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**Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness*: A Critique****Mr. Pankaj Vaishnav***Asst. Professor, Sinhgad College of Arts and Commerce, Pune, (M.S.) India***Dr. R.S. Zirange***Head, Postgraduate Department of English, Bharati Vidyapeeth University, Pune, (M.S.) India***Abstract**

This paper aims to reread the ambivalent nature of V. S. Naipaul's first Indian travelogue *An Area of Darkness*. The narrative dramatizes the ambivalent relationship of the writer in the form of being an 'insider' and 'outsider', resulting in harsh commentary on socio-political life of Indian society. India being a mythical land of his childhood matches nowhere near when he encounters it in 1962 visit. Unable to find a solution, he ends up with the projection of negative aspects of India. Therefore, this paper tries to evaluate this commentary of the nation in the light of what he saw and experienced in India.

**Key Words:** Naipaul, insider, outsider, nation.

This paper aims to reread the travel narrative of V. S. Naipaul *An Area of Darkness* (1964) in the context of 'ambivalence' that often seems to elude most readers. It is said 'rereading' because the works of this postcolonial travel writer have already enjoyed too many critical encounters in the postcolonial academia, and as such readers will be rather puzzled to hear of yet another reading of the same. It goes without saying that India is the only part of the subcontinent that remains as part of the 'supposed' areas of the original 'homeland' of the colonial population of Indian descent in the West Indies. Because of this, the colonial and postcolonial geopolitical history of the Indian subcontinent matters most to an estranged (colonial) Indian like Naipaul while attempting to relate to, and engage with his own sense of identity.

Naipaul narrates his maiden Indian adventure in 1962, one and half decades

after India's independence. This journey, taken as a kind of pilgrimage to the ancient holy land of *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* as learnt in his childhood, held many surprises and shocks for him as well as his readers, especially the Indians. The narrative can be seen as a dramatization of the distance the colonial like V. S. Naipaul who travelled from the 'originary' home of the Indian subcontinent under the displacing and disturbing agency of British colonialism. It seems, therefore, a dramatization of the attempts of an estranged Indian to come to terms with the contemporary version of the long abandoned 'homeland.' At the same time, it seems to be the inevitable but painful realization of the impossibility of a project of 'going home'. In this respect, an eminent critic, Suvir Kaul opines in *An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English* that:

There are burdens Naipaul brought to India when he visited it in 1962; added to them was the special weight of his cultural inheritance, his sense that the 'Indian' aspect of his Trinidadian sensibility could be explained, or discovered perhaps in some form of originary plenitude, in the land of his maternal grandfather. (Mehrotra, 2003, 235)

The narrative begins with the uneasy feeling Naipaul experiences as he draws near India. In spite of his education in London, his childhood dreams of the mythical India come as a disturbing memory. A half-hearted expectation, despite the possibility of getting disheartened, plays hide and seek. But, the unfolding of a poor, ugly India shocks the visitor beyond his control. So, he says:

But in spite of knowledge, this seemed ordinary and inappropriate! Perhaps all lands of myth were like this: dazzling with light, familiar to drabness, the margins of the sea unremarkably littered, until the moment of departure. (Naipaul, 1964, 39)

The moment of arrival at his destination becomes the moment of panic for the impending loss of the dream version of the land, and of his own innocence. According to Suvir Kaul:

The opening sections of *An Area of Darkness* are thus often about the loss of voice and self-possession (including his now famous description of his attempts to rescue two bottles of liquor from the clutches of customs bureaucracy that then administered liquor licenses in a Bombay under prohibition). What follows in the travelogue can be understood, in all its

richness of reportage and observation and its failure of spirit and empathy, as Naipaul's attempts to recover his bearings, to 'impose' himself in his surroundings. (Mehrotra, 2003, 236)

The immensity of the very act of relating himself to a country that had never been his, except in the mythical versions of the colonial memory which remained significant to his sense of a growing self itself, was there to add to this panic.

The predicament of assuming this estranged Indian self is revealed in his nervous outburst at the fear of being faceless in the Indian crowds at Bombay. Becoming indistinct in the 'sameness' with the Indians, his strangeness denied, Naipaul finds himself 'invisible'. Perhaps, for the first time his Indianness threatens to overwhelm his individuality. He notes:

I had been made by Trinidad and England; recognition of my difference was necessary to me, I felt the need to impose myself, and didn't know how. (Naipaul, 1964, 39).

