Reflections while in Mauritius

Amitav Ghosh

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ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh reflects on Khal Torabully and V.S. Naipaul whilst travelling in Mauritius to undertake research for his novel Sea of Poppies.

KEYWORDS

Mauritius, cyclones, hurricanes, climate change, V.S. Naipaul

I came across Khal Torabully’s work while I was writing Sea of Poppies. He is a prominent literary figure in Mauritius and along with Marina Carter, who is perhaps that country’s most eminent historian, he has edited a remarkable collection entitled Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora (Anthem Press, London, 2002).

A poet and scholar, Khal is perhaps best known for coining the concept of ‘Coolitude’. Having read and admired the anthology (but never having met Khal in person) I was very glad when he wrote to express his appreciation of Sea of Poppies.

I have had several inquiries from descendants of Indian migrants asking for suggestions for further reading. Coolitude is a very good place to start, and I would urge anyone who is interested in girmitiyas to seek out other works by Khal Torabully.¹

In August 2005, while I was in Mauritius, researching my novel Sea of Poppies, I had an interesting conversation with a member of
one of the country’s most prominent business families. We were talking about writers when he told me the story of V.S. Naipaul’s visit to the island in the early 1970s.

Mauritius had then only recently gained its independence, and since tourism was an important sector of the economy, a group of businessmen decided that it would be a good idea to invite a prominent writer to visit the country. V.S. Naipaul was a natural choice because his novel *In a Free State* had been awarded the Booker Prize in 1971. Since Naipaul had grown up in Trinidad, and was himself a descendant of Indian indentured migrants, it was assumed that he would write sympathetically about Mauritius. So Naipaul was duly invited to visit, and upon his arrival was much feted by his hosts.

But the essay that resulted from Naipaul’s visit, ‘The Overcrowded Barracoon’, was not at all what his hosts had expected. It portrayed the country as a Malthusian basket case, overpopulated, ridden with racial tensions and doomed to economic stagnation (‘barracoon’ refers to a type of barracks that was used to confine enslaved people in the days of the Atlantic slave trade). ‘The barracoon is overcrowded,’ Naipaul concluded, ‘the escape routes are closed.’

The article was written at a time of transition in Naipaul’s career. His early books, like *The Mimic Men*, *The Suffrage of Elvira* and, most of all, *A House for Mr Biswas*, were tender, humorous and generally sympathetic portrayals of life in the Caribbean. These are the works for which, I think, he will be best remembered. But then in the 1960s and 1970s, Naipaul assumed a new persona, one that has been memorably described by Edward Said as ‘a man of the Third World who sends back dispatches from the Third World to an implied audience of disenchanted Western liberals who can never hear bad enough things about all the Third World myths – national liberation movements, revolutionary goals, the evils of colonialism – which in Naipaul’s opinion do nothing to explain the sorry state of African and Asian countries who are sinking under poverty, native impotence, badly learned, unabsorbed Western ideas like industrialisation and modernisation.’
In the West, Naipaul’s fame rested upon his reputation as a clear-eyed and objective observer of the Third World. Unlike the tiers-mondistes of his time he was believed to be ‘unflinching’ and ‘honest’ in his depictions of the misery and delusions of the Third World. Others, like Naipaul’s great compatriot, C.L.R. James, held that he was celebrated in the West because his writing reflected ‘what the whites want to say but dare not’.

I often thought of ‘The Overcrowded Barracoon’ while I was travelling around Mauritius in 2005, thirty-three years after the essay’s publication. Contrary to Naipaul’s predictions, the country appeared to have prospered. Although its per capita GDP was much lower than that of most wealthy nations, it was still one of the most affluent nations in Africa. It also had good social welfare programmes, and its healthcare system boasted more hospital beds per thousand people than the UK, the US and Canada. It was also a functioning democracy that held regular elections. Indeed, by most metrics Mauritius was an unsung success story.

The clearest indication of this was provided to me by a climatic event on the other side of the planet: Hurricane Katrina, which hit New Orleans in August 2005, while I was in Mauritius. I spent a good deal of time watching the media coverage of the hurricane with Mauritian friends. They were astounded by the scenes unfolding in New Orleans: they could not believe that in the world’s richest country, a city located squarely within a storm-prone region would be so utterly unprepared for a thoroughly predictable disaster. Nor could they believe that the food supply system, and even the city’s social structure, would break down because of a storm. All of this caused speechless astonishment on the island that Naipaul had described as an overcrowded barracoon.

Such scenes were unimaginable in Mauritius, my friends told me, even though the island happens to be located in a part of the Indian Ocean that generates a great deal of cyclonic activity and is frequently hit by extremely powerful storms. But it is very rare for anyone to be killed by a cyclone in Mauritius; nor do storms put
any strain on the country’s social fabric. This is because the country is very well prepared for storms, and its citizens know exactly what to do when a powerful cyclone is approaching.

What Hurricane Katrina illustrated for me was that Naipaul’s much-vaunted objectivity was, in this instance at least, nothing other than a projection of the beliefs of those Westerners who like to imagine that the ‘Third World’ is an irredeemable ‘Area of Darkness’. These projections have again been brought to the fore by the Covid 19 pandemic. At the start of the pandemic, many Western philanthropists and intellectuals confidently predicted that Africa would experience a ‘Covid Apocalypse’. But in the event, some African countries have performed exceptionally well, while several Western countries have fared very badly, including the United States. Indeed, many Western countries, like the United States, France and Great Britain, have fared badly because they assumed that their wealth and infrastructure would protect them.

There is a heroic myth of literature in which writers are seen as dissidents, and fierce critics of dominant ideas. The reality, however, is that most of modern literature is built upon teleological assumptions that assume the intrinsic superiority of Western societies. The preconceptions that go with this often prevent writers from understanding the hidden strengths that come from having to cope with adversity. That was certainly the case with Naipaul’s perceptions of Mauritius.

NOTES
1 <http://amitavghosh.com/blog/> 1 October 2011.
2 V.S. Naipaul, The Overcrowded Barracoon and Other Articles, p. 286.