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# Writers write life-writing: Turning the Imaginary World into Reality in V. S. Naipaul's "Jasmine" and Janet Frame's *To-the-Is-land: an Autobiography*

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## Abstract

"Jasmine" and "island" are proximate to nature. Both "jasmine" and "island" give strong literary appeal, denoting the specific region or landscape. The writers V. S. Naipaul and Janet Frame thus resort to "jasmine" and "is-land" respectively to write out their unique writing lives that are rooted in their origins - Trinidad (which is located in Caribbean) and New Zealand. In this essay, we will discuss how V. S. Naipaul and Janet Frame develop their abilities to write imaginatively, as shown in "Jasmine" and *To-the-Is-land: an Autobiography*.

[**Keywords:** Naipaul, Janet Frame; Trinidad, New Zealand; autobiography]

V. S. Naipaul was born in Trinidad, Caribbean, while Janet Frame was born in Dunedin, the South of New Zealand. Both Trinidad and New Zealand are the former British colonies. In the past, the indigenous West Indies lived in Caribbean while the indigenous Maori lived in New Zealand. Colonized by Britain, Trinidad and New Zealand have become foreign, alienated, and exotic. The natural settings of Trinidad and of New Zealand help to generate new ideas for the writers V. S. Naipaul and Janet Frame to write respectively.

In V. S. Naipaul's "Jasmine", the tropical forests in Caribbean intriguingly stimulate V. S. Naipaul to write. In "Jasmine", he writes that 'women (sway) like coconut trees; their skins (are) the colour of the sapodilla, the inside of their mouths the colour of a cut star-apple; their teeth (are) as white as coconut kernels; and when they (make) love they (groan) like bamboos in high wind.'<sup>i</sup> The tropical forests evoke "foreign" feelings, propelling him to write imaginatively. His fascination with the tropical forest possibly inspires him to name the life-writing "jasmine", the title of the second piece of writings in *The Overcrowded Barracoon and Other Articles*. In fact, the kind of flowers called "jasmine" blossoms in tropical and warm temperate regions of the Old World-Europe, Asia and Africa, and the surrounding islands. Jasmine in tropical regions attracts him. Indeed, as Timothy Weiss points out, 'while the plant (belongs) to the West Indian landscape, its name (is) part of his British education and the romance of his literary ambitions.'<sup>ii</sup> His separation of the word "jasmine" from the scent of the flower jasmine in childhood not only indicates his talents in playing the language game, but also '(focuses) imaginatively the *dislocations* within the experience and identity of V. S. Naipaul, a colonial Trinidadian of Asian origin writing about the Caribbean and West Indies for metropolitan English readers.'<sup>iii</sup> As Timothy Weiss emphasizes, 'Like his native Trinidad, the former British colony, he is part of, yet not part of the English world, both included in and excluded from it by a combination of inheritance and history: he is a writer on the margins.'<sup>iv</sup> The tropical forests in Caribbean evoke foreign feelings for V. S. Naipaul to write, and "jasmine", commonly found in the tropical regions in Caribbean, is what he has sensibly chosen to articulate his marginalized identity.

Unlike the tropical forests in Caribbean, New Zealand is made up of North and South Islands and numerous small islands. In Janet Frame's *To the Is-land: an Autobiography*, the New

