The Invisible Woman in West Indian Fiction” (1989) that his ‘female Indian characters’ are rarely more than ‘cardboard cutouts ... unexamined in themselves’ – while he shows ‘a noticeable delight in the physical attributes’ of European women.³⁹ In *Postcolonial Mandarin* (1992), Rob Nixon places his travel writing and journeys to poorer countries convincingly within the traditions and the view of unfamiliar societies found in Victorian or Nineteenth Century travel narratives.⁴⁰

Kenneth Ramchand’s *The West Indian Novel and its Background* (London 1970) and Selwyn R. Cudjoe’s, *V. S. Naipaul: A Materialist Reading* (Amherst 1988) present a more equivocal reading. Both authors were raised in Trinidad and draw on their own background and shared knowledge of Naipaul’s heritage. Cudjoe sees an ethnic or at least a First World / Third World divide in critical responses to Naipaul’s writing, and is adamant that he should not be regarded as an objective commentator: ‘His work is a political intervention within a well-defined historical and cultural space, the product of an emerging tradition in literature.’ Like C. L. R. James, Cudjoe makes the assertion that: ‘Naipaul will continue to be praised by the West, but for the wrong reasons. He will continue to say what Westerners want to hear and will receive the necessary publicity for his pains.’⁴¹ As a critic, Cudjoe admires the early fiction, but mistrusts the ideological interventions in the later work.

A convincing reading of these critical splits can be found in Fawzia Mustafa’s study *V. S. Naipaul* (1995), which draws on postcolonial theory to analyse his fictional strategies. Mustafa presents Naipaul’s writing career as connected to ‘the initial struggles peculiar to Caribbean and postcolonial writing. After all, how does a writer resign membership from a version of history and then proceed to construct native histories out of precisely the same materials?’ She places the answer amid his

³⁸ Lamming, George, *The Pleasures of Exile*, London 1960, p.225.

³⁹ Quoted in Donnell, Alison and Lawson Welsh, Sarah, *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*, London 1996, pp. 429-430.

⁴⁰ Nixon, Rob, *London Calling: V. S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin*, New York 1992.

⁴¹ Cudjoe, Selwyn R., *V. S. Naipaul: A Materialist Reading*, Amherst 1988, p. 4 & 227.

repeated use of autobiographical writing, which has been reworked in his books in ongoing ways:

‘It is Naipaul’s use of details from his own life in his expository and fictional writing, and the almost transparent role that other biographical facts have played in the establishment of his public persona, that best help to characterize his work in postcolonial discursive practice.’⁴²

Mustafa’s approach is useful, but I was conscious that the “biographical facts” of Naipaul’s life known in 1995 were not always accurate, even if they had been much repeated.

The fields of knowledge

The World Is What It Is reassigns the importance of a writer’s life away from the abstract and towards the specific, asserting that biography can be a source of literary understanding in its own right. In doing so I expand, and in places challenge, existing fields of knowledge with regard to postcolonial studies, colonial discourse and, to a lesser extent, diasporic studies, cultural studies and feminist studies.

Edward Said, who has been mentioned as a significant commentator on Naipaul’s work, was a founding theorist of postcolonialism in his book *Orientalism* (1978).⁴³ His premise was that Western perceptions of “the Orient” were framed through the colonial period around prejudice and misrepresentation, and that alien cultures were judged according to Western assumptions. *Orientalism* demonstrated that in art and literature, alongside the more obvious forms of physical and economic assertion, “the East” was not only a site of political conquest, but a site of fantasy and projection too. Said crystallised a prevailing intellectual trend that colonial versions of “the other” needed to be reassessed in the postcolonial era, and that value judgments which assumed themselves to be neutral were rarely anything of the sort.

⁴² Mustafa, Fawzia, *V. S. Naipaul*, Cambridge 1995 (Cambridge studies in African and Caribbean literature), p. 13. Helen Hayward’s *The Enigma of V.S. Naipaul* (Basingstoke 2002) also has a perceptive and biographically acute understanding of his novels.

⁴³ Said, Edward W., *Orientalism*, London 1978.

Such ideas were developed further by literary theorists including Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (who preferred the term “postcoloniality”) and Homi Bhabha, who proposed in *The Location of Culture* that literary and other forms of cultural production are at their strongest when they are conceptually fluid. Bhabha’s ideas of interstices, hybridity and doubling were influential upon other postcolonial literary theorists. His concept of mimicry drew on Naipaul’s own use of the term in fiction.

Like Said, Bhabha found Naipaul’s work to be useful to illustrate his points, although his conclusions were less stringent. He represented Naipaul as a figure whose literary gaze abandoned the “half-made colonial world” in favour of a Western ideal:

‘Marlow [in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*] turns away from the African jungle to recognize, in retrospect, the peculiarly “English” quality of the discovery of the book. Naipaul turns his back on the hybrid half-made colonial world to fix his eye on the universal domain of English literature.’⁴⁴

Much of the critical work on Naipaul was written during the 1990s, and it either challenged or endorsed elements of postcolonial theoretical analysis. *The Location of Culture* was published in 1994, Nixon’s *London Calling* in 1992, Sara Suleri’s *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago) in 1992, Mustafa’s *V. S. Naipaul* in 1995 and Michael Gorra’s *After Empire: Scott, Naipaul, Rushdie* (Chicago) in 1997. By the end of the 1990s, Naipaul’s reputation was low in Western academia, but in the Twenty-First Century it rebounded.

I would suggest there were two main reasons for this. The first was that critical theory lost its dominant academic position. For all their perceptivity, high literary theorists failed in their writing to include enough people, enough life, enough intricate individual stories and histories. They lost specificity, and in doing so they left theory stranded. Large, abstract pronouncements were not a convincing substitute for examples of how individuals, in practice, wrestled with the implications of theoretical arguments.

⁴⁴ Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*, Abingdon 1994, p. 153.

The second reason was that history returned with a vengeance in 2001, after the attacks of 9/11. Far from being at an end, as Fukuyama would have it, history (or at least revolutionary perceptions of the past) became a driving force in modern global politics.⁴⁵ Movements built on ancestral identity took the place of an earlier postcolonial, and predominantly nationalist, impetus. The world moved into a new, as yet unnamed, phase, and postcolonialism began to appear dated. Naipaul's books on Muslim responses (and specifically on non-Arab Muslim responses) to modernity, which had been seen as disproportionately gloomy, now appeared prescient.⁴⁶ Even his opponents acknowledged that his opinions were based on extensive travels and prolonged interviews in the societies about which he was writing – Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia – over a fifteen-year period.

A renewed interest in Islam, in the effects of globalization, in displaced ethnic diasporas and in the impact of past events and inherited identity on the present returned Naipaul's work to the critical forefront. Many of the "long" themes in his writing, from colonial displacement and erasure to revolutionary resentment, began to feel more current. In the Twenty-First century, history that was optimistically assumed to have been laid to rest by progress, socialism, nationalism, liberalism, secularism or modernity came back.

Today, the uniting factor behind European nativist and regionalist parties, Islamist movements like al-Shabab, al-Qaeda and Islamic State, and anti-modern social traditionalists in countries like Turkey, India and Russia, is that they look backwards to history for answers. They seek validation in the cultural or religious identity of their ancestors – a tendency that might be termed "ancestralism" – and in the belief that a bygone golden age can offer guidance and hope for the future. The version of

⁴⁵ Fukuyama, Francis, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York 1992.

⁴⁶ In the *Hudson Review* (Summer 1982), Marvin Mudrick wrote that V.S. Naipaul was being 'monotonously alarmist' about the dangers of modern political Islam. Did he fear Bedouins 'sweeping like the simoom out of the desert descending on Bloomingdale's with fire and sword and no-limit credit cards?' Such pessimism, wrote Mudrick, was '*Grand Guignol* with Dracula make-up and howls from the wind-machines in the wings as Islamic fanaticism threatens the very foundations of civilization: the sky is falling! the sky is falling!'

the past to which they aspire may be authentic or may be largely fantasy, but it remains a powerful motive political force.

