

The STABRESS Indian: Repression, Erasure, Suppression and Suspension in Indian and Diasporic Indian Auto/Biography

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To cite this article: Maharaj, J. Vijay. (2022). 'The STABRESS Indian: Repression, Erasure, Suppression and Suspension in Indian and Diasporic Indian Auto/Biography'. *Indenture Papers: Studies on Girmitiyas*, Vol. 2: 147-158 @ <https://girit.ac.fj/ip-2022-jvmaharaj/>

Date Published: 25 October 2022

Other articles in this volume: <https://girit.ac.fj/current-issue/>

Editorial Board: <https://girit.ac.fj/editorial-board/>

Notes for Contributors: <https://girit.ac.fj/notes-for-contributors-2/>

Abstract

This paper examines some seminal texts by outstanding diasporic Indians to demonstrate that the work the texts perform is by and large to make us aware of how contemporary subjectivities involve processes of repressing, erasing, suppressing, or suspending various aspects of the self in order to arrive at a coherent sense of personhood. The main writer being considered is V. S. Naipaul, but through his work and what it reveals the paper also touches on these processes in the works of others (for example, Vijay Mishra, Gaiutra Bahadur, Brij Lal). In this way, the study aims to demonstrate a condition of RESS (repression, erasure, suppression and suspension), as a peculiarly postcolonial / postimperial condition well-documented in Indian and Diasporic Indian biography and autobiography and often within discourses of triumph and survival – hence the title of the paper 'The STABRESS Indian'.

Keywords: Repression, Erasure, Suppression, Suspension, Autobiography, Biography, Indian, Diasporic Indian, Survival and Triumph

Introduction

New conceptualizations of power and its modes and methods of functioning have been a part of twentieth century revolutionary thinking. A deep interest in how we come to create ourselves in discourse drives this paper. For this reason, auto / biographical works are selected. This genre is generally embedded within discourses of survival, quite often told within the parameters of triumph over adversities in a range of narrative media. The auto / biographical work is thus a perfect place to observe and interpret how the stories we construct about ourselves are informed by other discourses. Interestingly, the auto / biographical formula, technically speaking the popular *bildungsroman* or *kunstlerroman*, is also the favoured approach for the diasporic novel and provides equally fertile terrain for exploration.

It is not an exaggeration to say that V. S. Naipaul is one of those postcolonial intellectuals who has paid the closest attention and done us the greatest favour by recording a great variety of these articulations in a range of circumstances. Many view him as doing so in those situations to which we have learned to apply the prefix postcolonial or decolonizing. But he has also looked just as closely at the opposite scenario, at colonial and ex-imperial subjectivity, and at many possible varieties in between. In this paper, I pay attention to just one of the forms that he engaged in - the biography or autobiography. I argue that he uses this form as a tool to demonstrate his concerns regarding postcolonial, postimperial and particularly Indian subjectivities in both. In so doing I will develop the rationale for and hopefully what I consider the appropriateness of my titular acronym 'the STABRESS Indian' in which STABRESS is meant to stand for repression, erasure, suppression and suspension in auto / biographical records of survival and triumph used to represent Indian and Indian diasporic experiences.

An Exploration of the Biographical/Autobiographical in Naipaul's Writing

The first grand theme that appears in Naipaul's first novel, *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), is one that is never thereafter absent in any work he has written. To pose it as a question, which is how we usually encounter it subliminally, would be to ask: How do we resist being defined by others when we must all live out our lives within systems that relentlessly push us from diverse angles into prefabricated moulds? Of course, in *The Mystic Masseur*, the concern is first raised in a Caribbean setting. This is developed through the depiction of the protagonist's shame upon discovery of his class and ethnic differences from

the obviously dominant sectors in the society – the sectors with the right to laughter at others.

This state of negative affect is inculcated in him at first by his exposure to the masters and students at an elite secondary school – in an ‘always already’ white and ‘quite nearly white’¹ Creole environment. But it is also an effect of attitudes and behaviour in another section of the society – which as far as we can tell from the novel – is a mainly black Creole one. School and society disparage his father’s Indianness and by extension his own. The incident which demonstrates this most clearly occurs very early in the chronology of events that comprise the tale being told: In their rural mainly Indian Trinidadian setting the dress they adopt to face the world generates admiration but the same elicits ridicule the closer they come to the city. The city is therefore depicted as the centre of power and the place from which discourses of power emanate.

