

CULTURE

THE CONFESSIONS OF A GREAT WRITER

V.S. NAIPAUL Nobel Laureate in literature 2001

The British writer speaks about his latest and controversial book, “The Masque of Africa”, in an exclusive interview to EL MUNDO.

“I am controversial because I tell what I see, I’m not interested in anything else”

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Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, at the age of 78, is more than accustomed to the controversies he has been raising for decades. Even if, maybe, they had never been so furious and violent as the ones that in Great Britain accompanied the publication of his new travel book, *The Masque of Africa*, which will be released in Spain next Spring published by Mondadori.

To write this book, V.S. Naipaul, by many considered the greatest living English writer, awarded with the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2001, traveled through six sub-Saharan countries (Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Gabon and South Africa) in search of Africa’s spiritual and religious heart. And what he reports to have found is a continent deeply conditioned by religious practices that affect all the fields of life, and which include magic, the divination of the future as well as animal and human sacrifices.

From the pages of *The Sunday Times* the writer Robert Harris tore to pieces the new book of the writer of Indian origin, born in Trinidad and living in England since the age of 18, asserting that some passages reminded him “the aberrant ideas of Oswald Mosley, the founder of the British fascist party”. *The Observer*, on the other hand, charges him with “a lack of rigor unworthy of a great artist considered by many Conrad’s heir”.

Nothing of all this seems to worry sir Vidia while putting some sugar in his coffee in Udine, a quiet town in the North-East of Italy, not far from Trieste. Naipaul has become an assiduous presence in these places, where he regularly comes every year since, five years ago, he became the president of the jury of the Nonino Prize, the prestigious literary prize that the homonymous grappa distillery has been awarding since 1975 and which he received in 1993, joining other eminent prize-winners as John Banville, Hugo Claus, Leonardo Sciascia and Javier Marías, the winner of this year’s edition.

We met him here, accompanied by his third wife, Nadira, Pakistani of origin, and always careful to his needs.

Question.- Which reasons convinced you to write this new book on African spirituality?

Answer.- The task of a writer is to write books. Sometimes it is very hard to find a topic. Not this time. I’ve traveled in Africa a lot, and writing a book like this seemed natural to me. I thought about it, made my evaluations and considered I could really do it. But in the end it’s the people like you who have to say if I succeeded or not.

Q.- And what about the religiousness you found in Africa, was it what you expected or were you surprised?

A.- Some things were new for me. For example, the concept of energy I found in Gabon surprised me.

Q.- I don't know if you agree, but in my opinion this is a pessimist book. After reading it, it leaves the sensation that Africa is trapped into a terrible and inhuman religiousness that conditions all the aspects of life and includes practices as awful as human sacrifices.

A.- I'm not going to judge. I limited myself to going there and telling what I saw.

Q.- In any case you have formed an opinion on it, haven't you?

A.- To tell the truth I haven't drawn any conclusions, I just wrote what I saw. I am neither optimist nor pessimist about Africa, I didn't give any merit opinion in my book, I just told what I saw as strictly as possible. Evaluations will be made by the people who will read the book.

«I like to arouse negative reactions, it means I'm still irritating»

«If your words don't have any effect it means you've entered the cycle of dying»

Q.- *The Masque of Africa*, anyway, has raised a lot of criticism. Many people accuse you of giving a dreadful and above all partial image of Africa ...

A.- Well, many of the things I wrote have given birth to comments of this kind. But we have to be patient and wait to see what will happen of these comments.

Q.- I suppose you're referring to the furious criticism and the accuses of being an anti-Muslim that accompanied the publication of *Among the Believers* and *Beyond Belief*, your two books on Islam ... And now, look: France has just forbidden the burka ...

A.- Exactly, that's what I'm referring to.

Q.- How do you react to criticism, are you indifferent to it or does it hurt you?

A.- (Long silence). I must confess I feel a certain pleasure when I cause a negative reaction, because it means I'm still irritating. And this is a good thing. Being able to irritate people is a way to know that your words keep on having some effect. If your words don't have any effect on the people it probably means you've entered the cycle of dying, do you understand?

Q.- But do you think the power African religion has on the people is greater than the one exercised, for example, by Islam or certain Christian fundamentalist currents?

A.- To tell the truth I haven't thought about it. I have never thought about religions or cultures in comparative terms. If this idea had come to my mind I would have asked the people I met during my trips, and on the contrary I didn't. It's a matter I'd like to keep open.

Q.- Are you a believer?

A.- No, I have no faith.

Q.- Forgive me if I tell you, but even if you say you don't judge, I feel the book distills a sort of intellectual superiority of yours. For example, when you say that without a written tradition but only an oral one, sub-Saharan Africa doesn't have the foundations on which its intellectual development can be built ...

A.- But that's exactly what I think. I think the lack of a written tradition is a deficiency. I think the lack of a written tradition is an intellectual weakness. Depending only on the oral tradition means you're never sure of the truth, that you always suspect History.

Q.- What surprised you most in this trip to Africa?

A.- The greatest discovery, for me, was to confirm that, even if it is a very large continent, the idea of magic, of the divination of the future and things like those is pretty much the same everywhere. It is the same in Uganda, Nigeria, Gabon and even South Africa. All over Africa the magic conditions life. Even in South Africa, a country where there has been a white culture for about 150 years. I'll tell you a story: we were at the muti market in South Africa, where they sell human and animal remains for magic practices, when we met the police. I was surprised and asked what they were

doing there. They told us they were hunting a very dangerous criminal and to capture him they needed the protection of magic. But I'll tell you more: in England, where, as you very well know, there are many immigrants, some of whom coming from places like Lagos, Nigeria and Ghana, about five years ago the body of a black boy without head and limbs was found in the Thames. That boy was sacrificed. They can criticize me as much as they want, but I'm sure that boy was sacrificed.