Zealand natural elements have captured her, enabling her to explore “her place”. She writes, ‘I remember my overwhelming sense of anticipation and excitement at the world - the world being My Place by the fallen birch log, with the grass, the insects in the grass, the sky, the sheep and cows and rabbits - everything Outside. I remember my special feeling for the sky...’<sup>v</sup> A composite of islands surrounded by the sea, New Zealand wins the acclaim of its natural beauty. “The Land of the Long White Cloud” is named by the indigenous Maoris who live there. In the past, New Zealand was an agricultural land where lots of sheep and cows were found. In New Zealand, high quality of life with its proximity to nature is praised. Nowadays New Zealanders watch performance and visit exhibitions in leisure time. These are the selected views of the Is-land according to Janet Frame (Frame, p. 61). Similar to “jasmine” that features the former British colony Trinidad the marginalized writer V. S. Naipaul is in, the “Is-land” that Janet Frame manipulates symbolizes the present state of the former British colony New Zealand the marginalized woman writer Janet Frame is in. The word “island” that has been pronounced as “Is-“ land” by Janet Frame in childhood not only shows the creative talents of Janet Frame but also suggests a kind of newness that emerges from the original place or the former British colony New Zealand. *To-the Is-land: an Autobiography* is named as the title of the first volume of her autobiography, suggesting Janet Frame’s discovery of the self through the journey to her hometown New Zealand represented by the “Is-land”. The “Is-land”, the symbol of her home New Zealand, is an imaginary land through which Janet Frame can exercise her imagination to write creatively. The natural landscape of New Zealand allows Janet Frame to write imaginatively.

Indeed, the foreign feelings evoked by the two British colonies, Trinidad, and New Zealand, stir up mythical feelings of the places. Both Trinidad and New Zealand are rich in their myths. These myths enable N. S. Naipaul and Janet Frame to transform myths into writings respectively. In V. S. Naipaul’s “Jasmine”, although Trinidad is a small, remote and unimportant place in Caribbean, Trinidad could offer fantasy for V. S. Naipaul. V. S. Naipaul writes ‘The writer (is) protesting against what the English language had imposed on us. The language (is) ours, to us as we (please). The literature (is) like an alien mythology...To us, without a mythology, all literatures (are) foreign. Trinidad (is) small, remote and unimportant, and we (know) we could not hope to read in books of the life we saw about us. Books (come) from afar; they could offer only fantasy.’<sup>vi</sup> The exotic elements from the tropical forests in Trinidad offer V. S. Naipaul’s fantasy to write. This literature, the books about Trinidad is as foreign as an alien mythology. Because not many people could be able to read books about the life in Trinidad, it would be a great idea for V. S. Naipaul to transform what he sees in Trinidad into writing. Imbued with fantasy, Trinidad opens up the imaginative world for V. S. Naipaul to write.

Similar to Trinidad fraught with fantasy, New Zealand is filled with myths that point towards nature. The Maoris, the early inhabitants of New Zealand natives, have legends and myths through the oral tradition in the Maori language. Maori literally means normal, natural, ordinary. By passing on the myths- the heritage of New Zealand, from generation to generation, the writer Janet Frame is heading towards the imaginative space which is utterly poetic and literarily sensitive. In *To the Is-land: an Autobiography*, Janet Frame writes, ‘I set down the following record with its mixture of fact and truths and memories of truths and its direction always toward the Third Place, where the starting point is myth’<sup>vii</sup>. Like the colonized Trinidad, New Zealand is the ‘third place’<sup>viii</sup>, which means the Third-World country. As the starting point of the third world country New Zealand is myth, Janet Frame takes advantage of myths of New Zealand in her writing so as to mix reality with myth to make her writing more literarily appealing. The myths of New Zealand thus allow Janet Frame to write imaginatively.

The natural settings of Trinidad and of New Zealand create myths for the writers V. S. Naipaul and Janet Frame to write imaginatively. Given such settings, these writers who widely read attempt to make some efforts to transform what they have read into writing to create

masterpieces. How could they turn what they have read into writing? It would be interesting to find out how they turn the imaginative world into reality, as their ways of doing so could be inspiring creative writing methodologies by which we could write creatively.

