

## BOOK REVIEWS

### **Marquez, Gabriel Garcia. *Memories of My Melancholy Whores***

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Arguable among the greatest novelists of the twentieth century, Nobel Laureate, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's new novel *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* is his first work of fiction in ten years. This slim novel of hundred and fifty pages is so beautifully translated by Edith Grossman, widely recognized as the pre-eminent Spanish to English translator, that, it makes one to stop and admire the beauty of the words. What attracts one to Garcia Marquez's books is his style of writing; his simple, subtle, and highly descriptive writing draw the readers right into the setting and into the mindset of the protagonist. In this slender book, there is not one stale sentence, redundant word or unfinished thoughts. In fact this easy and quick-to-read novel is something worth reading despite the criticisms it has attracted from many readers and critics. While many fans and critics of Marquez are happy to get a hold of his first fiction, they are disappointed as they had expected that "Marquez would offer the next entry in his memoir trilogy to follow up *Living to Tell the Tale*." Instead, they are "surprised with a 'digression', in the form of a novella," Marquez's first fiction, *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*. This 'digression', referred to as the "fairy tale for the aged" by the book's publisher, begins with an anonymous first person narrator, a newspaper journalist who, at the age of ninety, falls in love for the first time with a fourteen year old seamstress. I must admit that I was taken back by the idea that a ninety year old man wants to sleep with a fourteen year old girl. But one must dig deeper than the literal text when reading this novella.

Garcia Marquez, a master of the arresting first sentence, begins his novella, thus; "The year I turned ninety, I wanted to give myself the gift of a night of wild love with an adolescent virgin." For his ninetieth birthday, the unnamed narrator has the madam of the brothel acquire for him an adolescent virgin. After 10 pm, dressed as a dandy in white linen, trouser cuffs turned up to disguise how much he

has shrunk in recent years, sweating with fear, he arrives at the brothel. Inside one of the "unplastered adobe rooms", he finds the fourteen year old girl peacefully sleeping, "naked and helpless as the day she was born." Unable to rouse her, he lies next to her admiring the Sleeping Beauty. When he wakes up, he discovers "the improbable pleasure on contemplating the body of a sleeping woman without the urgencies of desire or the obstacles of modesty". This newfound pleasure sets in motion a strange courtship. Enchanted by his sleeping virgin, whom he names Delgadina, he begins to reflect on his life's many lost romantic opportunities. He recounts numerous sexual experiences that he had in the past with prostitutes or the other women he had forced to accept money for sleeping with him: "I have never gone to bed with a woman I didn't pay, and the few who weren't in the profession I persuaded by argument or by force, to take money even if they threw it in the trash." He also adds "when I was 20 I began to keep a record listing name, age, place, and a brief notation on the circumstances and style of lovemaking. By the time I was 50 there were 514 women with whom I had been at least once."

Nevertheless, it is hard not to dislike this man in these opening pages. His emotional life is an empty shell of repetitive sexual acts, and his public life a miserable failure. As he admits, his public persona "lack(s) interests: both parents dead, a bachelor without a future, a mediocre journalist." He finds solace in writing a weekly column, immersing himself in literature and listening to classical music. So late in his life he realizes that by sleeping around with numerous women, he had actually prevented himself from having a meaningful attachment. It dawns on him for the first time now that "whores left (him) no time to be married". This reveals how painfully disconnected a life the narrator has lived until this point. Having spent his entire life buying pleasure from countless women, he has failed to establish any lasting or intimate bonds and sadly has never fallen in love. Yet his ninetieth birthday marks a profound change, and this work's charm lies in Marquez's ability to transform the sordid lust of this old man into an aching meditation of love.

