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In Part 1 of this essay on embodiment and postcolonial theory in VS Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*, I looked at the protagonist Ralph's relationship with his own body, which he progressively erases as the novel wears on. Here, I want to flip the lens outward and examine Ralph's gaze on the female Other, through the bodies of his white British wife Sandra and an unnamed prostitute. In sharp contrast to Ralph's own disembodiment and erasure are the repeated, extended physical descriptions of Sandra:

Sandra, I can see, will not be everyone's idea of a beauty; few women are. But she overwhelmed me then, and she would overwhelm me now, I know: her looks were of the sort that improves with the strength and definition of maturity. She was tall; her bony face was longish and I liked the suggestion of thrust in her chin and lower lip. I liked her narrow forehead and her slightly ill-humored eyes—perhaps she needed glasses. And there was coarseness about her skin which enchanted me. I liked the quality of graining in the skin; it was to me a sign of subtle sensuality. There was a firmness and precision in her movements, and always a slight bite to her speech. Women were continually provoked by her manner, which gave the impression of irony even when none was intended. She affected a very old and grubby khaki-colored macintosh, which it was always a pleasure to help off, for below it, and always as a surprise, were soft, cool colors, and a body fresh and scrupulously cared for. Not even the macintosh could hide the fullness of her breasts, to which I had for some time been admitted. They were not the self-supported cut apples of the austere French ideal; but breasts curving and rounded with a weight just threatening pendent excess, which the viewer, recognizing the inadequacy and indeed crudity of the cupping gesture, instinctively stretches out a hand to support; breasts which in their free state alter their possessor; breasts which in the end madden the viewer because, faced with such completeness of beauty, he does not know what to do (Naipaul 43).

Almost instantly, Sandra's body challenges Ralph's expectations. He is "overwhelmed" by her physicality. Although he purports to "like" the physical parts of her that would "not be everyone's idea of beauty"—such as her bony face, narrow forehead, coarse skin, and squint—what Ralph *really* likes is rather his ability to read each part of her body as what he calls a "sign of subtle sensuality." Her thrusting chin, for instance, becomes not merely an under bite but an indication of her forceful personality, further emphasized by the "firmness and precision in her movements." In

other words, Sandra's body becomes a text for Ralph to read and place in order. All parts cohere in a particular personality, and nothing is superfluous.

Despite Ralph's insistence on Sandra's bodily surprises, his description of her ends rather conventionally, with an extended description of her breasts. In many ways, Naipaul draws on standard tropes of embodiment in literature, including the sexualized, objectified body. That commonplace reading is nuanced here by the disappearance of the subjectivities of *both* Ralph and Sandra. We are instead told about a "possessor" and a "viewer." The controlling gaze on Sandra's body replaces both subject and object—Ralph and Sandra, colonizer and colonial—with neutral, third-person markers. Naipaul describes opposition rather than intimacy. Ralph realizes, even at this early stage in their relationship, that he will never be the "possessor" of Sandra. He is merely a generic "viewer," and like that hypothetical art patron, Ralph literally "does not know what to do" with what he sees. His passivity arises directly from the physicality of Sandra's breasts, which unlike the rest of her signifying body, cannot be aligned with her neatly ordered personality.

Indeed, Sandra eludes Ralph's attempts at characterizing her at every stage. Even in this first description, he notes the discrepancy between her old raincoat and the "soft, cool colors" she wears underneath. By affecting a particular appearance, Sandra retains her ability to surprise Ralph. Her body is not merely a series of well-oiled parts but rather performative surface, which she can manipulate outside Ralph's control. Take this later description of her, on Isabella:

She lay stretched out on the bed in the hotel room, in her clean white brassiere and chaste white cotton petticoat, below the electric ceiling fan. She wore the cheap, white-rimmed and I believe damaging sunglasses she had bought in the Azores. She smoked a cigarette, smoking in the factory-girl way, lips bunched wetly over the cigarette set in the centre of her mouth, inhaling deeply as though drawing urgently needed nourishment. It was a mannerism she had picked up in a government agricultural camp in Dorset where she had spent a month (Naipaul 54).