In V. S. Naipaul's "Jasmine", the writer V. S. Naipaul transforms what has read into writing by adaptation. He finds everything in books is foreign that enables him to adapt everything for his Caribbean great works. He writes, 'everything in books (is) foreign, everything (has) to subjected to adaptation, and everything in, say, an English novel which (works) and (is) of value to me at once (ceases) to be specifically English.'<sup>x</sup> English novels he reads ceases to be English, and has been transformed into novels suitable for the specific region named Caribbean. He achieves this by turning some elements from English novels into the creation of his books. Some elements are accepted as convention, while some elements have been adapted to the Caribbean conditions. He even tries to adapt Dickens to Trinidad (Naipaul, p. 25). In N. S. Naipaul's "Jasmine", he writes 'Dicken's rain and drizzle I (turn) into tropical downpours; the snow and fog I (accept) as conventions of books.'<sup>x</sup> By adapting what he has read to the Caribbean setting, the writer V. S. Naipaul writes imaginatively. The writer V. S. Naipaul could transform what he reads from English novels into the imaginary Caribbean setting to make his works specifically regional ones.

Unlike the writer V. S. Naipaul who makes an effort to adapt what he reads to the Caribbean conditions, the writer Janet Frame writes by mixing the imaginative world with the reality. For example, she has been fascinated by Grimm's Fairy Tale lent by her friend Poppy insofar as she notices 'the world of living and the world of reading (become) linked in a way'. She reads "The Twelve Dancing Princesses, and she and the other listeners have become the Dancing Princess (Frame, p. 43). Another example is that after reading the story of the Brontes, she relates the death in the family of Brontes to understanding the deaths in her family (Frame, p. 95). What is striking though is that she often thinks the poets have entered her world to write about her sister Myrtle and the kingdom by the sea, mixing fact and fantasy in a poetic way (Frame, p. 101). Janet Frame loves to mix myths with reality. At the beginning of the book, in Part Two, right at the start, she asks 'The Ancestors- who were they, the myth and the reality?'<sup>xi</sup> Janet Frame is a great dreamer. She likes to mix the fantasy world with the reality. With the power of imagination, Janet Frame mixes the imaginative world with the reality to make her writings more dreamily fascinating.

In the process of writing, it is found out that the writer V. S. Naipaul rejects the familiar words from home, while the writer Janet Frame accepts the familiar words from home. In V. S. Naipaul's "Jasmine", the writer V. S. Naipaul prefers England to Trinidad. He thinks the names of the places in Trinidad are 'petty'<sup>xii</sup> and 'ridiculous'<sup>xiii</sup>. 'Frederick Street in Port of Spain, Marine Sqaure, the districts of Laventille and Bataria'<sup>xiv</sup>. He thinks that in the creation of his works, the attempt to use these names requires courage. By contrast, Janet Frame uses the familiar places from her home New Zealand, such as 'Ferry Street, Wyndam' '56 Eden Street, Oamaru' in various chapters of the autobiography so that all the chapters seem to be connected to one another like a railway in the journey to the "Is-land". As Baisnee notes, the words are linked imaginatively in a railway network (Baisnee, p. 105). Both writers V. S. Naipaul and Janet Frame have different attitudes towards using the names from their home in the creation of their works.

How the great writers V. S. Naipaul and Janet Frame create great works could then lead us to think about the writing life of V. S. Naipaul and of Janet Frame. Both V. S. Naipaul and Janet Frame think Literature is fantasy. It is through literature as fantasy that they begin to write. Both of them have decided to become writers at an early age; however, V. S. Naipaul did not start writing seriously until 23 (Naipaul, p. 26), while Janet Frame started writing since childhood

(Janet Frame, p. 66) . V. S. Naipaul had left Trinidad with the ambition of writing at the age of 18, while Janet Frame went to London at the age of 32. Both of them live in colonized countries, yet both of them have been to England before. It would be interesting to discuss what factors constitute their writing life. In the following part, the four factors- the school's training, the writer's commitment to society, the writer's love of language, the private world of the writer will be discussed to understand how the two great writers write behind the scene of turning the imaginative world into reality.