In this early youthful novel, the race and class conflicts this creates for the protagonist, Ganesh, is resolved by an abrupt return to a total immersion in the supposedly traditional. But, as the reader is ironically made aware, this tradition is to a significant extent not traditional at all but is being invented on the spot in response to the need for a centre on which to cling for survival in light of the characters’ marginalization, exclusion and isolation from the city centre where the power to determine what comprises personhood resides.

The acceptance of the imposed otherness seen in everyone’s efforts to create the tradition finally made Ganesh enough of a success to permit his re-entry to the changing environment of the city. Cultural studies scholar and twenty-first century revolutionary intellectual, Rey Chow, has spoken of this ‘politics of ethnicity’ as an aspect of the capitalist commodification of culture, which in effect creates the current world order and impacts numerous disparate groups globally. This is pertinent to an understanding of Ganesh and his situation and should be extremely relevant to literary and cultural critics and / or theorists who could usefully seek to understand how readers come to identify the ‘Indianness’ of the text. Interestingly, in every single critical work on this and every other book written by Naipaul, there is an automatic assumption regarding the Indianness of what he is writing rather than any attempt to follow Naipaul’s lead and problematize the invention and perception of Indian and Indianness as he himself has often done.

The most important part of Ganesh’s situation with which we are most concerned in this study is Ganesh’s transformation into *Homo confessio*, ‘a confessing animal.’ As Michel Foucault, one of those twentieth century intel-

¹ I borrow this ‘always already’ ‘not quite’ formulation from Homi K Bhabha’s *Location of Culture*.

lectuals who contributed much to the epistemological revolution, observed, between St Augustine (Aurelius Augustinus Hipponensis) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau: ‘[T]he confession became one of the West’s most highly valued techniques for producing truth. We have since become a singularly confessing society... Western man has become a confessing animal’ (1998: 59). For Foucault, sexual desire is the key subject of confession and became the means by which the Western subject sought to understand the ‘deeply buried truth ... about ourselves’ (1990: 69; 1982: 208).

However, whereas for Foucault, sexuality is the core truth, as Chow rightly observes, for people like the emergent resistant Indo-Trinidadian, Ganesh, ethnic identity becomes an equivalent kind of truth. In fact, Ganesh comes to know that albeit at the beginning of the twenty-first century, there is an ‘acceleration of racial and ethnicist violence . . . where, paradoxically, there is the most talk about and awareness of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity’ (Chow, 2002: 14). For Ganesh, this means that he must urgently work out what his ethnic identity is because it is far more important than any other facet of himself in order for him to be able to pose and answer the fundamental question: ‘Who am I?’ (Foucault, 1997: 135; 1990: 61, 64-8, 77; 1996: 214). To answer this question correctly, as Foucault insists, is indeed the post-revolutionary road to the revolutionary ideal of ‘liberation’ (1990: 159). What is most noteworthy for the case we are considering, however, is that having depicted Ganesh as becoming *Homo confessio*, Naipaul then subverts the Western script of liberation-by-confession through Ganesh’s suppression of his autobiography, appropriately entitled à la Foucault, *My Years of Guilt*.

Ganesh’s tarrying with the ethnic finally fails to satisfy him. He seeks escape at any price and becomes content only when he is finally able to do so. This occurs in a two-part programme of resistance, first against the ethnic and secondly the national. When the national becomes evident to him as another kind of ethnic, his dissociation from it begins. The stages towards this endpoint conform to the acronym ABRESS. The biography or autobiography as a means of answering the question who am I ends in the rapid repression of the identity achieved, followed by its erasure and complete suppression with the protagonist ending suspended without any imposed identity in un/conscious refusal of the question itself.

This pattern recurs in all of Naipaul’s works. It has never been more interestingly depicted than in *The Mimic Men*, published a decade later and which Helen Hayward rightly describes as ‘a novel masquerading as an autobiography’ (2002: 69). Indeed, this work, like others, bear out Chow’s assertion that the ethnic biography or autobiography comes from a ‘need to write about something whose existence has nonetheless been placed out of reach,’ in order ‘to grope for a ‘self-regard’ that does not yet exist’ (2002: 142).