After reading *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*, one must realize that it is love that the man in the heart of the story seeks, not sex. Though he recounts his sexual acts willingly, there is vagueness in his tales, particularly in the story of the bride whom he left at the altar on their wedding day. Something is missing from his life and he worries that, at the age of ninety, it's too late to recapture it. So, perhaps wishing to get a taste of youthfulness, he requests for a young, unsullied companion. Instead, he gets a frightened child, a girl who works during the day

sewing buttons on shirts. She is asleep when he goes to her. He doesn't wake her, but sleeps next to her, barely touching her. This becomes the pattern of their relationship: sleeping together but not touching. And yet he falls in love with her, even while admitting to himself that the love he feels is based more on his ideas about this girl than on the actual girl. What initially appears absurd becomes increasingly interesting. The narrator's dissatisfaction prompts him to return to woo the girl for a second time but he fails yet again to seduce her. But, we are relieved when he fails and from here till the end, Marquez makes us experience the transformative power of love. As his chaste passion for Delgadina grows, he awakens to the "miracle of the first love of (his) life at the age of 90." Afterwards, his nightly visits become habitual. Oddly, the two lovers spend every night together, but they are never awake at the same time. Without speaking a word to each other, they develop an affection and tenderness that defies expectation. It is this attraction that proves most compelling, for Marquez suggests that love happens in the strangest of places and between the most unlikely of pairs. What is memorable about this affair is not the narrative trajectory of its story, but the exquisite details that make this particular love meaningful and unique.

Though *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* deals with a disturbing story and is unsettling to read at first, it is never for a minute dull, and it does touch on the problematic nature of love. Most relationships are based, at least in their initial stages, more on perception than reality. Yes, the situation is seldom as extreme as is the case here. But rest assured, the book is never really repulsive, despite the fact that the narrator spent so much time in the brothels. After all, the book isn't really about sex but about life, and about what happens when you get near the end of it. And at the end the reader is happy that the unnamed, lonely narrator got the chance to experience love; so what if he is ninety— its better late than never!

**P.S. Chauhan, ed. South Asian Review. V.S. Naipaul: His Ideas, Work and Ark**

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The South Asian Review, a fully refereed journal published thrice a year by the South Asian Literary Association, has brought out a special issue dedicated solely to V.S. Naipaul and, as the title suggests, 'his ideas, work and art'. This issue has been guest-edited by P.S. Chauhan who, in his introductory essay "The Current State of Naipaul Studies", notes that the volume "marks the beginning of a more just and less rigid, of an honest and less polemical, and of a more exacting and less sweeping criticism of Naipaul's work."

Over the years Naipaul studies has gone through significant changes as critics have gradually tried to reach a sound understanding of the true 'Naipaulian' qualities of commitment, sensitivity and straightforwardness and of his limitations. The 25 articles compiled in this issue manifest the divergent, multi-faceted and complex nature of Naipaul's work that reflect his transformation, identity crisis, contradictory stances and underscore his multifarious talents as a person, a writer and a critic of the customs, tradition, and practices evident in different places of the world. We can roughly group the articles in this review into the following categories based on their contents: (a) Naipaul's diasporic condition or treatment of identity crises; (b) the evolution of his ideas; (c) his role as a writer and the style of his works; (d) his treatment of women; and (e) miscellaneous topics.

The articles dealing with Naipaul's identity crisis and his diasporic condition trace Naipaul gradually back in time to his roots in different 'worlds', beginning with his ancestral home in India, childhood in Trinidad, and his writerly life and close association with Oxford culture. Elvira Pulitano, while talking about *The Enigma of Arrival* a work which cannot be labelled either as an autobiography or as fiction, shows how Naipaul challenges 'western notion of subjectivity' by proposing alternative modes of identity formation which in his case have been formed by the synthesis of different cultures and 'worlds'. But this idea of synthesis is problematic as Naipaul suffers from his doubly-exiled state. In "Deterritorializing Trinidad and India: V.S. Naipaul's Diasporic Travels in India",