In V. S. Naipaul's "Jasmine", V. S. Naipaul writes that his training at school does not help him much. He writes 'I (seek) continuously to relate literature to life. My training at school doesn't help. We have few libraries, few histories of literature to turn to...' <sup>xv</sup> By contrast, Janet Frame's school training could train Janet Frame to be literarily sensitive. In school, she makes the library subscription that becomes a family affair of hers. In *To-the-Is-land: an Autobiography*, she writes 'my life (centers) on my schoolwork and my walks on the hill and reading and reading and trying to write poetry. I (am) beginning to find that when I (answer) a question in school, the reaction of the class and the teacher (is) one of surprise, often amusement. 'Jean's so original' the teacher says one day...' <sup>xvi</sup> Janet Frame's life centers on her school work. She practices drama, writes poems to win awards in competitions, reading stories in Speech day (Frame, p. 112), and even becomes part of the small group of scholars, in which she meets W. W. who is advanced in reading (Frame, p. 100). Comparatively speaking, Janet Frame is more literarily trained than V. S. Naipaul, as V. S. Naipaul thinks the school does not help him much.

Both V. S. Naipaul and Janet Frame have different commitments to society when they write. The social segregation in Trinidad, which is the nature of society at his time, gives him the vision of not separating the writer from society. The social division between rich and poor in society is what he is aware of when he writes. V. S. Naipaul writes, 'I (go) to books for a special of participation. The only social division I (accept) is that between rich and poor... I might adapt Dickens to Trinidad, but it (seems) impossible that the life I (know) in Trinidad could ever be turned into a book, but no writer, however, individual his vision, could be separated from his society. The vision (is) alien...' <sup>xvii</sup> Conscious of the class differences due to the income gap between the rich and the poor, he treats writing as a special participation in society. Similarly, Janet Frame transports the others, such as beggars and thieves, into her world. The other world's arrival into her world enables her to write out the imaginary writings. In *To-the-Is-land: an Autobiography*, she writes 'gypsies, beggars, robbers, swaggers, thieves, all the outcast victims of misfortune who yet might be angels in disguise, (have) become part of my dreams and comprehension of the Outside World.' <sup>xviii</sup> Having deeply felt the sufferings of the outcasts, Janet Frame writes out the Outside World so as to discover herself. She realizes the inner self is different from the Outside World that the outcast victims occupy. Both V. S. Naipaul and Janet Frame have different social commitments. V. S. Naipaul is aware of the social segregation- class distinctions in Trinidad while Janet Frame shares the suffering feelings of the outcast victims in New Zealand.

Both V. S. Naipaul and Janet Frame are great lovers of language. A good language-game player who can master language sophisticatedly, both of them like to seek meanings of word by isolation. V. S. Naipaul says, 'My taste for literature (has) developed into a love of language, the word in isolation.' <sup>xix</sup> To V. S. Naipaul, in his childhood, the scent of the flower jasmine is separated from the name of the word "jasmine", propelling him to think of the idea that the language can be so deceptive. After all these years, he realizes that "jasmine" is 'a word in a book, a word to play with, something removed from the dull vegetation I knew' <sup>xx</sup>. As discussed above, the separation of the whiff of the flower jasmine from the word "jasmine" suggests the marginality of the writer V. S. Naipaul, according to Timothy Weiss. V. S. Naipaul has the capacity to isolate words to play around with language since childhood. Likewise, Janet Frame likes to

isolate words and wonder the possibility of seeking the truth in language. She doubts the meanings of words, for example, "decide" "destination", "observation", "adventure" and "permanent waves", and often questions which word she should use among words that look similar. At one time argues with Myrtle over the pronunciation of the word "Island" and insists on pronouncing the word "Island" as "Is"-"land". As discussed above, the pronunciation of the word "Is"-"land" signifies the creativity of the writer Janet Frame. Occasionally, she argues with Myrtle over the appropriateness of certain words in poetry writing. Janet Frame is talented in language since she is small. In childhood, she begins to collect words that are labeled as poetic, such as stars, soft, and deep (Frame, p. 93). Both V. S. Naipaul and Janet Frame are good masters of language, since they are young.