In this passage, as earlier, Sandra is the object of a male gaze. Yet here, Naipaul illustrates more clearly the ways in which Sandra's body slips past Ralph's desire to control. Her clothes are simultaneously sexual and chaste. Sunglasses, worn indoors, hide her eyes and therefore her truth. Even her manner of smoking is a performance, an imitation of "the factory-girl way," paradoxically learned not in the city but in the countryside. In fact, Sandra is neither a factory girl nor a farm worker, but rather a suburbanite who only married Ralph to avoid getting an office job. She is therefore an amalgam of a number of different influences, from her "North London tongue" (Naipaul 64, 67) to her dilettantish interest in the "Turkish League" (Naipaul 42). Her every action is a performance, what Ralph later calls "acting now for me" (Naipaul 65), in order to attract the attention of others.

Intriguingly, Naipaul hints that Ralph is perceptive enough to read others' interpretations of Sandra's actions, which they appear to view more directly as performance: "Can this naturalness be trusted?" (Naipaul 63). Yet Ralph assumes a mocking, self-knowing tone, insisting that his friends,

too, are “acting, overdoing domesticity and the small details, overstressing the fullness of their own lives” (Naipaul 63) and are therefore jealous or suspicious of Sandra’s “naturalness.” He is vicariously proud of what he calls her “gift of phrase” (Naipaul 64), misreading it as a winning combination of forthrightness and wit rather than what it truly is—an attempt to scramble to the top of society by cutting down others.

Because Ralph is unable to read past Sandra’s superficial bravado performance, their marriage dissolves, and she leaves Isabella permanently. As their relationship decays, Ralph revisits the image of Sandra on the hotel bed:

Wasn't it that cotton-clad body, with the cleanliness and freshness of the barren, a body without danger or mystery and forbidding for that reason? A body which was no more than what it was, holding no promise of growth, speaking only of flesh and futility and our own imminent extinction (Naipaul 71).

Ralph cannot comprehend the body as body, when it is “no more than what it” is. He requires a complex system of symbolism and signification—not unlike the anthologies’ claim to comprehensiveness—where everything must have its place. In this system, the material body is a symbol not of order and “growth” but of “our own imminent extinction”—that is, decay and death. Ralph’s search for order is, to a large extent, his reaction to the perceived “futility” of the body. His encounter with a prostitute may illustrate this best:

Without her outer garment—which she hung carefully over the back of the chair—she all at once appeared bigger than I had thought. She exceeded the generous standards of the country. Her arms were wide and slack. Her breasts had been pulled tightly upwards and flattened against her chest; even so they had appeared full and large. Now, with a sigh from my companion that turned into a laugh, these breasts were released. They cascaded heavily down. They were enormous, they were grotesque, empty starved sacks which yet contained some substance at their tips, where alone they had shape. She unbound, untied, released herself. Flesh, striped, indented, corrugated, fell helplessly about her...Tormented by flesh, she offered knowledge of flesh (Naipaul 235-236).

The physical contrast between the prostitute and Sandra is initially striking, but the themes of these sexual encounters are quite similar. Where Sandra was unexpectedly beautiful, the prostitute is almost horrifically grotesque—“a figure from hell with a smiling girl’s face” (Naipaul 236), totally unlike the woman whose earlier “courtliness delighted” him (Naipaul 235). Once again, Ralph has been duped by his reliance on superficial performance.

Yet the focus on this passage, unlike the passages about Sandra, is not on the sexuality of body, nor on Ralph’s desire to control. Indeed, he decides instantly “I would never touch; and I feared being touched” (Naipaul 236). Rather, Ralph appears overwhelmed at his confrontation with a body free from control. The instant the prostitute lays aside her “outer garment,” or her performative aspect, she is transformed into a hag. In the face of such “knowledge of flesh,” Ralph becomes utterly

passive, as “the self dropped away, layer by layer” (Naipaul 236). His self-erasure, begun by renaming himself at age eight, completes as he is subsumed into the prostitute’s body.