It seems the enigma of appearing in the 'sameness' makes him long for 'difference.' The moment of arriving at a sense of Indian identity is deferred as he realizes that this is not what he wants. This deferral is not only from his Indianness to something non-Indian; it is also a deferral from identification in terms of race, religion and culture to the assertion of its unsuitability or inadequacy.

It appears the colonial-Indian-Hindu identity that Naipaul assumes for himself is based not on continuity and, in the chapter "Fantasy and Ruins," Naipaul's colonial

hybridity reveals more of its menacing mimicry. The reminders of the British rule in India 'laid bare' the fantasy Naipaul had been nurturing of India of his childhood imagination. Naipaul says:

This confirmation (of complete British possession of India) laid bare a small area of self-deception which, below knowledge and self-knowledge, had survived in that part of my mind which held as a possibility of the existence of the white Himalayan cones against a cold blue sky, as in the religious pictures in my grandmother's house (Naipaul, 1964, 199).

An idea of India as a 'whole' had been the source of respite in the alienness, in West Indies. Now, in his writing, in the midst of Indian despair, he finds the hollowness of his earlier fantasy of an Indian self. But the present act of writing up of his 'Indianness' only can separate him from that past.

It seems to be this predicament of the disillusionment of the colonial traveller that brings Naipaul to a conflict with India or Indians. As an eminent critic Suman Gupta says:

In *An Area of Darkness* Naipaul is concerned primarily with describing the nuances of the unique kind of colonial mimicry he found in India, and with charting its (largely adverse) effects. That is the importance of this book: in his first encounter with India Naipaul doesn't try to delve into its essentially Indian depths, he is content to examine its peculiar old world variety of colonial mimicry and to observe the effects. (Gupta, 2010, 80)

As the above comment suggests, the book is filled with harsh commentary on India. The colonial is critical not only of the imperial project of the British in India, but also of the Indians who act as the inheritors of the colonizers and continue with the colonial fantasy. While experiencing the receding images of his childhood memories of an Indian community life in Trinidad, his exposure to the attitudes of the newly liberated Indians leads to serious doubts about the very validity of the same: he demands an explanation. In *Routes: Travel and Translation in the late Twentieth Century*, Clifford makes a bold remark when he says: "when travel...becomes a kind of norm, dwelling demands explanation". (Clifford, 1997, 5)

It appears that *An Area of Darkness* is notorious precisely for the demands for an explanation from the people 'dwelling' at home, for their so-called 'return to the pre-colonial past' after liberation from British rule. *An Area* narrates the difficult encounter of Naipaul with the supposed complacency, national pride or to be precise, postcolonial exultation. Often the narrative digs at the willful erasure of memories of colonial translation of the people inhabiting contemporary India in the face of the remains of the vast colonial apparatus, including the inherited bureaucracy which was as cumbersome, inefficient and degrading as the earlier caste-system used to be. In fact, Naipaul recognizes the traces of Indian slavery and casteism in contemporary stratified bureaucracy. What is particularly more irritating, for Naipaul, is the presence of British architecture displaying the remains of the vainglorious mythical

colonial grandeur in the midst of widespread poverty, degradation and the ruins of earlier royal structures.

It will be pertinent to refer to the ambivalence that Naipaul nurtures *vis a vis* his cultural memory, in spite of his difference:

I had rejected tradition; yet how can I explain my feeling when I heard that in Bombay they used candles and electric bulbs for the Diwali festival, and not the rustic clay lamps, of immemorial design, which in Trinidad we still used. (Naipaul, 1964, 31)

While it would be too naive to look for the nostalgic outburst in these words, it will be equally fallacious to assume that Naipaul finds the Indians totally cleansed of the past. On the contrary, he questions the rather unproblematic acceptance of the colonial and pre-colonial history. Their 'inheritance' of the imposed grandeur of the British Raj, their claims to have made a return to the pre-British past against their spectacular blindness to the othered Indians within - the untouchables, the poor, the unhygienic living conditions - these were sufficient enough for Naipaul to express his strong disagreement with much of India. However, he finds at least one Indian i.e. Gandhi, worth praising for his new vision of India, whom Naipaul considers as someone who had learned to see himself as the *other*, different from the mythical self. He says:

He looked at India as no Indian was able to; his vision was direct, and this directness was, and is, revolutionary. He sees exactly what the visitor sees; he does not ignore the obvious. He sees the beggars and the shameless pundits

and the filth of Banaras; he sees the atrocious sanitary habits of doctors, lawyers and journalists. He sees the Indian callousness, the Indian refusal to see. No Indian attitude escapes him, no Indian problem; he looks down to the roots of the static society. (Naipaul, 1964, 74)

