

Searching for a House for Sir Naipaul in an Area of Darkness

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Abstract

Ancestrally related to India, born and brought up in Trinidad, Naipaul decides to settle in England and write mostly about non-English people and society. Circumstances had sent his grandfather out of India but he voluntarily left Trinidad for England, for in the simple society of Trinidad there existed no literary tradition or symbol to help him pursue his creative ambition. But in England he realises, "I can never hope to know about people here (of England) as I do about Trinidad Indians." Migration of any kind and especially under colonial compulsion is not just an economic and political phenomenon. In its reach and impact it acquires psychological and cultural dimensions. It generates a sense of alienation of being uprooted and raises questions of belonging and identity. In order to elaborate this point we propose to examine V S Naipaul's relationship with India as it emerges in his 'India : An area of Darkness'. In our analysis we will also take into account his other two works on India constituting together Indian trilogy: India: A Wounded Civilization and India: A Million Mutinies Now.

Key Words: *Migration, Identity, Despondency, Hypocrisy, Gandhi, Nationalism*

Introduction

On the title page of the novel *Half A Life* (2001), Naipaul uses the soliloquy of a character of the book itself as an epigraph:

The air was hot and stale inside. Looking out from the bedroom window, through wire netting and dead insects, [...] Willie thought, 'I don't know where I am, I don't think I can pick my way back. I don't ever want this view to become familiar. I must not unpack. I must never behave as though I am staying. (HAL 1)

The admission or confession of Willie Somerset Ram Chandran that he doesn't know where he is, and he doesn't think he

can pick his way back, clearly dramatizes the dilemma and predicament with which Naipaul has been living all his life. In fact, it would hardly be an exaggeration to suggest that the entire literary endeavours of Naipaul are directed primarily at overcoming the fate of Willie Ramachandran. Unlike Willie Ramachandran, however, Naipaul wants to know for sure as to who he is and where he should be. Born to a family of Indian immigrant in Trinidad, Naipaul could never identify himself with the place. Even though he loved the natural beauty of the place, he always felt a sort of distance between himself and the local life. Talking of his interaction or the lack of it with the locals,

when he was in his grandmother's house in Port of Spain, Naipaul says:

To stand beside the banisters on the steps gave a perfect view of the street and the people. I got to know the people well, though I never spoke to them and they never spoke to me. I got to know their clothes and style and voices. (AWP 1)

Hence, Naipaul's knowledge of the people on the street remained detached, and without personal touch.

Naipaul's inability to identify himself with the place of his birth is hardly helped by his being misfit in his family. As they were Brahmins from the then United Province, India, they were quite orthodox in their belief, and the household atmosphere was elaborately ritualistic. Young Naipaul neither knew the language of the ritual nor had the inclination to understand its symbolism. As he says that, 'though growing up in an orthodox family, I remained almost totally ignorant of Hinduism (AAD 27).

Moreover, the language that was spoken in his family and the Indian community there was Hindi, which though he could understand but could not speak. It must have proved a kind handicap in his personal communication, as he acknowledges "when older people in our joint family spoke to me in Hindi I replied in English" (AWP 1). Incidentally, it was the English language in which he had set his goal of realizing his writing ambition. But what he comes to understand much early in his life was that, being in Trinidad, a small island, it was not possible to produce a great literature. Elaborating on this Naipaul says:

It was something we, with literary ambitions from these islands, all had to face: small places with simple economies bred small people with simple destinies. Their literary possibilities, like their economic possibilities were as narrow as their human possibilities. They didn't give a fiction writer or a poet much to write about; they cramped and quickly exhausted a talent which in a larger and more varied space might have spread its wing and done unsuspected things. (AWP 16)

Thus, Naipaul was convinced that small places would give rise in all probability, to a narrow creative vision. It is with this handicap that many of the eminent names like Derek Walcott, Edgar Mittelholzer, Samuel Selvon etc. in Caribbean literature, in Naipaul's view, had to work under (AWP 26).