The theoretical arguments over colonialism and postcolonialism now look a little different in light of the turn, in a global age, to global history. In C. A. Bayly's *The Birth of the Modern World* (2004), a picture emerges of imperial power exercised within the limits set by local networks; modernity has no centre, but originates out of a difficult interaction between the temporary or comparative advantage of the West and the civilizations and ambitions of the ruled. It is a stern riposte to Hegel's proposition that China and India lie outside world history.⁴⁷ Naipaul's own case, as outlined in *The World Is What It Is*, provides a clear demonstration of the West being approached from the opposite direction – from the periphery – and so rendering the familiar ideological moves of postcolonial literary theorists outmoded.

I would argue that the author is not dead, but is rather a central force in the story of how his work can be read in the future. The density and complexity of the writer's life is foregrounded, as is the struggle necessary to achieve the position he finally attained. In this version, Naipaul himself becomes a deep, rich archive, and a means of understanding the transformative damage of colonialism and the implicit contradictions of being a transplanted citizen in the colonial / postcolonial era. The author is not absent, but is a breathing, struggling self, a repository of tradition, influence, success, failure – and of contradiction. This biography of the author, told with the help of a diverse range of previously unknown primary sources, is itself an intervention in a reader's understanding of literature and of artistic production. Rather than abstract language, the reader discovers the material conditions and challenges faced by the subject, as mediated through individual experience in an extraordinary and at times impossible cultural journey.

My aim was to show that the critical debate around what Naipaul represented was to an extent the effect of a set of deliberate and subconscious choices on his part – emerging to a substantial degree from acting or performance. Self-contradiction by

⁴⁷ Bayly, C. A., *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914*, Oxford 2004.

the subject is common in any biography or autobiography, and was particularly strong in his case.

It was apparent from the childhood material I found in Tulsa that self-masking was an aspect of his personality, but it was only after interviews with his peer group in Trinidad that I was able to place this in a larger cultural context. Naipaul's primary mask from the early 1960s until the late 1990s (when he consciously sought to recover his "Indianness") was that of the unassailable, detached global author whose talent overcomes every obstacle. Creating this image meant cloaking aspects of his creolised past in Trinidad and denying that he faced the same hazards, pressures and prejudices as any other person of colour seeking to become established in the chauvinistic Britain of the 1950s and Sixties. It is indeed arguable whether, at that time and later, he could have succeeded in what he intended except by taking a tangential, tricksterish route. His triumph, won through manipulating the wellbeing of others, is itself an act of conquest.

Fluent in English

In analyzing my similarities or differences to the key debates about Naipaul's writing, it may be helpful to show how I approached the critical literature. When I researched the biography, I read Naipaul's published work, then cuttings and profiles about him, and interviews in compilations such as Feroza Jussawalla's *Conversations with V.S. Naipaul* (Jackson 1997). Next, I surveyed the archive material in Tulsa, and in particular the diaries of Patricia Naipaul. My impression at this stage was that the influence of aspects of his personal life on his work had been underestimated. In particular, I was concerned with the importance of his West Indian background and the power of his relationships with women, including his grandmother, mother and sisters, and subsequently with both Patricia Naipaul and his lover of 25 years, Margaret Murray. The key, then, was the ways in which his personal or family life played out in his writing. It was with this in mind that I approached the critical literature.

I dismissed the early assessment that he was the author of peripheral West Indian fiction, since it was clear from the start that he had a large and deliberative talent. The claim that he was part of a canonical tradition was plausible in that he had a high-quality education and knew the canon through his study of English literature. However, it neglected the extent to which he was not brought up “on English ways, and the pretended reasonableness of the English mind.” His father might have read him Dickens, Kingsley and Maugham, but this did not make him into the child that Kazin thought it did. To see Naipaul in such a light seemed a purely outward reading of his persona, and of his books. It took, for example, his studied adoption of certain “English” traits and literary tics at face value. Repeatedly, after his adaptation away from the Caribbean, Naipaul was mistaken for something he was not. As his Oxford friend Jill Brain admitted half a century later:

‘He was very, very articulate and well read and fluent in English. Looking back, I think that I always took him as less foreign than he was, because he spoke such good English, and that was a mistake. I may have taken him to be a psychologically simpler person than he was.’

Like his West Indian contemporaries and colleagues in the United Kingdom in the 1950s, Naipaul was struggling with the problem of how to create himself as a writer just at the time when the empire and its dominant colonial vision were starting to fall apart, leaving people like him physically and intellectually displaced from the lands of their childhood.

On arrival in England in 1950 as an eighteen-year-old scholarship boy, Naipaul was already schooled in an understanding of the “mother country”, but he had no direct experience of Britain or the British. His position was not unlike that of his character Hat in *Miguel Street*, who is asked: ‘You ain’t know what you talking about, Hat. How much white people you know?’ Lloyd Best, the economist and politician (and Naipaul’s schoolfriend) later coined the critical term “Afro-Saxon”, to refer to people of African descent like himself who had been through the colonial education system, and could flourish in British-made institutions by adopting the mask of the master.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ See *The World Is What It Is*, p. 65.

Rather than an English or British tradition, Naipaul emerged more plausibly out of a well-established Caribbean lineage. For example in the year of his birth, 1932, C. L. R. James arrived in Britain for the first time. A black Trinidadian who had been to the same school that Naipaul would later attend, Queen's Royal College, he was in the words of Kenneth Ramchand, 'confident about his intellectual superiority, and apparently able to live comfortably with a quota of discrepant attitudes and interests.'⁴⁹ James wrote articles that were published back home in the *Port of Spain Gazette* about the Bloomsbury set, and commented that that since 'the English native is so glum and dull and generally boorish in his manners ... any man of colour who is not repulsive in appearance, has good manners, and is fairly intelligent, is a great favourite with the girls.'⁵⁰ In his style and cultural approach to the imperial metropolis, James was one of several intellectual and literary models for the nascent writer, V. S. Naipaul.

I argue in *The World Is What It Is* that there are other Caribbean figures alongside James who provided a guiding example, such as Alfred Mendes, Albert Gomes, Herbert de Lisser, Jean Rhys and Claude McKay. In Naipaul's own accounts in both fiction and nonfiction, his father Seepersad is presented as the sole local guide. Though I share V. S. Naipaul's high estimation of Seepersad Naipaul's literary legacy, I place his achievement within a larger regional milieu, both of his father and of the next generation.

They were, collectively, early exemplars of a movement towards cultural migration and reflexivity that is today well established. Since the 1990s, the field of diasporic studies has expanded as globalization speeds up, and the importance of transnational diasporas and their networks are now recognised. Diasporas are never sure or static: they evolve just as their "host" society and their "home" country alters with or without them. Both father and son were early analysts of cultural displacement and its infinite ramifications. As Ravindra K. Jain noted in a different context, 'it is

⁴⁹ James, C.L.R., *Letters from London* (ed. Nicholas Laughlin), Port of Spain 2003, p. ix.