Against this backdrop, one particular dramatic action on the part of Naipaul is worth mentioning. It is the refusal to witness one of the symbols of the Indian (Hindu) myths that every Indian carries or remembers - the *lingam* of Amarnath Cave. Every year, during a particular period, thousands of Hindus make their pilgrimages to the mountains of Kashmir, to see the natural ice-structure symbolizing the *lingam* (phallus) of Shiva, the Hindu God of Destruction. Naipaul finds himself taking part in that annual pilgrimage accompanied by his Muslim aide, Aziz. Naipaul, apparently due to the physical awkwardness associated with the entry into the cave, decides not to go inside to see the *lingam*, instead, allowing Aziz to do so. As a dramatic relief, Aziz comes out to tell him that he could not see any *lingam*, as it had not formed that year. While the absence of the mythical symbol can be explained away as co-incident, Naipaul's refusal to enter the cave to witness the origin of that symbol, and be gratified, is what attracts our attention. It is a deliberate choice to refuse identity - to let myth remain as myth, the trace of an absence. At the same time he is pricked by the explanations from a fellow pilgrim: "You don't come for the *lingam*, it's the spirit of the thing" (Naipaul, 1964, 182). He is less than amused by the desire for the symbol of a symbol.



It seems, Naipaul is both, alternatively, an 'Indian' and a 'westerner' in India, and this fusion causes trouble. A critic on Naipaul, Chandra Chatterjee says: "Naipaul's perceptions about India are coloured by an inevitable insider-outsider conflict. He moans the way that the Indians had to see themselves through European eyes to be aware of their own spirituality". (Panwar, 2007, 108)

It appears that Naipaul's joy and exaltation come from his Brahmin self and his anger and negativity come from the inherent western self. So, one can say that this type of identity is responsible for creating the sense of cultural displacement in him. This cultural displacement of West Indian and East Indian implies Naipaul's intellectual rejection of Indian ways and morals. It appears that he finds it difficult to eradicate it from his subconscious mind completely. It results in a conflict about taking an ironic stand towards East on one hand, while on the other hand, Naipaul's self perception of not being accepted in West Indies frustrates him further.

Immediately after its publication, ?????????? the then Indian government imposed a ban on it. In the West, it was hailed as a scathing but truthful vision. It appears to be misinterpreted in the west as well as in India. It was strictly not a travelogue as Paul Theroux declares on the cover of its penguin edition, 'A master piece of travel-writing...wise, original'. Likewise it was not, "darkness, packed with a kind of life which is death, a negation, a distortion and degradation from which he is glad finally to escape".(Ezekiel, 1974, 78) It

seems to be the meeting ground of an 'insider' and an 'outsider' in his homeland.

Naipaul's engagement with India is not one way process. It appears to be complicated case of action and reaction being recorded against a background that is equally complicated. Naipaul has written of the idea of his Hindu-Brahmin self that survived as a small area of 'self-deception'. He has recorded that he had been brought up in a double world: the closed Hindu world of his grandmother's family and the open outside world. Both these worlds were separate and secreted from each other. In the similar way, Naipaul's two selves of an 'insider' and 'outsider' separated and reacted differently to the situations. It was likely to be a double struggle for Naipaul in *An Area of Darkness*. It is the struggle to establish a perspective to find the meaning of India; at the same time it appears to be a struggle to discover the process through which the meaning could be unravelled.

The book ends in ambivalence. There could not have been any other possible ending. Though the book is full of commentary of darkness about India, as Naipaul defined it in the beginning, it is that aspect of India or that aspect of Indian sensibility which remains impenetrable for him. The area of light is the area of his "experience, in time and place."(Naipaul, 1964, 30) Naipaul has expressed in his own words that he has been unable to express his briefly grasped understanding of the philosophy that is at the heart of India. He says: "I felt it as something true which I could never adequately express and never seize again." (Naipaul, 1964, 266)

The value of *An Area of Darkness* is that the book and its critics have documented various aspects of India. India was never presented through a diasporic vision. Never before was so much talk had been made by the critics about the commentary to be right or wrong about India. There is no potent thesis about India which can help us to scale the opinions of Naipaul about India. The

book describes the problematic relations of Naipaul with India, so it is full of confusion and contradiction. We notice frequent notes of the writer's identification with India at a personal level. He never wants India 'to sink', so he returns with more books on India, attempting to analyze its problems with positive views.

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