Both V. S. Naipaul and Janet Frame have developed a private world of their own out of writing. In V. S. Naipaul's "Jasmine", V. S. Naipaul writes, 'writing develops into the private language of a particular society.<sup>xxi</sup>' Through writing, V. S. Naipaul has developed a private language of his society. He could see the class distinction between the rich and the poor which is getting more and more 'inward'<sup>xxii</sup>. Therefore, we can see that in the period of internationalism, literatures are turning more and more inward, developing languages there are more and more private (Naipaul, p. 29). According to Naipaul, perhaps in the end, 'literature will write itself out, and all its pleasure will be those of words.'<sup>xxiii</sup> Similarly, Janet Frame develops 'a place'<sup>xxiv</sup> of her own to explore her-self when writing (Janet Frame, p. 14). The beggars, swaggers, and other victims belong to the perception of the outside world, which serve as a contrast to her inner space. Janet Frame develops her own world by her intelligent use of language. She finds her way out by articulating herself in her place. The outside world does not matter to her. The others in the outside world are only dreams for her to write about to uncover herself. Both V. S. Naipaul and Janet Frame have the private space, by which they could discover themselves in writing.

To conclude, V. S. Naipaul and Janet Frame are both great writers. The respective natural settings of Trinidad and New Zealand constitute myths, which in return enable them to write imaginatively. In the writing process, they have different treatments of familiar words from home. From the writing life of V. S. Naipaul, and Janet Frame, we could understand the four factors that shape them- the school's training, the writer's commitment to society, the writer's love of language, and the private world of the writer. All these help us to understand the writer's life more deeply. Both V. S. Naipaul and Janet Frame are two great writers whom we should admire, as they have the capacity to turn the imaginative world into reality beautifully.

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### Endnotes:

<sup>i</sup> V. S. Naipaul, "Jasmine" in *The Overcrowded Barracoon and Other Articles*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973, p. 23

<sup>ii</sup> Timothy Weiss. *On the Margins. The Art of Exile* in V. S. Naipaul, Amherst: the University of Massachusetts Press, 1992, p. 3-4

<sup>iii</sup> *ibid*, p. 3

<sup>iv</sup> *ibid*, p. 3

<sup>v</sup> Janet Frame, *To the Is-land: an Autobiography*, New York : G. Braziller, 1982, p. 14

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- <sup>vi</sup> V. S. Naipaul, "Jasmine" in *The Overcrowded Barracoon and Other Articles*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973, p. 23
- <sup>vii</sup> Janet Frame, *To the Is-land: an Autobiography*, New York : G. Braziller, 1982, p. 7
- <sup>viii</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>ix</sup> V. S. Naipaul, "Jasmine" in *The Overcrowded Barracoon and Other Articles*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973, p. 24
- <sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xi</sup> Janet Frame, *To the Is-land: an Autobiography*, New York : G. Braziller, 1982,p. 7
- <sup>xii</sup> V. S. Naipaul, "Jasmine" in *The Overcrowded Barracoon and Other Articles*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973, p. 25
- <sup>xiii</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>xiv</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>xv</sup> *ibid.*, p. 27
- <sup>xvi</sup> Janet Frame, *To the Is-land: an Autobiography*, New York : G. Braziller, 1982, p. 109
- <sup>xvii</sup> V. S. Naipaul, "Jasmine" in *The Overcrowded Barracoon and Other Articles*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973, p. 24
- <sup>xviii</sup> Janet Frame, *To the Is-land: an Autobiography*, New York : G. Braziller, 1982, p. 34
- <sup>xix</sup> V. S. Naipaul, "Jasmine" in *The Overcrowded Barracoon and Other Articles*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973,p. 26
- <sup>xx</sup> *ibid.*, p. 29
- <sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28
- <sup>xxii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xxiii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Janet Frame, *To the Is-land: an Autobiography*, New York : G. Braziller, 1982,, p. 14

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