Q.- Do you feel that, now, you have become a controversial character and therefore anything you say or do there will always be someone ready to criticize you?

A.- Once more: I only try to tell the truth, what I see. Little matters if the authorities of Gabon will never allow me to get there anymore or if Uganda will prevent me from entering the country for the rest of my life. I told what I saw. And do you know why, maybe, I am controversial? Because I tell what I see, and don't care about anything else. As you said before, when I wrote *Among the Believers* (1981) there were people who turned up their nose and accused me of being an anti-Muslim. And when I wrote *Beyond Belief* (1998) they directly called me bastard, insulted and denigrated me. Today, on the contrary, many of those people commend me because, in their opinion, I was the only one who saw that something like what happened to the Twin Towers would take place, the only one who realized that jihadists didn't come from Saudi Arabia, but from countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Iran ... But the truth is that it is exactly the same whether they praise or criticize me. The only thing that matters is to follow my *dharma*.

Q.- Excuse me, I don't understand, to follow what?

A.- My *dharma*. It's an Indian concept, it means to be born to do something. I think I came into this world to write and tell what I see, and this is what I have done all my life long, this and nothing else. I'm not interested in criticism or praise, in this or that comment. I just follow my *dharma*, nothing else matters. But I'd like to add this: it is very easy to criticize a book like *The Masque of Africa* comfortably sitting in the office of a western university. These people's children, differently from the children of many Africans, are not mutilated, are not murdered and their corpses don't float in a river ... And more: I didn't write this book sitting comfortably in a hotel room. I went to Africa dragging my old and tired legs, and I also lived moments of fear. But I saw the things with my own eyes.

Q.- But doesn't it bother you to be called racist or fascist, the way *The Sunday Times* did after this latest book?

A.- No, you have to believe me, I really don't care about it at all. Besides, now I expect it, so it doesn't surprise me at all. The critic of *The Sunday Times* accused me of writing about Africa, or a part of Africa that is «really disgusting». Well, this is her judgment. The people of *The Sunday Times* think there is another way of writing about Africa. Yes, it's true: there are lots of radio programs devoted to African music, African dancing ... But in Africa also other things happen. And, above all, I think this attitude doesn't help Africa at all.

Q.- Truth is for you the most important thing, isn't it?

A.- Yes.

Q.- Let me ask you a personal question: is your love for truth that allowed Patrick French to write a biography in which, let me say, you are described like an insensible monster, sadist and misogynist? Especially when he tells about the ordeal of your first wife, Patricia Hale, who still convalescent from breast cancer reads that her husband, you, have never felt any sexual attraction towards her and resorted to prostitutes, probably contributing to her relapse and death two years later ...

«Everywhere in Africa, even if it is a vast continent, magic conditions life»

«I gave Patrick French free access to my papers, but his biography was an error»

A.- That biography was a bad, very bad error. And I must say that French didn't behave well at all. I gave him free access to my papers and spoke to him clearly, but he decided he didn't want to invade my privacy. At the beginning, when he discovered something he considered interesting, he came to talk to me. But from a certain moment, from the events starting in 1971, he gave up consulting me and limited himself to a one-sided vision of the facts. It's a bad book, really a bad book.

Q.- Is there anything of that book you would like to make clear now?

A.- No. But I hope there will be other biographies, and that they will be honest. I think Patrick was so impressed by a part of the material that he built a fantasy castle. For example, when he read a letter of my first wife, or of a lover, he didn't come and ask me whether the content of that letter was true or not. I would have told him, but he didn't come. And, doing so, he wrote a partial and unbalanced book, which more than a biography is a novel.

Q.- But isn't it supposed to be an authorized biography?

A.- Yes, it is an authorized biography but not accepted.

Q.- But, didn't French give you the manuscript so that you could read it before publication?

A.- Yes, but by that time I had already realized Patrick had decided to write the biography he wanted to, and so I didn't care about it anymore, and I didn't even read it. I felt very, very disappointed. I expected a biography and on the contrary I found a book of scandals, full of inaccuracies about the facts. But there will be another one, I hope.

Q.- Don't you think you could write it yourself?

A.- No, I couldn't do it. But I assure you I'm not afraid of the truth, and this is proved by the fact that I gave Patrick the letters of my first wife, in which she wrote terrible things about me. What I'm longing for is that someday somebody endowed with integrity and intelligence will understand what there is behind those letters. I never destroy a document, because I'm aware it is very difficult to reconstruct one's life without documents. I don't hide anything. If tomorrow you wrote me a letter, I would keep it, as I do with all (the letters).

Q.- Polemic and controversial as you are, aren't you afraid you might run into what happened to Céline, the 50th anniversary of whose death won't be celebrated in France because he was an anti-Semite?

A.- It might easily happen. But I have to live with it.

Q.- Had you ever imagined, when you were a young Trinidad immigrant in London, leading a hard and difficult life, that you would become a respected novelist, and that you would be awarded the Nobel Prize?

A.- No, it had never come into my mind I might win the Nobel. I wanted to be respected, sure, and I wanted to be famous. This is the main reason that pushed me to write. But I didn't have the ambition of winning any particular prizes.