Ralph’s final response, after the prostitute leaves, is “a sensation of sickness” (Naipaul 237) followed by vomiting. The symbolic purge mirrors his nausea and vomiting elsewhere in the novel. Naipaul thus parallels the racial constraints of (post)colonialism with the material body, “unbound, untied, released.” The prostitute’s body challenges Ralph to be free not only of literally restrictive garments, but also of his colonial mentality. But Ralph has built his entire life around mimicry. For him, to shed colonialism is to disappear. The prostitute enacts, in a profoundly visceral way, the “imminent extinction” that Ralph fears. So he runs away to a London hotel and writes his memoirs in an explicit attempt to impose order on his life and achieve rational immortality despite his decaying material body.

Ironically, the cracks and frayed edges of Ralph’s life become increasingly obvious as he retreats from them. The last few pages of the novel detail Ralph’s obsession with wallpapering and cheese-eating, and are interrupted by fragments of nursery rhymes and Isabellan patois. The effect is uncanny, perhaps even psychotic. I certainly don’t mean to suggest that Ralph is schizophrenic, merely that his focus on order results in complete dissociation from the material world and the real body within it.

I’ve looked at multiple instances of the body in Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*: sexualized, performative, erased, and decayed. Each time the body appears, it challenges Ralph’s steady attempts at reading order into the world. And each time, the body chips away at Ralph’s façade of mimicry and reinvention. Sandra’s unhappiness—caused in part by Ralph’s inability to understand her actions as performative—effectively ruins his chance at becoming the politician he wanted. Ralph attempts to erase his own body and replace it with the theatrical gestures of the dandy. Ultimately, however, he must abandon performance and even personality when he is confronted with the limitless flesh of the prostitute. Ralph is completely unable to resolve the bodily tension of the novel, and ends by refusing to address the question at all. Instead, he chooses to write alone in his hotel room, hiding behind pillars to avoid being seen—a further erasure of his body. Tellingly, Naipaul presents no effective solution to the problem of mimicry and embodiment. Ralph, in exile, surrenders to perfect order, but he certainly does not have the power he craves.

Perhaps, like Ralph, we too need an ordering schema to help us make sense of the massive double problems of the world and of world literature. Perhaps without some sort of categorization, we would become lost in the sheer size of world literature, just as Ralph loses his self in the grotesque enormity of the prostitute’s body. Yet the simplistic, nation-based organization of world literature, so often presented in anthologies and criticism, glosses over the complexity of the subject. Authors such as Naipaul himself, for instance, cannot be easily categorized according to this national or regional taxonomy. As someone born in Trinidad, does he belong with the other Caribbean writers? Or is he part of the Indian diaspora? Shall we label him British, or Commonwealth, or some other signifier to acknowledge his own mimicry of Britain? The taxonomy of world literature refuses to

recognize “all of the above” as an option, and to choose any of these as Naipaul’s “primary” classification would be to devalue other parts of his literary heritage.

I don’t have easy answers to these questions of classification for VS Naipaul, or indeed for a host of other postcolonial authors whose works and bodies have migrated across the globe. One option, given the complexity of world literature, is to abandon the current national taxonomy altogether, to present world literature purely chronologically, or according to themes that cross geographic boundaries. To some extent, courses in world literature, and the anthologies themselves, are beginning to do this already, with their editorial commentary on literary resonances and border-crossings. But this avoidance of the political world’s influence on the literary world is no better than Ralph’s retreat into reclusiveness. To move world literature outside a politically based taxonomy, we may have to rethink our very definitions of nationality, ethnicity, and race. And one way to do that is to focus explicitly on the body, the material body, as an organism that is both intensely singular and fundamentally universal.

What I hope to have shown in this embodied reading of Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men* is that the material body will resist the traditional ordering schema by insisting on its own disorder as a source of knowledge. Postcolonial writers like VS Naipaul have used the body, therefore, to question their own place and the erasure of their identity within taxonomy of world literature. The material body cautions us, the academics, as we attempt, like Ralph Singh, to impose order on a world that is perhaps too messy and too complex to obey.

Further Reading

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