As Giosuè Ghisalberti notes, unlike Rousseau, who begins Book One of *The Confessions* by writing that “I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, when complete, will have no imitator” (17), Singh’s autobiography will repeatedly confess how his whole life has been a complicated imitation despite his attempts since childhood to give himself a personality that was independent from the influences of birthplace, culture, family, and friends and required both identification and mimicry (2009: 73).

Gordon Rohlehr, too, had recognized long before Ghisalberti’s and Chow’s theorizations taught us to see it so clearly, that *The Mimic Men* provides us with myriad examples of the psychology and temperament of *Homo confessio*, the modern absurd self. Naipaul participates in the endeavour by writing for the first time from a first person point of view thereby ensuring that there is no doubt from the outset that readers know that they are about to be privy to the narrator’s deepest innermost fears and desires. But he also shows us how the narrator becomes the person he is. Landeg White wrote one of the earliest book length analyses of Naipaul’s work. Recalling J. J. Thomas’s *Froudacity* which is a rebuttal of James Anthony Froude’s interpretation of society in the Caribbean, White points out that Naipaul plays with two different episodes from Froude’s narrative in his construction of this novel (1972: 165).

Naipaul, thus, seems intent on reminding us in this novel of the extreme invalidity and unreliability of the sources of our self-knowledge. For this reason, while another critic Anthony Boxhill follows the trend of the time and reads Naipaul into his text, his remark is otherwise on point when he says: ‘Naipaul seems to be asking himself how can a society which is profoundly mimic produce anything which is not itself mimic; how can a man who is not sure what he is, produce anything which is genuinely his own’ (1976: 13). *The Mimic Men* makes us recognize also that not only our knowledge about Caribbean society is wanting but also that about ancestral inheritances. The protagonist in this novel also goes through the same RESS stages and he too ends up suspended in the no-man’s land of a hotel room with a desk, a chair and his pen as his only anchors. The protagonist Ralph K Singh aka Ranjit Kripal Singh expresses it this way:

... by this re-creation the event became historical and manageable; it was given its place; it will no longer disturb me. And this became my aim: from the central fact of this setting, my presence in this city, which I have known as a student, politician, and now as a refugee-immigrant, to impose order on my own history, to abolish

that disturbance which is what a narrative sequence might have led me to (2002: 243).

This trend continues in Naipaul’s writing and can be seen even more clearly in later works like *The Enigma of Arrival* in which, to use Ian Baucom’s words in his study of Englishness, we can say that Naipaul sets out to examine ‘the power of certain tradition-soaked places to secure and bestow English identity’ (199: 18). However, this time the writing takes us on the writer’s own journey through the stages of repression, erasure, suppression and acceptance of a place of suspension in which only his draughts of the landscape provide him with sustenance to carry on. As in this novel, he tells us during the Adam Low film *The Strange Luck of V. S. Naipaul*, that in this suspended place, only the wonder and glory of life, despite all the earlier frantic searching, remain important, as in the intricately beautiful skeletal web left behind when a shed peepal leaf begins its process of final disintegration into the earth.

Naipaul has commented on the biographies and autobiographies of many other writers over the course of his writing career and in each instance, he has commended those who recognize the process of RESS and castigated those who didn’t. In his comments on *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, for example, Naipaul observes at one point:

The ethnographic tone, which might be modelled on something French, suits Chaudhuri. He is at his best in that mode. It doesn’t deny autobiography, but it controls what might become too personal and slack, and it keeps at a distance the polemical and rather hectoring side of his personality, into which after a life of non-doing he is too ready to fall: the wish to display knowledge and settle accounts with the world (Naipaul, 2007).

