

Lorisha Singh

Research Scholar, Department of English

D.D.U. Gorakhpur University
Gorakhpur, U.P. India

Voice of Exile: A Study of V.S. Naipaul's An Area of Darkness

Abstract

The paper aims at analyzing V.S Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness* as a text born out of the subjectively objective observations of an angry young man who had to ask a lot of questions to the history of the land which was once his forefathers' homeland. The book is an indefatigable account of the author's first visit to India. It contains his perceptive comments and elaborate descriptions about India and its people. The first hand experiences of the author seem to wage war against the memory handed over and instituted in him by his forefathers and eventually the alien locale of his birth. The narrator appears to have taken upon himself the double bind responsibilities of being an insider stationed outside the ambit of contemporary India and also as an outsider earnestly willing to relate with everything that might have happened around and framed his past. The book convincingly presents the conflict between his unwillingness to get disillusioned by the contemporary state of affairs and his forced acceptance of what can not be denied at any cost.

Keywords:- Ethnicity, Imperialist intervention, Colonial hangover, Belongingness, Squalor, Disillusionment

V.S Naipaul, a Trinidad born British novelist of Indian descent belonging to the Bhumihar Brahmin patrimony from Gorakhpur situated in the eastern part of the Indian province known as Uttar Pradesh, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001. Vehemently attacked and even denounced for spreading venom and hatred in Iran and addressed as 'Lord V.S Naipaul' in India, Vidiyadhar Surajprasad Naipaul is one of the most compellingly attractive literary figures of our times. His literature is what he has lived through, experienced, perceived and

above all, what he could not force himself not to express. In his famous Nobel acceptance speech, while situating himself as an author, he explains it in the simplest possible manner:

I said earlier that everything of value about me is in my books. I will go further now I will say I am the sum of my books. Each book, intuitively sensed and in the case of fiction, intuitively worked outstands on what has gone before and grows out of it. I feel that at any stage of my literary career it could have been said that the last book contained all the others. It's been like this because of my background. My background is at once exceedingly simple and exceedingly confused. I was born in Trinidad. It was a simple island in the mouth of the great Orinoco river of Venezuela .So Trinidad is not strictly of South America, and not strictly of the Caribbean. It was developed as a New World plantation colony and when i was born in 1932 it had a population of about 400,000.Of this about 150,000 were Indians, Hindus and Muslims, nearly all of peasant origin, and nearly all from the Gangetic plain. (2002: 2-3)

All the works of V. S. Naipaul demonstrate a close contact with his personal life and are undoubtedly, therefore, the result of the circumstances of his own life and the effects of his surroundings. None of them, including fiction, can be judiciously evaluated without placing them in a specific context that is directly associated with Naipaul's life. All his works, especially the non-fiction seem to have started a crusade against all such superficial and baseless socio-cultural systems/rituals that have gripped the world in its vicious clutches for long and have resulted in a kind of unfathomable degradation. He quite skillfully represents the spread of poverty, ignorance, deceit and cruelty of his surroundings. He gradually emerged as a rare writer with a self-conscious autonomy tinged with a lot of unsurpassed individuality. Naipaul's sense of belongingness, displacement and above all his Third-World consciousness are the direct result of the circumstances of his life. As a writer of self-exile Naipaul's basic objective as a postcolonial writer is a quest for personal, racial and cultural identity. As a third generation immigrant, the pull for a visit to India is not out of love but out of curiosity. In this particular text, Naipaul records his personal impressions of the land of his

ancestors. It also exhibits that the individuals of the Third-World are quite conscious of their needs, status and prevalent situations etc.