⁵⁰ See *The World Is What It Is*, pp. 42-43.

useful to explore how the Indian “caste” consciousness has transformed itself into a “racial” one through generations of living in the “old” diaspora of South Africa and Trinidad.’⁵¹

By the time that V. S. Naipaul reached England in 1950 and contributed to the BBC radio programme “Caribbean Voices”, Edgar Mittelholzer, Una Marson, Andrew Salkey and George Lamming were part of a loose, emerging literary group. In 1954, when Naipaul became a presenter and producer of “Caribbean Voices” in London, he was a key participant in a creatively dynamic circle of Caribbean writers, poets and thinkers that included not only Lamming and Salkey, but talents like Jan Carew, Edward Brathwaite, Derek Walcott, Sam Selvon (his sister’s lover and Seepersad’s rival), Sylvia Wynter, Stuart Hall, Errol John, John Figueroa and Gordon Woolford – nearly the full gamut of the first wave of postcolonial Anglophone Caribbean literature.⁵² When Naipaul went back to the West Indies to write *The Middle Passage*, its instigator was independent Trinidad and Tobago’s first prime minister, Eric Williams. Some of these figures reappear at different points in *The World Is What It Is*, showing the course of “linked lives” in biography.

I demonstrate that the BBC “Caribbean Voices” group were not only Naipaul’s friends and colleagues, but were significant in his early and his later work. It was with this in mind that I devoted more than one-third of the biography to the formative first twenty-five years of his life. The process of creative exchange between the diaspora and “home” was consistent.

Alongside my running argument about his influences, relocating him within a non-English or non-British background, was my assertion that his father was not the only key figure in his life, education and literary career. I sought to foreground what was omitted in his paternal creation myth in *A House for Mr Biswas*, *Prologue to an Autobiography* and other works. I also questioned his claimed Brahminical background, with its implication of lineal or ancestral status. Given his father’s

⁵¹ Ravindra K. Jain, ‘Diaspora, Trans-Nation and Nation: Reflections from India’, *Sociological Bulletin*, Vol. 59, No. 1, January-April 2010, pp. 3-21.

⁵² See *The World Is What It Is*, Chapters 9, 10 and 11.

fragile mental health, the determining influences of Naipaul's early life were just as crucially his widowed maternal grandmother (who controlled the extended family and its finances), his mother (who was 'a strong woman with a strong personality,' according to her eldest daughter Kamla), and Kamla herself, who was his closest ally and intellectual sounding-board during his childhood and afterwards.

Once Naipaul reached adulthood, women were again a driving influence. His girlfriend and later wife Patricia was central to the form and process of his writing development, his physical wellbeing and his psychic survival. During the course of a long marriage, he displayed his weaknesses and wounds to Patricia to an intense degree, and yet chastened her for being aware of this hidden aspect of himself. The punishing embrace was central to the creative process that gave rise to remarkable books such as *A House for Mr Biswas*, *The Mimic Men*, *The Enigma of Arrival* and *A Way in the World*. After 1972, a different but connected relationship with Margaret Murray developed, which was closely tied to his writing of later works like *Guerrillas* and *A Bend in the River*, and to a new and often aggressive development of women characters in his fiction.

By showing the creative importance of women in Naipaul's life and literary work, I assert the centrality of the contextualised author as a figure to be considered in any critical analysis of a text. To exclude biographical aspects of Naipaul when reading his work is to again marginalise the significance of the contribution of women to what he did, to essentialise the way that books are created as cultural objects, and to allow theory to overshadow individual experience. In this sense, *The World Is What It Is* is an understated feminist reassertion, readmitting women who had been written out of history, or historicity.

All of these aspects of Naipaul – his masking and self-invention, the reclaiming of the writer's life as a source of understanding, his connection to a Caribbean background and literary tradition, and the centrality of women in his creative life – were used in the biography to query the critical arguments around his writing, and to examine the wider functioning of interconnected colonial / postcolonial and diasporic

societies. This reframing of V. S. Naipaul constituted an original contribution to knowledge.

4. Description of the book

In *The World Is What It Is*, V. S. Naipaul is portrayed as a radical as well as a reactionary figure, and one with a substantial influence. As the grandson of indentured labourers (temporary slaves, in practice), he grew up in rural poverty in the Caribbean, won a rare scholarship to Oxford University and faced racial discrimination in 1950s London. Over the next half century, he became a significant and influential postcolonial novelist. Crucial to my account is his ongoing transcultural triangulation between the West Indies, Britain and South Asia.

His writing identity was constructed out of three places of empire: the West Indian sugar plantation, the imperial capital, and the downtrodden territory around Awadh in north India. His remaking of himself first as a West Indian émigré novelist, next as a British writer, then as a deracinated global observer, and later as an Indian or Hindu figure came out of a constant process of repositioning. Naipaul became both highly distinctive, and representative of an international age of migration, offering a globalism of his own.

The World Is What It Is: The Authorized Biography of V. S. Naipaul is made up of 25 chapters. The text is divided into two parts, with the break point being the moment when the principal leaves Britain aged 29 to visit India, his ancestral land, for the first time; it ends after the death of his first wife, Patricia, in 1996. I was conscious when writing the book that although earlier critical studies of Naipaul included nominally biographical material, I was writing the first full-length biography.⁵³

Chapters **One** to **Four** cover Vidyadhar Naipaul's childhood in Trinidad. New or original material includes: the process by which his maternal grandfather came to the

⁵³ On publication, *The World Is What It Is* received widespread critical acclaim and won the Hawthornden Prize and the US National Book Critics Circle Award for Biography. It has been cited in scholarly literature and is used as a text in postcolonial studies courses.

Caribbean, showing the received family story is likely to have been invented (pp. 8-9); his parents' background, revealing there is no evidence their son is a Brahmin (pp. 23-25); the economic power of his grandmother Soogie Capildeo and the severity of the surrounding society, and the influence this had on the child (p. 27); the ethnically mixed world of his schooldays; Naipaul's reversal of his view of his father, saying he was a 'weak man' and that his 'strength' came from his mother (pp. 34-35); events that were later fictionalised in *The Mystic Masseur*, *Miguel Street*, *A House for Mr Biswas* and *A Bend in the River*; Seepersad Naipaul's position as a writer and influence upon his son, despite his "inferior" position within the extended Capildeo clan (pp. 47-51).

Many themes laid down here are taken up later in the book: with little shared heritage and a diverse population, varied self-presentation and improvisation were common in Trinidad (p. 53). Lloyd Best summed up the phenomenon (p. 359):

'The most important single feature of Trinidadian culture is the extent to which masks are indispensable, because there are so many different cultures and ethnicities in this country that people have to play a vast multiplicity of roles, each of which has got its own mask depending on where they are. It's true of the whole Caribbean, and Trinidad is the extreme case in my view.'

I suggest that "masking" or theatricality was an aspect of Naipaul's development as a person and as an international literary figure, and that its context and extent were not understood outside the land of his birth: what sounded like "English" haughtiness might be closer to Port of Spain street style (see p. xiii).

Chapters **Five** to **Eight** cover Naipaul's arrival in England, his time at Oxford University and its aftermath. New or original material includes: his efforts to acquire culturally appropriate manners and the way these events were altered in fiction in *Half a Life* and *The Enigma of Arrival* (pp. 68-70); his symbiotic literary relationship with his father (using the correspondence between them, some of which has previously been published with inaccurate transcription); Naipaul's exclusionary interactions with other Oxford students at the university paper, *Isis* (pp. 81-83); his meeting with his future wife, Patricia Hale, followed by his spiral into depression

months later; his conflict with family members in London, his difficulty in obtaining accommodation, and an emotional breakdown (his Oxford tutor found him ‘socially an extraordinarily composed person’ at a time when he thought himself ‘very, very disturbed, very melancholy’ (p. 98); his growing dependence on Patricia, and his reaction to the literary canon; successive rejections for employment on racial grounds, including interview material where he speaks about this subject for the first time; asthma, squabbles with his extended family in London, and periods of poverty when he was unable to get enough to eat.