A substantial number of scholars have examined and compared the two men so I won’t rehash the comparisons here.² The quote is intended to demonstrate only that praise is elicited by the exquisite descriptions of rural Bengal in Nirad Chaudhuri’s *Autobiography* but is held in tight reserve over writing that becomes ‘personal and slack’ and thus devoid of insight for writer and reader. This is not a type of writing which Naipaul can ever be found guilty of. One of those insights that motivates and is inscribed in all of his writing is this condition of RESS that afflicts people of the Indian diaspora. This is not to say that Naipaul was interested in this group as a racial category, a thing he vehemently rejected.³ It is to say that he would come to recognize in his other works and records of his travels, that all those who have experienced the dominion of co-

² I merely note two references: Niven (1978), and Rastogi (2006).

³ See for example Naipaul (1995).

lonialism or imperialism and attempt to answer the question who am I thereafter are in the process confronted by this complex set of attributes in their endeavour.

Perhaps it is necessary to repeat that Naipaul has generally been read as racist whereas, as this discussion of his representation of ABRESS demonstrates, the very opposite is true. Brent Staples' words will suffice for now to make the point:

Few writers of V. S. Naipaul's stature have been so consistently and aggressively misread on account of essence and racial literary politics. Much of the criticism stems not from what Mr. Naipaul writes but from expectations about what he ought to write, given that he is a (brown man of Indian descent) born into the brown and black society that is Trinidad. Alas, after a 40 year voyage as a writer, Mr. Naipaul has arrived at a time when his work is too often viewed through the filter of race. This would seem an impoverished way of seeing in any case. In V. S. Naipaul's case, a strictly racial reading amounts to no readings at all (1994: 9).

Other types of ABRESS

It is, therefore, very important to consider that there is another kind of ABRESS in the biographies and autobiographies produced by writers of Indian origin. For example, despite the fact that scholars like Vijay Mishra proclaim the indebtedness of their own self-development to their exposure to Naipaul's writing, their readings of his work fall short of the agency which he always allows his characters and the persons about whom he writes in his non-fictional work. This is particularly true when one takes into consideration Naipaul's views of other Indian writers who, in a clear case of life imitating art, can often emerge as doubles of his fictional characters. Mishra says, for example, that 'for the people of the old plantation-diaspora, the girmitee ideology is a ghost that reminds the son of the endless unhappiness of diaspora, wherein mourning never arrives due to its definition being rooted in absence' (2008: 70). In this formulation, there is no escape.

This statement therefore does not apply to any of the novels considered thus far. In fact, in these works we find Amartya Sen's *Argumentative Indian*, and between that subjectivity and girmitee ideology there is an almost unbridgeable chasm. Mishra defines girmitee ideology as 'a singular subaltern plantation experience that designates a form of consciousness, a system of imaginary beliefs, and defines a subaltern knowledge category, that grew out of the collective indenture ethos' (2008: 22). It is important to note that in questioning Mishra, one is not proposing that no damage was inflicted on the psyche of the

indentured; one is saying that the first argumentative stance accords agency to the subject while the second, in reading the self through the lens of damage and victimhood, in effect ends up lying by default and imposing a debilitating burden on an already overburdened subject.

It is particularly important to draw attention to the fact that the problem is starkly present in the representations of Indian women in supposedly factual autobiographical work in which they are denied the trajectory through the ABRESS. Instead, repression, erasure and suppression seem to be applied externally on perceptions of their strength, articulateness, intelligence, resilience and other qualities that are being reserved for the masculine by women writers. There is, thus, a worrying gender bias that many have had which may be having repercussions that no one has yet studied. While one would concede, for example, that Trinidadian gender and development scholar, Patricia Mohammed is right when she says that 'Indian femininity occupies an unfortunate position in Caribbean society' (2012: 1). Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Woman* definitely illustrates the point about overburdening. For instance, Bahadur explains her title in the following way:

... a coolie carries baggage. A coolie bears a burden. To me, that perfectly sums up the position of indentured women. They carried burdens. They had to meet the needs of both Indian men and British men on the plantations. They had to carry the weight of expectations: the expectation that they represent the honor of a culture, that they preserve a culture (2013: 70).

These are grand generalizations which are informed by an ethos of victimology, out of which the ethnographer / writer bestows an exceptionalism on one individual – her own great-grandmother, Sujaria. She describes her undertaking in the following terms:

The archives leave gaps. Missing, with few exceptions, are the voices of the women themselves. They did not leave behind diaries or letters. The vast majority wasn't literate, in English or in any Indian language. They did not tell their own stories, except indirectly, through the often-biased prism of government investigators and court officials who occasionally took their testimonials (2013: 32).