Thus Naipaul, who claims to be a born unbeliever, amidst the orthodoxy of his family and a quite bleak prospect for a writer takes a vow at the age of 12 to leave the place Trinidad in 5 years, which he did in 1950, when he came to London. Here he tried simultaneously to move in two directions: (a) pursuing his studies and (b) shaping up his career as a writer.

But very soon he realizes that though London can provide him with a house it cannot be his home. To quote Naipaul: "I come to London. It had become the centre of my world and I had worked hard to come to it. And I was lost. London was centre of my world. I had been misled [...]. It was a good place for getting lost in a city no one ever knew (AAD 18).

And he goes on further,

Here I became no more than an inhabitant of a big city robbed of loyalties, time passing taking me away from what I was, thrown more and more into myself [...]. All mythical Lands faded in the big city. I was confined to a smaller world than I had ever known. I become my flat, my desk, my name. (AAD 38)

Thus, his wish to escape the small and confined world of the Caribbean islands and to become part of a larger world remains unrealized even in London. Very soon, he realizes that the European or English life is far too away from his experience to enable him to make it a subject of his writing. Naturally he falls back on his childhood experience of the Indian immigrants of Trinidad. This decision to focus on the Caribbean Indian life was also helped by his belief that fiction writing was a serious business, and hence, be done with all sincerity. The novel, according to Naipaul, is not an individual fantasy, it is a form of social inquiry (IAWC 8).

It was his sincerity that he mostly kept himself confined to the limited world of the Caribbean Indian, even though he was criticized and rebuked by writers from the West Indies, notably by George Lamming, for not paying sufficient attention in his books to non-Indian groups (AAD 30).

Thus, with experience of the small world of a small Indian community in Trinidad, he undertakes travels primarily to enlarge his world of experience, as it was essential, in his view, for a writer of the small place like him. In *A Writer's People* he says, "every writer of the region has to

find a way of going on or off not drying up, of overcoming the limitations of the place" (AAD 26).

But travels, while providing opportunities to know the world and the people, are also a means to know the self. As Naipaul says, "I cannot travel only for the sight" (IAWC 8). In reality, the starting point of his travels, especially those of India, has been an inquiry into his self.

Naipaul's search for his self, his root and identity in India has resulted in three travel accounts acclaimed as Indian Trilogy: *An Area of Darkness* (1964), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977) and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990). These three books are a sincere enquiry into Indian's outlook of life and the world, Indian psyche and attitudes, movements of history and the role of intellectuals, individual and society, religion and politics, patriotism and propaganda. All these books of Naipaul's have done very well in India in terms of sales but not in terms of appreciation. *An Area of Darkness* was found cantankerous with lapidary grace and piety, whereas *India: A Wounded Civilization* was said to contain vitriolic bite and numbing pessimism. However, *India: A Million Mutinies Now* has been appreciated by many as a serene¹⁶ and sincere consideration of situations in India. Some Indian scholars have even concluded that Naipaul lacks sympathy and understanding of India. According to Prof M.K. Naik, "V.S. Naipaul's Indian ancestry is indisputable, but he is so much of an outsider when he writes about India and Indians, and so much of an outsider while

dealing with Caribbean life and character” (4).

Edward Said attributes fault finding attitude in Naipaul to Joseph Conrad's bad influence on him. According to him:

In one important respect, latter writers like Graham Greene and V.S. Naipaul have followed Conrad's unfortunate example: when there is something indigenous to be described it is, following Conrad, unutterably corrupt, degenerate and irredeemable. (Cedric 168)

But one does not feel inclined to easily agree with either Prof. Naik or Edward Said. Naipaul may have had spent his childhood in the Caribbean island, but he has studied India and studied a lot about India. Moreover, there is no basis for having doubts about Naipaul's sincerity in having the desire to know India from close quarters.

Having settled the question why Naipaul takes travels especially travels to India so seriously - because it enlarges his creative vision, adds to his experience of life, and helps him to define who or what he is - there remain broadly two issues to consider:

(i) Why does Naipaul write about India and Indians the way he does?