Naipaul’s analysis at this time is uniquely biographically revealing, offering a form of confessional self-assessment that would not occur again, after his position had stabilised (pp. 138-142):

‘Have I any right to be in the Free World? ... They want me to forget my dignity as a human being. They want me to know my place ... That is what the whole policy of the Free World amounts to. Naipaul, poor wog, literally starving, and very cold.’

Chapters **Nine** to **Twelve** cover the rest of his twenties. New or original material concerns: his work as a producer on a BBC show “Caribbean Voices”; his early attempts at fiction (making use of previously unseen notebooks); the circumstances of his marriage to Patricia and the way it was kept secret from both families; his return to Trinidad in 1956 and his private reaction to a crucial general election (for instance: ‘we Indians really have no stake at all here and we are rapidly being pushed into the position where we will have to become the Jews of the area: in business, etc., since other fields are closed to us’ (p. 173); his gathering of material for *The Suffrage of Elvira*; his response to a rejection by the BBC General Overseas Service; the significance of his use of prostitutes; the publication of his masterpiece *A House for Mr Biswas*; a journey at the start of the 1960s through Trinidad, Guyana, Surinam, Martinique and Jamaica, and his interplay with figures such as Derek Walcott, Margaret Walcott, Lloyd Best and C. L. R. James, and his conscious effort to be “unlike” them.

The book that followed this journey, *The Middle Passage*, actively undermines what Salkey calls ‘everybody’s cosy myths of West Indian quaintness.’ (p. 212) It was praised by Evelyn Waugh, who sought to strip out its ambiguities to make a political point about the ‘delusion’ of self-government in the colonies of the British empire.

The section ends with a restrictive new law in Britain against immigration, and Naipaul’s move to refashion himself. I use an interview with Jan Carew to describe the change (p. 214):

‘He told me he was going to become English, and I thought he was pulling my leg. The English are very strict about letting you in, particularly if you are a different colour. I thought it was one of his jokes, but he was quite serious about it. He meant he was giving up his West Indian imprimatur and taking on an English one.’

From this point forward, “Naipaul” becomes a different kind of character.

Chapters **Thirteen** to **Sixteen** cover a period of wandering. New material includes: details of Naipaul’s first journey to India (p. 220) and the beginning of his career as an assessor of lands with which he was unfamiliar (on arrival in Bombay he thinks the Hindi word “cheez” means “cheese”); concise notes written by Patricia showing the sequence of events surrounding the research for *An Area of Darkness*; information about family members in India that he disguised; extracts from a series of articles written for *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, which were thought to have been lost; his interaction and break with C. L. R. James, mainly for ideological reasons, and an assertion that Naipaul’s moral axis became internalised as part of the self (p. 245); his new social access to upper-class British society; the writing of the novel *The Mimic Men* in Uganda at Makerere University; his first meeting with Paul Theroux; the gathering of material for *In a Free State* and *Guerrillas*; his awkward interaction (using letters as a source) with his younger brother, the writer Shiva Naipaul, when he was at Oxford; a time of homelessness and journeys to the West Indies, the United States and Canada, ending with a return to England and the winning of the Booker prize.

Challenging the account given by Theroux in *Sir Vidia's Shadow*, I re-examine their supposed friendship and show how Naipaul presented a version of himself to Theroux that became critically influential (p. 275): 'Think of it like this: imagine the despair to which the barefoot colonial is reduced when, wanting to write, and reading the pattern books of Tolstoy, Balzac et al, he looks at his own world and discovers that it almost doesn't exist.'

Chapters **Seventeen** to **Twenty** cover a moment of emotional change. New material includes: Naipaul's return to Trinidad and curiosity about the murder of Gale Benson and Joe Skerritt; his first journey to South America and life-altering meeting with Margaret Murray (the rest of *The World Is What It Is* uses her letters and Patricia's diary to offer insights into the connections between Naipaul's life and the act of literary creation); a sadistic turn in the relationship with Margaret, leading to an alteration of Naipaul's idea of himself and the possibility he may leave Patricia; the way these changes are then manifested in writings about Michael X, violence and women; Naipaul is recorded as saying of his work (p. 340), 'That is what writing, "style", experimental writing is: to write in a thoroughly modern way'; the development of a triangular interaction with Patricia and Margaret; archive material describing Naipaul's violence towards Margaret, and interviews showing his subsequent self-justification, absolving himself of responsibility for the events, which plays out directly in the creation of *A Bend in the River*.

Theroux's questionable analysis of Naipaul's conduct is analysed further, together with his distortion of facts. An alternative reading of Naipaul is offered, again quoting Lloyd Best (p. 359):

'Theroux's book exposes Naipaul as a real Trinidadian in every sense – including the way he would not pay for the wine. All these little Trinidadian smart-man things: the way he would sing calypso and whistle, the way he would take the mickey out of people, provoking them. Naipaul expects the responses that he's going to get; I'd say that it's second nature to him, performing in that way.'

The chapter ends with an attempt by Patricia to reassess her marriage, which shows an element of delusion.⁵⁴

Chapters **Twenty-One** to **Twenty-Five** cover Naipaul's life and work to 1996. New or original material includes: the imaginative invention of *A Bend in the River* using experiences in Kisangani, Wiltshire and Trinidad; Patricia, under the emotional domination of her husband, rationalizing the distorted fictional relationship between Yvette and Salim (the critic Hilary Spurling, in a review, wrote of this section: 'Her diaries recording his life as a writer, together with his own cold, hard analyses of his conduct as a man, take us probably as far as it is possible to go to the core of the creative process'⁵⁵); an analysis of the way Naipaul became understood: instead of being a "calypso writer" or a curiosity, by 1980 he was on the cover of *Newsweek* labeled "The Master of the Novel"; the writing of *The Enigma of Arrival*, in a reversal of the imperialist gaze onto rural England, in a form between autobiography and fiction; information about how the book emerged from his years in Wiltshire.

I challenge the idea that Naipaul changed his surroundings simply by being there. Elleke Boehmer writes in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*: 'As he describes in *The Enigma of Arrival*, when the Trinidadian writer V. S. Naipaul domiciled himself in Wiltshire, he transformed the landscape by the sheer "oddity" of his existence in it.'⁵⁶ I regard the oddity of his marriage and restricted interaction with other people as being more significant here than his ethnicity or colonial heritage.

⁵⁴ To show the developing personal relationships and their impact, it was necessary to intertwine Naipaul's life and work. With regard to Patricia, this process was usually straightforward, since her letters and diaries were a rich biographical resource. With Margaret Murray, it was difficult because my principal source was her letters, which I was obliged to paraphrase (for legal reasons). So for example when she wrote: 'Do let's have a child. Your family may think you are a eunuch, but God I know damn well you are not,' it had to be rendered in reported speech in my text as, 'Surely the answer was to have a child? Vidia's family might think he was a eunuch, but she knew very well he was not.' (pp. 341-342) This meant I ran the risk of editorialising to a greater degree than I intended, since it might not be apparent to a reader that these were Margaret's words rather than mine. I tried to offset this by reiterating phrases like "she told him", "she wrote" and "she described".

⁵⁵ *The Observer*, 13 April 2008.

⁵⁶ Boehmer, Elleke, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, Oxford 1995, p.175.

Other new material in the later part of the book includes a decoding of one of Naipaul's more unusual and complex works of fiction / nonfiction, *A Way in the World*, showing how it emerged from his close interpretation of Caribbean history; the circumstances of Patricia's death from cancer, with her husband admitting that his mistreatment may have precipitated her death; his travels to write *Beyond Belief*, a reprise of *Among the Believers*; his meeting with Nadira Khannum Alvi in Pakistan, and the circumstances of their marriage, leading to an ending where his second wife recites the opening verses of the Quran and scatters Patricia's ashes in woodland in Gloucestershire.