But the reader has no means of identifying how the book fills the gaps the writer confronts. This suggests that research projects are urgently needed to find out what the sources are upon which such generalizations can possibly have been based. Such projects would help us to understand what has been repressed, erased, and suppressed in order to arrive at such suspending statements that are so unlike those of the texts previously discussed. Moreover,

what differences of experience are hidden here to suspend every woman in these roles as everybody's mule? What are the effects of these discourses on real women's lives?

Indeed, Bahadur is relentless in pressing her case and concludes that coolieness is a condition that affects women specifically:

Was that what it would mean to be a "coolie woman": to be disgraced – and powerless to do anything about it? To not only *be* powerless, but made to *feel* just how powerless she was? Was "coolietude" not just an economic circumstance, not just a social condition, but also an emotional state? (2013: 70).

It is interesting to note, although it isn't possible to dwell on it here, that in contrast to negritude which demands the right to express the range of emotions and modes of being thought inherent to blackness, coolietude as conceived in Bahadur's book and elsewhere is to know oneself only as a powerless woman.

Brij Lal concurs in his similar view that 'a woman's world was tightly regulated, her field of action narrow. Always a mother, a daughter or a daughter-in-law, she was never – nor was she allowed to be – an individual in her own right' (2001: 13). Lal explains his overall project as follows:

Mr Tulsi's Store: A Fijian Journey is the result of that private investigation over many years. My main aim was not factual accuracy in the conventional sense of footnoted facts to support a conclusion. Rather, it was to discover the inner truths of a community's life, its fears, hopes and aspirations, its rituals and ceremonies that gave it purpose and cohesion, the way it celebrated life and mourned its passing, the way it educated its young and taught them about their place in the world ... *Mr Tulsi's Store* is my attempt to connect today's disconnected and dispersed generation of Indo-Fijians with their historical and cultural roots (2013: 7).

Lal, therefore, chooses to call his work 'faction', to signify that it is a fusion of facts and fiction but based on our discussion of biography and autobiography here, the methodology seems to be a rather slippery move to dictate what the past is to the supposedly ignorant young.

Such representations of women, in particular, seem to give new meaning entirely to Simon Gikandi's argument that the 'ambivalent location of women in the colonial economy has created what has come to be known as the 'complicity/resistance' dialectic' (1992: 122–123). Even more importantly, this study is most concerned with the fact that the latter representations seem oblivious to any but Cartesian conceptions of the self and are firmly embedded in

the status quo of unchanging victimology, what Chow calls 'the protestant ethnic.' Bahadur prefaces and ends her text with the same litany:

The power of her colonizers to name and misname her formed a key part of her story. To them, she was a coolie woman, a stock character possessing stereotyped qualities, which shaped who she was by limiting who she could ever be. The word coolie, in keeping with one of its original meanings, carries this baggage of colonialism on its back. It bears the burdens of history (2013: xxi).

Perhaps this way of thinking and behaving is the more sensible practical option as the world in which we live becomes more firmly split between beggars and donors, and perhaps not to be a victim is to have no place in it at all. Lal too, like Bahadur, begins and ends on the same note of lamentation which Mishra alludes to in his girit ideology:

... they seemed to be shipwrecked by fate in a place they did not, perhaps could not, fully embrace, and they could not return to a place they so dearly loved. They were a people caught in-between the tensions of culture and history, resisting assimilation into the ways of their adopted homeland, by re-enacting the archaic customs from a remembered past. And so time passed and memories of home faded, and, in the course of time, an intended temporary sojourn was transformed into permanent displacement (Lal, 2013: 27).

Or perhaps, just perhaps, it may be important to think about the pervasiveness of what I am calling the STABRESS, especially as discussed here in two dichotomous varieties, and to ask ourselves what and why in relation to the condition. I, therefore, want to end with a question. Gauri Vishwanathan once said that the 'representation of Indians as morally and intellectually deficient provided the ameliorative motive and self-righteous justification for colonial intervention' (1989: 11). What kind of intervention, I wonder, do the two types of representation of the STABRESS Indian require and on what basis would they have to be launched?

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