Harveen Mann investigates *India: A Million Mutinies Now* as a nationally deterritorializing text which turns the narratives of both India and Trinidad into interdependent postcolonial histories reflecting Naipaul's Trinidadian-Indian self. Mann also shows how in *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, Naipaul ceases to see everything myopically through the lenses of European culture. In "Travel Taking Further: V.S. Naipaul, Travel Writing and the Quest for Postcolonial Identities", Jacinta Matos traces Naipaul's unease with the novel form which he terms an imperial project that the writer cannot call his own. By citing a few of Naipaul's travel narratives, especially the ones on India, Matos traces his futile search for a unified identity. Abdollah Zahiri, in "*The Enigma of Arrival: Inverse Authorship, Textualizing Reterritorialization*", talks about the 'inverse authorship' of *The Enigma of Arrival* which takes the reader into a journey from back to front regarding the diasporic accounts of an autobiographic tale. It also pinpoints Naipaul's shift 'from instrumental rationality to postcolonial reason'. Naipaul's shift from a sense of displaced identity and loss of history in works like *A House for Mr. Biswas* to acceptance of the hybrid and fragmentary identity or nature of self is examined by Judith Levy in her article "V.S. Naipaul: From Displacement to Hybridity?". She shows how Naipaul, in his latest works, returns to the autobiographical form to reassess his former notions of identity and loss. In *Odd Man Out: V.S. Naipaul and Postcolonial Studies*, Zesus Zapata points out how Naipaul, in his search for roots and rejection of Caribbean identity, accepts his Indian ancestry partially and identifies himself with Western literary and cultural traditions, while distancing himself from his contemporaries at a time of decolonization and 'resistance'. In "Naipaul and the Illusion of Identity", Nandini Bhautoo-Dewnarain writes that the transcendence of self-identity against all odds is what has been traced by Naipaul all along. Taking into consideration four novels of V.S. Naipaul (*The Mimic Men, A Bend in the River, The Enigma of Arrival and A Way in the World*), Yu-Yen Liu, in her article "Negotiating the Changing World: Migrancy and Identity in V.S. Naipaul's Fiction", explores the ways Naipaul negotiates his identity in an ever-changing world. Liu cites Stuart Hall, James Clifford, Iain Chambers and Paul Gilroy and shows how the concept of identity changes as Naipaul's characters move from one place to another and eventually embraces a trans-cultural identity.

The second group of articles discovers a change in Naipaul's worldview and stance as a writer. In her essay "Frustrated Homelands: V.S. Naipaul and Caribbean Indianness as Despair", Lisa Outar shows how Naipaul has a melancholic view of ethnicity and gradually sinks into the state of a disinterested judge of the postcolonial world. Raphael Dalleo traces a gradual transformation

in Naipaul and shows how his view of Trinidad as typifying the colonial and postcolonial world, and his view of a place that is sterile and absurd, evolves as he comes to see it as a part of a transnational network. His earlier negative view is replaced by a more tolerant one. Jasbir Jain's article "Out of the Colonial Cocoon? From *The Mimic Men to India: A Million Mutinies Now*" argues that Naipaul's identification with power and rejection of his roots is reflective of his inner ambivalence which ultimately doesn't let a unitary subject come into being. She discards Naipaul's belief that the mutinies in *India: A Million Mutinies Now* are attempts at working towards a unified India. According to her, the mutinies are nothing but divisive power structures.

A good number of essays in this collection are devoted to assessing the characteristics of Naipaul's writings as a whole, the changes his works have shown over time in terms of form, the regulating factors of his writing and the stances he assume in his works. Stuart Murray's article "Naipaul in the 1970s: Authorial Preferences and the Symptomatic Reading of Place" reveals how, in his fictions of the 1970's, Naipaul portrays a postcolonial world in disarray. Murray shows how Naipaul claims that a writer has the right to claim his own subject matter and, a thorough understanding of the places and peoples he writes about. He also underscores Naipaul's opinion that a writer should not just fictionalize the common historical accounts of different parts of the world. Masood Raja's essay "Reading the Postcolony in the Center: V.S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*" attempts to read Naipaul beyond the politics of representation and beyond the tyranny of the text or authorial intention. In "Rituals of Passivity: Naipaul's *Mimetic Book on the South*", Ben P. Robertson scrutinizes *A Turn in the South* and challenges Naipaul's claim to realism although it was praised by many upon publication. He points out that Naipaul castigates Americans and shows the paradox of inequality in a people supposed to be living on the basis of equality. Nicole Gyulay, in his essay "Writing for the West: V.S. Naipaul's Religion", analyzes Naipaul's Eurocentric perspectives and his attitudes towards religion and stresses his early struggle to become a writer. Havice Ovgu Tuzan's "The Dual Vision: Compassion and Cruelty in the Writings of Naipaul" argues that dismissing Naipaul as a 'reactionary' or as a 'native informer' would mean disregard for the substantive complexity of his worldview. Tuzan asserts that Naipaul's observations on 'half-made societies' definitely rings true and are marked by signs of his genuine concern for 'Third World' countries.

