Andrew Robinson

‘I had no idea that madness in the Islamic world had gone so far’

V. S. Naipaul, at 70, speaks about his controversial career and reveals that “for the first time in my life, I’m doing nothing”

The news came on the radio. The Nobel Prize for Literature 2001 is awarded to the British writer, born in Trinidad, V. S. Naipaul. When, last October, this journalist, who once came to his home in Wiltshire, Sir Vidia Naipaul protested to be busy in the garden, in fact, he had taken to his bed. The award was a shock — he had long assumed his work was unapplicable to the academic world, and there had been no prior hint of the honor. His immediate reaction, he tells me, was one of “extreme ex-haustation”. “Our minds need to think of everything. So I want to lay down.”

Later, he issued a statement that the award was a “great tribute to both England, my home, and to India, home of my ancestors”. He made no mention of Trinidad — as people were quick to note — despite the fact that Naipaul was brought up there until the age of 16 and that Trinidad is the setting for his early books, including his first major work, A House for Mr. Bassho, which had established him as a leading young novelist by the early 1960s. Naipaul is an expatriate, from India, from which his Hindu grandfather sailed to Trinidad in the late 1800s, who was the subject of much discussion in the citation that I was born in Trinidad, and not England, “enough. As for being ‘British’, he always seems to be it. In his 1989 essay, ‘India: a million million’, he says: ‘I could not have had a training, as a writer, in the country. To that extent, I am a foreigner. The same is true of the country. Though it is a foreign country, the country is not to be supported by the country in my opinion. ’

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Books

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About the internet: “I began to think that it was something for the lower classes — a toy. Other people, those who had access to libraries and books, could just find their information in the usual way”

About women: “I admire women, I am probably the greatest lover of women you are likely to meet.”

The madness of people who have been hidden behind a veil, and who do not have the right to make the intellectual effort to catch up. I was aware of the religiosity here, but I was aware of the difference in life. I was aware of the anti-Christ, anti-theologian, the new fundamentalism. But I had no idea it had gone so far — the madness. The idea of their strength is an illusion. Nothing is coming from within. The thing that can’t be a plane, but what they can’t do is build a plane. They won’t make it, but they can build three times the plane. I think people have spoken much rubbish about that event. The poor. Reversing themselves on the right, it’s nothing but an aspect of religion hatred. And that is what they deal to death. But you can’t deal with the threat of a nuclear war. Though he approved of the recent war in Afghanistan, he is keenly aware of the inherent danger of the recent war on terrorism. ‘Your biggest enemy is your great ally — Saudi Arabia — and the book-seller of the tower comes from your ally — Pakistan.’

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to make him more sympathetic to Islam, or to Pakistan. Instead, the opposite seems true. Both his books on Islam have been “banned” there, he says anyway, they cannot be obtained. Naipaul is scathing: “It’s not a book-reading country, it has no intellectual life — it’s against the intellectual life. I think if the faint of all your actions is religion and the idea of the religious war, which involves religious hatred — then books, civilization — these things don’t matter to you. All you need is the Koran, and a ruler with a big stick.”

Vintage Naipaul. His views are original and often surprising. About his all-green garden: “I feel if I wanted to see flowers, I could just take a bus ride and in front of every house there would be a series of shocking colours.” About book reviewing: “One of my golden rules was: never mention the name of a character. If you deny yourself that, you have to go to the heart of a novel.” About himself: “It’s my great regret that I didn’t do science at Oxford. I think I would probably have been a better man if I had studied science profoundly.”

No wonder his former friend Paul Theroux’s envious memoir, *The English Patient*, is so fascinating — “a portrait of Mozart by Salieri”, as A. N. Wilson called it. For V. S. Naipaul can never be dull. He is always thinking, always moving on.

“The artist, the writer, the filmmaker, moves on, and the friend who liked him no longer likes him. It has to be like this — people fall away,” Naipaul reflects. “I’m not lonely. It’s a fantasy about the writer’s life being lonely. I’m never happier than when I’m writing. Writers live when they’re writing, the other side of them is probably not as important as this life during the writing, in the writing.”

*Andrew Robinson is the literary editor of the TLS; V. S. Naipaul’s books are being reissued by Picador*
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