Analysis and summary of *India*

1. Description of sources

The sources for *India: A Portrait* were a combination of detailed individual interviews, primary research on Indian electoral politics and secondary material on a broad range of topics. In a series of linked monographs, explanations and personal narratives, the book's objective was to show connections and to synthesise interpretations and accounts that spanned the political, economic and social aspects of contemporary India.

For the opening section of *India*, principally regarding politics, elections and political history under the rubric "Rashtra", the sources were a combination of one-on-one interviews and secondary material, and crucially new first-hand research into the phenomenon of hereditary or nepotistic politicians. The published material included press cuttings, biographies and memoirs of key figures of the post-independence period, and analysis of elections by political scientists. (I found biographies to be useful in showing how political decisions were often contingent, and in part dependent on personal factors.) In addition, I used source materials such as the text of debates conducted in the Constituent Assembly of India December 1946-November 1949.⁵⁷ I made use of details and statistical reports from www.eci.nic.in (the capacious website of the Election Commission of India) concerning parliamentary constituency delimitation, party affiliation, percentage of votes polled, percentage of seats contested, and election results for both the Lok Sabha and legislative assembly seats, dating back to 1951.

I interviewed around 50 people, and about one-half of the interviews were used in the final text of "Rashtra". Most interviews were done alone with the interviewee, except in the case of senior politicians who were with an entourage. The interviewees fell into three main categories: members of the public who had a view on how the

⁵⁷ *Constituent Assembly Debates, 1946-1950*, 12 volumes, New Delhi n.d.

Indian polity had evolved or was evolving since independence; peripheral figures who had an insight into politics, such as party workers, family members, candidates or advisers; and senior national politicians like Maneka Gandhi or L. K. Advani. In a few cases, I conducted interviews with senior politicians who were willing to speak only on the condition they could remain anonymous. In such instances, it was possible to obtain strong background information that fed into my understanding of how Indian politics worked in practice, rather than in theory. (Anonymity encouraged a greater degree of openness.)

The culminating part of the first section of *India* covered my new research into the influence of heredity on national politics. This area will be my main focus in this half of the critical review, since the material on nepotism was the product of original research, contributes significantly to the expansion of knowledge and has been widely cited in academic work. It was the first time that a complete table was compiled showing how each Indian MP had reached their position in the lower house of Parliament. (I describe how I went about the process in detail on pp. 113-123 of *India*.) Once the data had been obtained, it was possible to identify significant trends in the political process.

When I was around half way through the collection of biographical details on MPs – mainly from state-level political journalists, local party activists, and contacts who worked in public policy – I became concerned about the quality of the information. It was apparent that as it became harder to obtain details (for example about a member of parliament who had little public profile, and came from a remote region of India) so the accuracy could suffer. I therefore employed a research assistant, Megha Chauhan, to check all of the information that I had obtained. Once each state-by-state table had been completed, I sent it to a local third party to confirm whether any single-sourced information needed to be corrected.⁵⁸ By the end of the process, the biographical portrait of each MP had been checked by at least two people with knowledge of this individual and their political history. (After the publication of

⁵⁸ Those who helped with this research process and fact-checking are credited by name (or in some cases by their own choice anonymously or under a pseudonym) in *India: A Portrait*, pp. 418-419.

India, several MPs contacted me to discuss the book's findings and the "category" into which they had been placed – but no errors were found in the data.) The full dataset and list of Lok Sabha MPs showing their short biographies and family relationships can be found on <http://www.theindiasite.com/family-politics>.

Overall, the source material for a study of hereditary politics in India at a national level seemed reliable, although it was laborious to obtain.

For the second section of the book, principally concerning finance and economics under the rubric "Lakshmi", the main sources were a combination of one-on-one interviews and secondary material. For this section, I conducted fewer first-hand interviews: in total, I spoke to around 40 people, but only used around 10 of the conversations in the book. The interviewees ranged from a creator of miniature packages of shampoo and a telecom entrepreneur who had started out making bicycle parts, to an enslaved quarry labourer and a senior Maoist leader who I succeeded in speaking to in Tihar Gaol near Delhi.

The published material included a mixture of press cuttings, biographies, academic papers, books on India's economic history and financial structures, studies of colonial policy and finance, studies of state-owned enterprises and books written by those who were involved in large economic decisions, including John Maynard Keynes and Manmohan Singh. In addition, I used a number of primary sources including papers in King's College, Cambridge archives (which showed that Keynes's conceptualisation, writing and editing of the book *Indian Currency and Finance* coincided with his relationship with an Indian student, Bimla Sarkar), and publicly available reports such as a *Public Enterprises Survey*, a report from the Ministry of Steel, Mines and Metals, several Government of India economic surveys, the Government of India's "Fifth Five Year Plan", and poverty data and related information issued by the World Bank. Finally in this section, I relied on information that was told to me in confidence on a condition of non-attribution, in this case relating to the balance of payments crisis in 1991, when India came close to losing its ability to pay for petroleum and other essential imports.

In the third and final section of *India: A Portrait*, which widens out to look at social phenomena under the rubric “Samaj”, my main sources were one-on-one interviews, together with a minimal amount of secondary material. The published sources included video and press cuttings, government reports on the social position of minorities, and books and studies on topics including caste, religion, the position of Dalits, the teaching of history in India, Muslim personal law, housing, population spread, and the history of Pakistan, as well as biographical information on some significant individuals including Dr B. R. Ambedkar, Nehru and Mayawati.

I consulted around 60 people for the “Samaj” section, of which less than one-half of the interviews were used in the final version. Detailed interviews took place with a variety of people including: geneticists, a mafia don, a prostitute who had become the head of an escort agency, the parents of a murder victim, commentators on Pakistan, a Muslim protestor (Shakeel Ahmad Bhat) who had been targeted by foreign social media and later by the police in Kashmir, teachers and authorities on Muslim and Hindu religious law, a range of figures with a distinct experience of religion, and several computer engineers. Where an individual was left to speak in their own words, I sought to allow the credibility or otherwise of their views to be assessable finally by the reader.

2. Description of methodology

My initial approach to research for *India: A Portrait* involved wide reading about the nation in the post-independence era, in different disciplines. It also rested in part on first-hand observation, based on extended periods spent in dissimilar parts of India since the 1980s. For the areas of the book dependent upon personal interviews, my methodology was as it was for *The World Is What It Is* (and indeed for *Tibet, Tibet*). Individual accounts in the voice of the person concerned were included throughout the narrative, and placed in their own context without much editorial intrusion.

Surrounding these disparate voices were a series of analytical monographs, in dialogue with the areas of interest and ideas raised in the personal histories.

As has been outlined in the previous section, it was necessary to meet a substantial number of people in order to locate those who would be willing to be interviewed, and a further process of sifting was needed to choose which interviewees should be included in the final text. The difficulty was often in finding individuals who did not replicate what others had told me (this applied particularly to interactions with business people), but rather had a distinctive experience that could be illuminating – and which linked to a larger theme of those who had or had not prospered as a result of economic change in India at the end of the Twentieth Century.

For the study of hereditary politicians, I first obtained a list from the Election Commission website of the 545 sitting MPs in the lower house of Parliament (the Lok Sabha) who had been elected at the 2009 general election. I cross-checked this list with publicly available information about the Fifteenth Lok Sabha, to make sure there were no mismatches, and started to obtain basic biographical information about MPs. This was mainly done from public sources and from informal conversations with political journalists and some party workers. In addition, I obtained further information from the Election Commission and from public policy organisations including the Association for Democratic Reforms (who run the www.myneta.info website, which synthesises public records on parliamentary and state assembly candidates) and PRS Legislative Research (which collects and publishes data on MPs' activities and their parliamentary attendance).