Two of the articles of the special issue focus almost entirely on Naipaul's treatment of women. Gillian Dooley's paper "Naipaul's Women" attempts to

answer the accusations made against Naipaul for his supposedly misogyny in his early novels. Dooley tries to suggest that his later works indicate that he is equally critical of his male characters. She suggests that if any accusation of misogyny is to be labelled, it should be directed at Naipaul's fictional characters and not at the writer himself. On the other hand, Sanna Dhahir examines Naipaul's *Guerrillas* where Naipaul links woman to the life-negating sexual goddess of Hindu mythology.

The complexity and multiplicity of the subject matters in Naipaul's works is quite evident to anyone reading this special issue of the *South Asian Review* since many of the articles dealing with him is on miscellaneous subjects. Rachel Donadio in her *Profile* talks about Naipaul's disapproval of the novel as a form of art and notes how he is bent on proving the works of the master novelists, including the French greats, to be futile. As Naipaul worked harder and harder at this form, he found out that the novel form induces falsity and has its limitation. Donadio also points out how Naipaul sees great possibility of economic growth of India and China although the Arab countries hold out no signs of hope for him. In "V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*: Poetics of History, Biography, Modernity and Culture", K.D. Verma shows how Naipaul blends history, biography, modernity and culture in an aesthetic and philosophical manner in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Timothy Weiss' paper "Tales of Two Worlds: Naipaul after 9/11" examines the representation of a disordered world in Naipaul's linked novels of the millennium *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds*. It also sets these novels in the context of his works of the 1960's which represent nihilism both in the farcical state of the 'First World' and the hopelessness of the 'Third World', and those of the late 1980's and 1990's which offer some glimpses of hope. Weiss suggests that after the catastrophe of 9/11, we should read Naipaul from a different political perspective. In "Buried Alive: The Gothic Carceral in Naipaul's Fiction", Ankhi Mukherjee examines Naipaul's preoccupations in his fictional works with live burial, a state of the self where it is blocked off from life-sustaining elements, which calls for literary strategies derived from the Gothic tradition. Vivian Nun Halloran's paper traces Naipaul's obsessive *leitmotif* concerning the need for a thorough analysis of the Caribbean history of slavery to solve the present problems of the century. It asserts Naipaul's belief that the legacy of slavery keeps affecting the lives of Caribbean people. Focusing on Naipaul's novels *The Suffrage of Elvira* and *Miguel Street*, Maureen Shay traces the relationship between literacy/ illiteracy and self-representation, cultural definition and national articulation. Sangiata Gopal explores a new "area of darkness" and the limits of epistemology in *The Enigma of Arrival*.

This major collection of scholarly essays "interested less in the man than in his work" attempts not only at throwing light on Naipaul's works but also insists on reading Naipaul in a number of interesting and rewarding ways in the context of recent developments in literary studies and theory. The diversity of cultural and intellectual backgrounds of the authors and the essays selected clearly mark Naipaul's worldwide popularity as a writer. Despite the fact that Naipaul continuously challenges his critics through his contradictory remarks and stances, the writers in this collection attempt at presenting a new Naipaul who, as he himself suggests in his Noble Lecture, has "always moved by intuition alone".



## V. S. Naipaul, *Magic Seeds*

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When V.S. Naipaul's last book was published, a few months before he received the Nobel Prize for literature, it was perceived not to be a very big event. His next work, a sequel (amazing and singular for Naipaul, the novelist), *Magic Seeds*, his 'first fictional work [properly] set in India' also failed to arouse universal acclaim, despite the Prize. But it is a novel worth reading for its preoccupations, like the failure of idealism, questions of identity, etc. if not the story, as it contributes to understanding this versatile but enigmatic writer.