(ii) Why do Indians respond to his writings the way they do?

As a child Naipaul was a keen observer of things around him. Yet his knowledge of the Caribbean life remained limited to that of the Indian immigrants which subsequently became basis for the creative

vision of his novels. The urge to know this Indian world - its beliefs, doubts, psyche, religion etc. - in depth was bound to drive him to see and feel India as it was in reality and not as it was in scholarly books or in his father's stories. Recalling the childhood notion of India, Naipaul says:

India had, in a special way, been the country from which my grandfather came, a country never physically described and therefore never real, a country out in the void beyond the dot of Trinidad; from it our journey was final. It was a country suspended in time. (AAD 21)

Naipaul's urge to be intimate with India in concrete terms was whetted by his realization of the existence of a very complex kind of relationship between himself and India. As he says: “India is for me a difficult country. It isn't my home and cannot be my home, and yet I cannot reject it or be indifferent to it [...]. I am at once too close and too far” (AAD 42).

So whatever Geography and Politics may say Naipaul is constantly aware of the Indian blood in him. With such awareness he cannot be expected to be anything but sincere in matters dealing with India.

Naipaul's criticisms of India, which have mostly been pathological can also be seen as an attempt to draw attention towards him. Incidentally, it is Naipaul himself who provides basis for such an assumption when he declares:

In Trinidad to be Indian was to be distinctive. To be anything there was distinctive, difference was each man's

attribute. To be an Indian in England was distinctive, in Egypt it was more so. Now in Bombay I entered a shop or a restaurant and awaited a special quality of response. And there was nothing. It was like being divided part of my reality. (AAD 39)

This quotation might appear to support the above hypothesis. But we know

that Naipaul in the past has been known for his forthright, often unpleasant remarks, and not for saying things to elicit a particular response. However, it is true that he never hesitated saying things even if unpleasant, when he had the hunch of its truth. A case in point is his long friendship (1957-1994) with the British author Anthony Powell. It came to an abrupt end in 1994 when Naipaul had to review his book. It made him remark that "it may be that the friendship lasted all this time because I had not examined his work" (AWP 41).

Thus Naipaul's criticism of India and the Indians grows out perhaps of his deep rooted attachment with the country and its culture and civilization. He doesn't seem to be taking a sadistic pleasure at its plight but nudging the Indians to rebuild the nation and take it to the peak.

One of the reasons that Naipaul's account of India is thought colonialist, outsider's and high-brow is his childhood conception of India, the conception of an idyllic and perfect India. But the real encounter with India (1962-1964) found the country not an area of hope and light but *An Area of Darkness*. The note of dissatisfaction grows into pessimism and despondency in

his second visit to India in which under emergency it appears to him *A Wounded Civilization* (1975-1976). Further on, in his third visit to India (Dec. 1988-90) the situation reaches a pass where there remains a hope in only *A Million Mutinies Now*.

In reality, Naipaul's shockingly ironic comments are perhaps aimed at breaking the inertia of the Indian masses so that they can regain their force and dynamism. Therefore he targets those aspects of India life which are either too sacrosanct like religion, Gandhi, nationalism, or too commonplace to draw attention like hypocrisy, corruption, callousness etc.

Discussing the caste-ridden Indian society and its consequent degeneration, Naipaul observes:

Class is a system of rewards. Caste imprisons a man in his function. From it follows, since there are no rewards, the duties and responsibilities become irrelevant to position. A man is his proclaimed function. There is little subtlety to India. (AAD 76)

The importance of Gandhi to modern India is unquestionable. Like a novelist who splits himself into his characters, the many sided Gandhi permeates modern India. He is hidden and unknown but the drama that is being played out in India today is the drama he set up sixty years ago when he returned to India after the racial battles of South Africa (IWAC 172).