An important resource at this stage was the section of www.myneta.info that links to scanned copies of the official affidavits that each candidate is legally obliged to file before contesting an election. (In a few cases, these affidavits were smudged or unclear and difficult to read.) The affidavit details the full name of a candidate, address, age, marital status, profession, political party, debts, qualifications, outstanding criminal and civil cases, and moveable and immovable assets. Although candidates will in some cases not declare their full assets (which can be unlawfully

held in the name of another person, or a business entity or foundation, and will therefore not be directly linkable to the candidate), their affidavits are policed by the Election Commission, and most of the information is likely to be reliable, particularly for the more “winnable” candidates.

I was therefore able to complete, from publicly available sources, a list detailing each sitting MP in the Fifteenth Lok Sabha which showed their title, first name, last name, sex, age, date of birth, constituency, state and political affiliation. I also listed whether or not their parliamentary seat was unreserved, or was reserved for a member of a Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe. This table could then be broken down for further research on a state-by-state basis. My ambition was to establish how each person had entered politics. To do this, I added a section to the table containing basic facts in the form of a short biographical sketch.⁵⁹

Other matters that might have been of theoretical or methodological interest, such as an MP’s criminal record, caste background or outstanding corruption charges were not included, except where that would help to form a clear biographical portrait. (After the publication of *India: A Portrait*, I made the full dataset available on an open source basis, and other researchers have since linked it to their work in these areas, as will be mentioned later.)

A spreadsheet detailing all the information was created and subsequently updated by Arun Kaul, a statistician whom I employed. When it was complete and I had a pan-Indian spreadsheet containing all the biographical portraits, it was feasible to break down each MP’s route into politics into one of nine categories: No significant political background, Family, Student politics, Business, RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), Inducted, Trade union, Royal Family, Maoist commander.

Once this had been done, Arun Kaul turned the accumulated information into numerical code, enabling it to be analysed quickly by SPSS statistical software.⁶⁰ It

⁵⁹ See the biographical sketches in the far right-hand column of the full dataset, which is available via a click-through on <http://www.theindiasite.com/family-politics>.

⁶⁰ See *India: A Portrait*, p. 115 & 119.

was now theoretically possible to take the biographical details and identify trends of “hereditary” representation. My ambition was to move beyond hypothesis, and to obtain empirical information on the prevalence of nepotistic politics in India, and to question how much choice voters are consequently offered in national elections.

After some experimentation, I decided to interrogate the data for the purposes of *India: A Portrait* by asking the following questions:

How did the 545 MPs in the Fifteenth Lok Sabha enter politics (using the nine categories which have been specified above)?

Which political party was the most hereditary? (Or to be precise: what percentage of a party’s MPs reached the Lok Sabha through a family link – excluding parties with fewer than five MPs?)

Was this a regional issue – i. e. were some states and regions notably more hereditary / nepotistic than others?

Were women MPs more likely to have reached their position through a family link?

Is national politics in India becoming *more* hereditary? (Or to be precise: does the incidence of heredity increase or decrease according to age?)

Is politics in the Congress party becoming *more* hereditary? (Or to be precise: looking only at MPs from the Indian National Congress, how does the incidence of heredity increase or decrease according to age?)

Do MPs with multiple family links (whom I called “hyperhereditary” MPs) enter politics earlier than those with merely hereditary links?

The full answers to these questions can be seen on pp. 116-123, and I outline the principle findings in the section that follows. Because my research was a “snapshot” of a single Lok Sabha rather than of successive Parliaments, it was not possible to investigate further interesting possible longer-term trends, for example by comparing the prevalence of “family politics” in earlier decades.

Previous studies of Indian politics have tended to look at nepotism generically. They might mention it in passing, focusing on the Nehru-Gandhi family and the five generations of national leaders that this one family has produced. Or they might

place nepotism in the context of the positions held by historically dynastic families across South Asia, which often favoured the emergence of widows or daughters as leaders: Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh, Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar and Sirimavo Bandaranaike in Sri Lanka. It was rare to find studies that showed how dynasty itself worked, why it was entrenched and how it therefore excluded other potential candidates from politics.

Having shown the objectives and methodology of my study, I will now outline the context, results and conclusions of this research.

3. Description of key arguments

The mechanism to drive the book is the voice of the interviewee, each with its individual perception. In an extension of the idea that biography tells a larger intellectual or historical story, my ambition was to use a sequence of personal accounts to put individuals at centre-stage in a portrait of India. Short biography becomes a form of prosopography, with one person showing a trend. Rather than being recipients of policy, economic change or of history itself, I seek to let people speak, and show that in nearly every case, they are actors and agents shaping their own destiny in an intricate way, rather than subjects of an orchestrated set of decisions imposed upon them. *India* is a study of a period of unleashing, as social and caste groups that have previously lacked access to power assert themselves. My premise is that Indian society is evolving rapidly, even as many traditional forms of influence are retained.

It is possible for one person, through the historicity of their inevitably unusual story, to widen our understanding of what history should and can be. The subaltern experience of a quarry worker (Venkatesh) or a male escort (Satish), or a self-made entrepreneur (C. K. Ranganathan) or a Tamil woman actor (Anu Hasan), can help to build a series of connected pictures: each portrait forms part of a web of biographical experience that narrates a piece of the past and of the present. Alongside abstract ideas about, for example, social functioning in a postcolonial polity, the

consequences of economic reform or the nature of elections in the world's largest democracy, I sought to locate distinct narratives.

The aim of the book links to my earlier discussion about the direction of postcolonial studies, and the need to match abstraction with concrete histories. My ambition here was to allow each person's view to be presented on its own terms, and to let each story contain its own complications and conflicts. The course of the book focused upon real human beings, on actual experience, on intricate lives and on the material conditions faced by an array of discrete individuals. Above all, I sought to return specificity to the narration of postcolonial history.

The wider context of Indian politics

As has been mentioned, the main focus in this part of the critical review will be on the existing fields of knowledge in relation to party politics and heredity, and on the way that my work seeks to expand these areas of study.

There are few successful synthetic accounts of Twentieth Century India, the best pairing perhaps being Sumit Sarkar's *Modern India: 1885-1947* (New Delhi 1983) with Ramachandra Guha's *India After Gandhi* (London 2007). Much of the writing on the period has concentrated on the achievements of the nationalist movement, with an emphasis on Congress leaders, although this has been challenged by the "Cambridge school" of historiography and in turn by the subalternist view of modern India. Post-Nehruvian politics and political culture have been written about as much by journalists and participants as by scholars. Studies by Paul Brass, Myron Weiner, Jyotirindra Das Gupta, Pradeep Chhibber, James Manor and others have examined the development of Indian democracy and the distinctive electoral process. Works like *The Success of India's Democracy* have sought to understand the origins, consolidation and deepening of Indian democratic traditions.⁶¹ Further studies have looked at the relation of party systems to caste, language, gender and religion.

⁶¹ Atul Kohli, ed., Cambridge 2001.

Yet dynasty – which has been a prominent characteristic of Indian democracy and is enshrined in the post-independence national political leadership – has been little researched. The literature on democracy and representation invariably refers to the expansion of political competition after the decline of the once all-encompassing Congress Party (see for example *Rise of the Plebeians? The Changing Face of Indian Legislative Assemblies*),⁶² but it does not fully explain why the choices offered to voters are often limited. I would suggest that dynasty is one reason for this narrowing of options. The lack of *internal* democracy in Indian political parties helps to explain the restriction. As Pratap Bhanu Mehta wrote in 2001, the institutional functioning of parties is far from transparent:

‘The simple fact is that the lack of intraparty democracy impedes proper representation rather than enhances it. By their non-transparency, parties have restricted voter choices rather than increase them. The reasons for the lack of proper intraparty democracy are not hard to understand ... Leaders like as much control over their parties as possible. They like to set agendas, select candidates that are beholden to them, and maintain themselves in power.’⁶³

The post-1990s expansion of political parties across India, and the growth in the importance of state-level politics, has not necessarily created more options or opportunities for voters / citizens. Yogendra Yadav and Suhas Palshikar’s conclusions about this (in 2008) ran as follows:

‘This is the paradox thrown up by the nineties: state after state experienced the rise of competitive politics that witnessed the entry of new occupants in the political space but this competition rarely led to new policies, programmes or institutional devices. We describe this system as a system of competitive convergence.’