Naipaul's previous novel, *Half a Life*, was the story of Willie Chandran, a half caste, culturally hybrid, morally anchorless character's first forty years in India, Great Britain and an unnamed country. *Magic Seeds*, begins in Europe where Willie has gone at the end of *Half a Life*, leaving his hybrid wife Anna, who had supported economically and emotionally his flotsam existence. It ends after a long sojourn by Willie in India and in England.

Willie's sister Sarojini, the wife of a left wing filmmaker in Germany, points out to Willie, his lack of moral direction. She inspires him to go to India to take part in a guerilla war in support of lower caste untouchables in accordance with Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideology. Ironically, Willie unwittingly joins a splinter faction of the group he was supposed to fight with. After seven years of fruitless campaign, Willie surrenders to the police and spends several years in jail. Sarojini finally manages to get Willie released with the help of his English friend Roger through presenting him as a pioneer of postcolonial Indian writings, in English. Willie then returns to England but only to get entangled in a web of sexuality and mindless living.

Towards the end of the novel, Willie, who in *Half a Life*, had felt constricted by his limited kind of existence, comes to view himself as a man 'serving an endless prison sentence' from which he may free himself if he acts upon the realization: that 'It is wrong to have an ideal view of the world' (Naipaul, 2004:294). However, we do not see Willie acting upon the realization as the novel ends there.

The story line of this work is more schematic than that of *Half a Life*. The characters seem as drab as before, but the basic ideological framework of the writer, a n unbeliever in any kind of idealism, gets accentuated through the treatment of identity markers like caste and class and the revolutionary leftist guerilla movements, which had their heyday in the sixties and seventies in different parts of India. The long middle section on the caste/class war reengages with the problem of caste and partially class in a more aloof kind of way than in the first book. The glossing over of the unpleasant reality of caste which made Willie's mother's uncle( the firebrand lower caste untouchable leader) appear ineffective and Willie's father's action of marrying his mother, comical in the previous novel, is given here a more accentuated expression. The movement to free the lower caste is led by middle and upper class Hindus. The untouchables, on the other hand, are uninterested in any kind of class war. The gap between the two not only upholds Naipaul's pessimistic views about idealism and more clearly utopian politics but also presents caste as a problematic category demanding intervention.

The section on the sexual free play, towards the end of the novel(for example between Willie and Perdita, Roger's wife and between Roger and the maid Marian) speaks of a kind of liberation for Willie but at the same time also of ennui and a cul-de-sac situation.

Fate takes the form of a cyclic encounter and the whole world seems to be gray. The individual's existence seems meaningless except in being anchored in a world, which is gray without the dignity of being dark. The magic solution ("seeds") presented at the end of the novel ('It is wrong to have an ideal view of the world')(Naipaul, 2004:294), comes too late and is offered as too schematic an answer to have. The novelist takes on the tone of a didactic author in the manner of seventeenth and eighteenth century English novelists, and we feel awkward.

This is Naipaul's only 'Indian' novel and thus the portrayal of Indians is of special significance to his readers here. If Naipaul's public expressions on India, bespeaking of atavism , in the comments he made subsequent to the Nobel are coupled with the presentation of Indian and other characters , we get the impression of a dark personality.

The novel is not, however, without its positive characteristics. The treatment of caste and class oppression is far more realistic and nuanced than we find in other writers. The enigmatic nature of identity as presented here makes us feel that the writer, perhaps because of his hybridity, understands the complexities



involved better than others. The class war type of leftist politics touched the people of Bangladesh and readers will feel affinity with the novelists' viewpoint at certain points. The characters if not much attractive succeed in keeping us interested.

*Magic Seeds*, was a surprise to me in being a sequel and is at times troubling, as a novel. I for one would not want a third novel based on the same characters. Naipaul's critical engagement with the issues of identity and idealism, in this novel, however creates the feeling in readers that he has still things to offer his readers. We therefore wish that Naipaul does not end his novelist's career with *Magic Seeds*.