But Gandhi for him was not a man with complete system of ideology. He was the summation of so many parts never making

a whole. To quote Naipaul:

In fact there was no completeness to him (Gandhi). He was full of bits and pieces he had picked up here and there; his mother's love of fasting and austerities, the English common law, Ruskin's idea of labour, Tolstoy's Russian religious dream, the South African Jail Code the Manchester No Breakfast Association. (AWP 168)

And these pieces, even if put together, would not fit well. Naipaul calls him an epitome of intellectual confusion and hence it is not easy to enter the culturally denuded mind of Gandhi. Here it is important to remember that although the influence of Gandhi on Modern Indian society is undeniable, the nature of this influence is certainly a matter of debate. But Naipaul is very clear about Gandhi's influence on symbolic acts, "Symbolic action was the curse of India yet Gandhi was Indian enough to deal in symbols. The spinning wheel did not dignify labour; it was only absorbed into the great Indian symbolism" (AAD 83).

In Naipaul's view Gandhi used Hindu revivalism to strengthen nationalism, which ultimately undid the whole endeavour of Gandhi in the form of partition following which he was assassinated and he himself became a symbol, a very useful symbol for the Indian hypocrites. Today "Nothing remains of Gandhi in India but his name and the worship of his image" (AWP 129).

If Gandhi seems to be a bad influence on India, his disciple Vinoba Bhave becomes a laughing stock, 'a foolish man' to Naipaul. Even Neerad C. Chaudhary doesn't fare well in his assessment even though his

Autobiography is praised with certain reservations.

In a land where *shabdapramana* (verbal testimony) is recognized as a valid epistemological category, Naipaul probably tries to impart among Indians an impulse of questioning which is so missing in modern India.

One of the most considered criticisms of Naipaul's is a lack of critical tradition at the moment:

India has no means of judging. India is hard and materialist. What it knows best about Indian writers and books are their advances and their prizes. There is little discussion about the substance of a book or its writer [...]. Literary criticism is still hardly known as an art. The most important judgments of an Indian book continue to be imported. (AWP 193)

It is this lack of proper critical atmosphere and an autonomous intellectual life which explains the denial of international recognition to Indian literature. How can there emerge a national literature, observes Naipaul, where the books are published by people outside, judged by people outside and to a large extent bought by people outside.

As Naipaul hardly subscribes to any established isms, his views about Communism and the Marxist Scholars in India have been far from appreciative. And it explains a great deal why he generates so much reaction against his comments and writings in India. Summing up the relationship between Bengal and Communism he holds that Communism

was what, inevitably, the Bengal renaissance led to in the mid-twentieth century; that was where the new learning ran finally into the sand (AWP 180).

The Indian Trilogy of Naipaul shows in a very compelling manner not only India on the move but also the author on the move. Starting from *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul's knowledge about India has acquired greater intimacy and completeness. And, moreover, the shock that he felt in his first two visits gave him deeper awareness and understanding of the fact. As a result the bitterness and shock of the first and disappointment and pessimism of the second give way to a sanguine hope in the third. And hence Naipaul has the realization that in course of freedom movement India has achieved the truest kind of liberty, which in due course after independence has gone

down to the lowest sections of Indian society. But this process is still on and it may not be completely a peaceful process. As Naipaul says, "In India, with its layer below layer of distress and cruelty, it had to come as disturbance. It had to come as rage and revolt. India was now a million little mutinies"(IMMN 603)

To conclude why Naipaul's Indian travels - the search for his self-identify and root was so tumultuous? The answer is quite simple. He misunderstood Indians' taste buds. Indians had no problems with bitter pills of criticism that he supplied in his *An Area of Darkness* and *India: A wounded Civilization*, provided they had been coated with sugar. And Naipaul should have known it for he knew much about sugarcane plantation.

Abbreviations:

A AD--An Area of Darkness

AWP--A Writer's People : Ways of Looking and Feeling

HAL--Half A Life

IAWC--India: A Wounded Civilization

IMMN—India: A Million Mutiny Now

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