Yadav and Palshikar’s hypothesis was that, ‘the shrinking of the choices negates the gains made by expansion in numeric choices that emerged in the last two decades,’ and that a ‘system of competitive convergence has meant that the opening up of the format of party competition has not led to greater and more meaningful political

⁶² Christophe Jaffrelot & Sanjay Kumar, eds., New Delhi 2009.

⁶³ Pratap Bhanu Mehta, ‘Reform Political Parties First’, *Seminar* 497, New Delhi January 2001.

choices for the citizen.’⁶⁴ This suggestion may apply at a national level too, if pressures on parties encourage them to look inwards as a means of retaining control.

My objective was to add to the existing areas of knowledge regarding national politics and representation by looking directly at dynasty in the 2009 Lok Sabha, and by investigating *how* each of the 545 MPs entered Parliament. Having obtained the results I was able to show, for the first time with the use of empirical data, how hereditary influence in India had reproduced itself in different parties. I showed that there was considerable variation in dynastic presence. (This work in turn has led to political and social scientists exploring connected areas of research, as I will outline.) My empirical work has provided raw data with which researchers can engage in hypothesis-testing in regard to why certain political parties, regions or age groups may be more or less hereditary.

Results of primary research

In the previous section, I outlined the different questions or areas of inquiry that I used to interrogate the data. I will now give a summary of my principal results and conclusions from this process:

Headline finding: Heredity was not the most important determinant for obtaining a party nomination. 46.8 percent of all MPs came in the “No significant political background” category, and appeared to have entered politics on some form of achievement or merit. “Family” was the second most important route into Parliament, and accounted for 28.6 percent.

Main parties: 19 percent of Bharatiya Janata Party MPs were hereditary, against 37.5 percent of Indian National Congress MPs.

By party: Small parties like the RLD, the NCP and BJD were overwhelmingly hereditary, but they were statistically insignificant, since they had so few seats in the Lok Sabha. Two other smaller parties, the TDP and AIADMK did not have a single MP from a hereditary background. A full third of the Bahujan Samaj Party MPs were hereditary (but in each case they were not Dalits, but had been brought in from one of the communities that the

⁶⁴ Yogendra Yadav & Suhas Palshikar, ‘Ten theses on state politics’, *Seminar 591*, New Delhi November 2008.

party leader Mayawati was seeking to win over, such as Muslims or Brahmins). The “ideological” parties like the BJP and the parties of the Left remained comparatively meritocratic. The INC was twice as hereditary as the BJP in the Lok Sabha.

By region: Hereditary politics was at its strongest in Punjab, Delhi and Haryana in the north. Apart from Andhra Pradesh, all the southern states had 75 percent or more of MPs from a non-hereditary background. The newer states, such as Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand appeared less hereditary (perhaps because nepotism had not yet had time to become entrenched).

By gender: Women MPs were more likely to have reached their position through a family link: 69.5 percent of women MPs fell into the “Family” category.

Multiple links: 27 MPs qualified as “hyperhereditary”, meaning that they had multiple family links across state or national politics. They were concentrated in certain states: Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Haryana and Punjab in particular. The average age of an MP with no significant political background was 58; for a hereditary MP it was 48 and for a “hyperhereditary” it was 46.

By age: Every MP under the age of thirty had “inherited” a seat, as had more than two-thirds of the MPs aged forty or under. (In addition, this new wave of lawmakers had a decade’s advantage in politics over their peers, since the average MP who had benefited from heredity was almost ten years younger than those who had arrived by another route.) In the Congress party, the situation was more extreme: every Congress MP under the age of thirty-five was hereditary. Nine out of ten Congress MPs aged under 40 were hereditary. Out of all the MPs aged 50 or under, 47.2 per cent were hereditary. Of the 38 youngest MPs in the Lok Sabha, 33 already had a near relative in politics. None of India’s octogenarian and nonagenarian MPs had entered Parliament by this route. In summary: it appears that in the early decades of Indian democracy, politicians were not able (or did not wish) to arrange party nominations for family members – with the exception being the Nehru-Gandhi family.

It was the last conclusion, in relation to age, that sparked the greatest interest among political scientists and commentators. More widely, the findings of my research have been used to investigate how heredity in parties may link to other aspects of the changing Indian polity. Since *India: A Portrait* was published, this topic has become an area of developing intellectual interest, which is perhaps connected to the growing

global tendency of elites to reproduce themselves and to retain financial power down the generations.⁶⁵

I will now show some instances of where my findings have been referenced, or where the “family politics” dataset has been used for further investigation.

Kanchan Chandra and Wamiq Umaira examined “India’s Democratic Dynasties” in a special issue of *Seminar* in 2011 devoted to ‘lineage and family ties in subcontinental politics.’ They argued that dynasty encourages a form of competition in South Asia, and that politics remains open to new entrants: ‘The cost of dynastic politics, in the end, is not the violation of democratic procedures but the violation of democratic ideals. Dynastic politics is undesirable, not because it undermines openness or competition but because it undermines the idea of political equality.’⁶⁶ Pradeep Chhibber published “Dynastic parties: Organization, finance and impact” in 2013, in which he argued that the rise of dynastic politics that was identified at the 2009 election may have been caused by a lack of party organization and the absence of central financing of elections. Chhibber’s thesis was that, ‘not only are party systems more volatile when parties are dynastic but more important, dynastic parties serve to make the political system less representative.’⁶⁷

By merging the full dataset that I created with declared assets reported to the Election Commission, Aaditya Dar showed that 15 out of the richest 20 MPs were hereditary, and that ten of these belonged to Congress. Dar also demonstrated that hereditary MPs were on average 4.5 times wealthier than MPs with “No significant political background”.⁶⁸

In 2014, I wrote an essay in which I looked again at my findings, and observed that ‘in the upper echelons of many parties, the paramount leaders are not beneficiaries of

⁶⁵ Note the debate and interest that has been sparked by Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge 2014) with its thesis of ‘patrimonial capitalism’.

⁶⁶ *Seminar* 622, New Delhi June 2011. Kanchan Chandra also published ‘Hardly the End of Dynastic Rule’ in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. XLIX No. 28, 12 July 2014.

⁶⁷ *Party Politics*, March 2013.

⁶⁸ See <http://theopendata.com/site/2012/04/the-business-of-family-politics-in-india>.

nepotism.’ I argued that dynasts would remain politically significant, but might face a growing number of obstacles. It was possible that a new crop of senior self-made leaders might emerge in the next generation, similar to Mamata Banerjee, Jayalalithaa, Arvind Kejriwal, Nitish Kumar, Mayawati, Narendra Modi, Sharad Pawar and Mulayam Singh Yadav. I suggested that the developing backlash against hereditary politicians could make it difficult, in some parties, for beneficiaries of nepotism to secure key positions of national leadership. The Aam Aadmi Party, for example, had recently made a constitutional pledge that no two members of the same family could contest an election. I suggested that this decision, ‘was a direct response to the perception that Indian politics, across the country, has been taken hostage by nepotism.’⁶⁹

Further studies are currently underway on the subject of heredity and its influence, comparing India’s experience of dynastic politics to that of other South Asian and Asian democracies.⁷⁰ A larger study looking at the make-up of India’s state legislative assemblies is in process. Christophe Jaffrelot, Gilles Verniers and Sanjay Kumar are editing a book on the sociology of elected representatives in India. Kanchan Chandra is editing a forthcoming book of essays, *Democratic Dynasties: State, Party and Political Families in India*, for Cambridge University Press.

In conclusion, my primary research on the link between heredity and national politics in India has contributed significantly to the expansion of knowledge, and its conclusions have formed the basis for further investigation by scholars on a subject of growing international importance.

4. Description of the book

India: A Portrait was conceived in part as a sequel to *Liberty or Death* (1997). It aims to look at the period of change after the economic reforms in India in the early

⁶⁹ See Patrick French, ‘Hereditary Politics is Thriving in India, but the Real Leaders Reached the Top by Other Routes’ in ‘India in Transition’, published by CASI at the University of Pennsylvania, 27 January 2014.

⁷⁰ See also Inge Amundsen, ‘Democratic dynasties? Internal party democracy in Bangladesh’, *Party Politics*, November 2013.

1990s from various angles: political, financial and social. The primary question it is seeking to examine in the round is – Why is India the way it is today, and how has change come about? It is divided into three sections: “Rashtra” or Nation, “Lakshmi” or Wealth, and “Samaj” or Society. These categories are deliberately capacious, to allow varied forms of information to be included. Each section is divided into four, creating a total of twelve chapters.

“Rashtra” (pp. 3-123) examines the birth of India as a unitary and independent nation after Partition, and the way in which undemocratic princely states were integrated with difficulty into the new union of India. It looks at the framing of the constitution after detailed debate in the constituent assembly, and at the start of the Indian nation as a democracy with a universal franchise – which in 1951 was an unprecedented experiment in mass electoral politics, given that the majority of the population was illiterate. The narrative moves rapidly through the politics of the six decades following independence, covering the life and political career of leaders including Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, L. K. Advani, Narasimha Rao, Sonia Gandhi and others, drawing on my first-hand observation of election campaigns, conversations with parliamentary candidates, and personal interviews with senior politicians and their staff.

The last part of this section (pp. 105-123) is the culmination of an argument, looking at the rise of dynastic politics, and using a survey to investigate the significance of its prevalence among Indian members of parliament. My study to determine what proportion of MPs elected to the Lok Sabha after the 2009 general election gained their position through nepotism was the first such an all-India survey.

“Lakshmi” (pp. 127-255) starts with a discursive monograph on John Maynard Keynes, and considers the influence of his ideas about India in the development of his concept of money, value and hoarding, which later became the theory of liquidity preference. Nehru’s attitude towards money is examined, and the conception of India’s early five-year plans aided by the work of P. C. Mahalanobis. I look at the early academic work of Manmohan Singh on India and international trade, done long

before he became prime minister, and at how it affected his later policies; and I use the examples of the Heavy Engineering Corporation and Coal India to describe the way in which theories of central economic planning were often unsatisfactorily put into practice in India during the 1950s, 60s and 70s.

The successes and challenges of an array of individuals are introduced, including a vehicle parts manufacturer, a shampoo sachet entrepreneur, a low-cost sanitary towel producer and an adivasi who has a job as a cellar-master in a Maharashtra winery despite being illiterate. As in the opening section, “Rashtra”, “Lakshmi” covers the post-independence history of India largely through the diverse experiences of individuals, linked to short analytical accounts of important changes in economic, regulatory and trade policy. I include aspects of lives that are left undocumented, including the conditions of migrant workers on a building site, a young woman who joined the Maoist movement, an early Communist who became a Congress party politician, and an indebted labourer who was chained up and kept as a slave for nearly two years in a quarry near Mysore. In each case, I try to maintain and contextualise the voice of the speaker. (See for example the meeting with the quarry worker Venkatesh, who spoke in Kannada and Telugu to a journalist who was travelling with me, N. Bhanutej, as outlined on pp. 233-235.) These experiences are placed alongside the socially advantaged, such as business people who have been aided by economic change, including a self-made billionaire and a software engineer whose job led him to California.

“Samaj” (pp. 259-392) is less tightly focussed than the preceding sections, in order to provide a wider social portrait by looking at areas of interest specific to India. The section begins with an examination of caste through an account of B. R. Ambedkar’s experiences as an “untouchable” child, and leads on to examine pre- and post-independence conflict between political leaders over casteist prejudice. I question whether caste could have a genetic basis, and conclude it cannot. Rival views of casteism are shown as being linked to the power politics of states such as Uttar Pradesh, including the ability of potentially criminal or semi-criminal politicians,

whether Muslim or Dalit, to attract large-scale popular support when they are seen as representatives or defenders of an “outcaste” or underprivileged social section.

Change is also examined through individual experience, including the cultural position of women, as seen by a Tamil Brahmin actor, the position of gay men at a time of comparative liberalism, via the experiences of a male escort, and the destructive potential power of the state over a family through the case of a “modern” mother and father whose lives are ruined first by the murder of their daughter and then by continued police incompetence and harassment. The closing two chapters look at religion in different guises: India’s relations with Pakistan, the ongoing unsolved politics of Kashmir, and the position of Muslims and the extent to which Indian policy on minorities has its roots in Nineteenth Century choices. A series of interviews looks at different manifestations of religion in daily life: a group from the same caste, who run the “dabbawala” food distribution network in Mumbai, a Tamil who had a single marriage conducted according to four different rites, a swami who exercised significant power over politicians and others, and a computer engineer who linked his mathematical invention to his Advaita family tradition.

The purpose of *India* is to have a dialogue between political, economic and social approaches to the recent historical past, and to produce a contemporary portrait of the nation from different angles.

Conclusion

This critical review has sought to demonstrate that the two books under consideration, *The World Is What It Is* (2008) and *India* (2011), form part of a corpus of work, with which they are consistent. It has summarised and explained the aims, objectives, methodology and conclusions of the books, and shown how they contribute significantly to the expansion of knowledge. The critical review has also described my use of primary sources and my key arguments.

With *The World Is What It Is*, this involved showing how biography can act as a sub-genre of history and tell a global historical story through what is nominally the experience of a single person. By overlapping between different areas of knowledge, including history, literature, sociology, psychology and language itself, biography can destabilise categories and open up new understandings in a range of fields. In the study of the life and long literary career of V. S. Naipaul, it raises questions in regard to our understanding of postcolonial theory and colonial discourse. The biography suggests that the author is not dead, but rather is a rich archive in his own right, a repository of tradition and influence, and a means of better understanding the colonial and postcolonial eras.

In *India*, my objective was to use a sequence of personal, individual biographies and oral narratives in order to put people at centre-stage in a broad portrait of modern India. I sought to create an account in which the privileged were placed alongside people who rarely have a public voice. This was also done by drawing links into the past to show the lineage of change. I sought to improve our understanding of electoral politics at a national level by looking at dynasty in the 2009 Lok Sabha, and identifying the route to power of all 545 MPs. I provided empirical information with which I, and others, could test hypotheses about the expansion of hereditary political influence in India.

Both *India* and *The World Is What It Is* come out of a vision developed during two-and-a-half decades of primary research into colonial and postcolonial history, with a

specific focus on South Asia. My guiding aim has been to communicate a distinct historical view of the period before and after the end of the global British empire. Postcolonialism as an era is now at an end, and we are not yet sure what has replaced it: the world is in flux. In my work, I have sought to challenge disciplinary categories and to use inter-disciplinary insights in order to develop a new perspective on the recent history and culture of South Asia and its diaspora. The two books under critical review use a combination of biography, history, ethnography, literary analysis and political science to fashion this perspective. In the era that comes after postcolonialism – the “post-postcolonial” (or perhaps the ancestralist) age – we have to look again at our conceptions of the world, and at our place in it.

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