Naipaul's first visit to India was full of hopes and extreme expectations as it was more like a return of the native to his roots in search of a string that could provide him a way to locate his immeasurably haphazard identity. He had thought of coming back to his roots so that he could search for a meaning of his life and could identify with something that, though remotely, belonged to him but unfortunately it all ended up with a series of shocks, frustrations and disappointments as he found the country full of chaos and squalor, fraud and horror. Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness: A Discovery of India* is the first of his acclaimed Indian trilogy. This is a travelogue explaining Naipaul's first trip through India in 1964. The book focuses on the experiences and reactions of the author as he journeys across the country in an attempt to learn about his roots and his past. It was a journey undertaken with expectations for answers to the questions pertaining to the issues of home and identity. He finds India as a country in a totally dilapidated condition completely devoid of the will to relate to its past. Vijay Mishra while theorizing the diasporic experience comments on this notion of being left in wilderness when he says:

In the imaginary of diasporas both mourning and melancholia find a place, sometimes mutually exclusively but often they intertwine and co-exist in the same individual. (2001:35)

Naipaul is shocked to discover that nationalist elites have surrogated colonizers. While locating his own identity through this travelogue we find him constructing an "India" that is stationed at the border zone totally baffled, mingled and lost between the past and the present, the familiar and the unfamiliar, the real and the imaginary, the subjective and the objective.

The book is divided into three parts: the first part consists of four chapters which presents the autobiographical details about Naipaul's grandfather being transported to Trinidad as indentured labourer who first introduced and made Naipaul acquainted with India in his childhood; the next chapters give an account of India's poverty and the third part consists of Naipaul's own views about India. Naipaul's idea of India is created by his grandfather's various domestic articles that his grandfather had brought from India:

India lay about us in things: in string bed...in plaited straw mats; innumerable brass vessels;...in brightly coloured pictures of deities on pink lotus or radiant against Himalayan snow ; and in all the paraphernalia of the prayer room... the images ,the smooth pebbles, the stick of sandalwood. (1981: 29)

Although Naipaul lived within the India which was created by his grandfather, he could not inherit the unity of his grandfather's world .The few articles his grandfather brought from India –brass vessels, images, a ruined harmonium, a string bed etc. constituted the hoary heirloom of the country of his ancestors and constituted India to him. Naipaul again recollects in his Nobel lecture:

In Trinidad, bright boy though I was, I was surrounded by areas of darkness....With my limited social background it was hard for me imaginatively to enter into other societies or societies that were far away. (2002:7)

Naipaul's generation could not replicate that sense of complete self sufficiency; it could not deny Trinidad. As he grew, India slipped further and further away. It belonged to his grandfather's world, a world which the younger generations had no access to. The very first paragraph of *An Area of Darkness* sets Naipaul's status both as an insider and an outsider. A man from a travel agency came aboard the ship and whispered "You have any cheej?"(1981:1). He was tall, thin, shabby and nervous. Naipaul imagined he was speaking of some type of contraband. He wondered as to what could be more ridiculous than the people who wanted cheej but were unable to make it. It is harsh and perceptive observation. To Naipaul, India was both familiar and strange and unlike his travel to other erstwhile colonies of the British empire, his journey to India was more personal.

When Naipaul first visited Bombay, he found that it was not like what he had expected. He hated being part of crowd at Church Gate Station and craved for special treatment something like which he always got in Trinidad and England. But in Bombay he found no special care or welcome. He writes:

And for the first time in my life I was one of the crowd. There was nothing in my appearance or dress to distinguish me from the crowd eternally hurrying into Church Gate Station. In Trinidad to be an 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 denied part of my reality. Again and again I was caught. I was faceless. I might sink without a trace into that Indian crowd. I had been made by Trinidad and England; recognition of my difference was necessary to me. (1981:43)

In Bombay Naipaul used to stay at Green's Hotel on Marine Drive with his companion (Pat), anxious, faceless, nervous of sinking into the crowd of 450 million. Here he came in contact with Adil Jussawalla, a twenty one year old Parsi, who was shortly to publish his first volume of poetry. Here the accumulation of many of their experiences finds place also in Naipaul's archive at the University of Tulsa, "Piles of fruit, spice in pyramids and other shapes. Incense, Bangles, Prostitutes in crowded boxes or pen. Some beautiful, some old and grotesque. Some with faces powdered White." (*The World is What it Is* 221)

It was the land of Gandhi and Nehru, the India of the glittering past. His acquaintance with India was only through what he had heard about it from his parents. But the city of Bombay does not leave good impression on him. Naipaul could not feel the city to be exciting rather he felt it to be dull and drab. On his first visit Naipaul took with him the conventional ideas of the India. Naipaul was born of Pundit family, his grandfather on the mother's side was pundit himself, though brought to Trinidad as indentured labourer. Naipaul claims himself to belong to the new world, the new civilization that caught him halfway and took him entirely growing up with a mind all against India. In *An Area of Darkness* he found no communal identity and was shocked by the 'poverty' and 'objectness' that assaulted his sense of self. He finds Indians just mimicking the West as he writes:

The outer and the inner worlds do not have the physical separateness which they had for us in Trinidad. They coexist; the [Indian] society only pretends to be colonial; and for this reason its absurdities are at once apparent. Its mimicry is both less and more than a colonial mimicry. It is special mimicry of an old country which has been without a native aristocracy for a thousand years and has learned to make room for outsiders, but only at the top. The mimicry changes the inner world remain constant [...]Yesterday the mimicry was Moghul; tomorrow it might be Russian or American today it is English. (1981:56)

Here Naipaul talks about the difference between the aftermath of colonization in the Old world and the New world. For him, mimicry is in the fashion in India. The New world on the other hand is seen by Naipaul to be more comfortably colonial.

The text is full of Naipaul's anxieties about India and he openly talks about his fears for it. He considers the problem of caste system to be an awfully disturbing affair, a kind of a separatist activity as he says: "Class is system of rewards, caste impassions a man in his function"(1981: 75). The main reason behind this division was to establish the organic relationship among various sections of the society and to provide work and bread to everyone according to their mental and physical ability and skill as Lord Krishna says "Chaturvarnammayasrustagunakarmavibhagash"(PR iv-3). The *Mahabharata* defines Brahmin as one "who possesses virtues like truth, charity, fortitude, good conduct, gentleness and compassion" 7. Manu also says: A Sudra becomes Brahmin and Brahmin becomes Sudra by conduct"(PR XI-977). In the words of Darshana Trivedi, the concept of caste system was evolved to keep the social fabric in a harmonious condition. But the caste system became rigid and a dividing force and class by birth became prominent force. The concept of untouchability developed with the passage of time which according to Gandhiji is the greatest blot on Hinduism. (Journey through Hell)

The other aspect of India that Naipaul encountered in his visit was sanitation. Indians, he writes, 'defecate everywhere'. He saw people squatting and defecating besides railway tracks, along river banks, on the streets, never looking for cover, rarely with any sense of

embarrassment. He feels that Indians do not want to see these squats as anything problematic but rather they perform these activities believing it to be their legitimate claims. All these worries of Naipaul express his anxieties about India and Indians. The physical realities of India are not the same as he had been visualizing them in his imagination as Satendra Nandan observes:

In his many-layered journeys back to India, Naipaul has attempted in his writerly imagination and historical consciousness to establish a dialogue of connection.
(2000:52)

Naipaul also talks about Gandhi's views. Gandhiji who spent twenty years in South Africa, saw India through an outsider's eyes. He saw sanitation linked to caste and that caste was linked to demotion and disregard to others that further led to inefficiency and resulted in a divided nation. All these things paved the way for a weak country all set for the rule of foreigners. Gandhiji always tried to attack the psychology of caste or attached dignity to labour. Naipaul is shocked to see the inequality in India. He contrasts the Indian villages which have narrow, broken lanes with green slime in the gutters, the chocked back to back mud houses, the jumble of filth and food, and animals and people. Naipaul says if caste system is the bias of society, in such a situation how can there be equality, love, bonding, unity and harmony? He exposes the filth, degraded people, decaying social systems and apparent stupidity of Indians living in different cities. India's area of darkness catches Naipaul's eyes. In Delhi he finds hollow signs and symbols representing some ideals but that are never executed in work, beggars, school children apparently from good families sporting begging at Rajghat. Naipaul's views on reservation system are also very clear. He writes: "Reserving government jobs for untouchables helps nobody. It places responsibility in the hands of unqualified". (1981: 86)

Like his encounter with Indian bureaucracy, the function of beggars, collective blindness, place of Mahatma Gandhi, craze for foreign things, problems of Kashmir Valley, pilgrimage episode, the colonial past, Naipaul is also upset on the failure of Pt. Nehru. Nehru's greatest blunder was his ill-equipped war against the Chinese that makes Naipaul angry and turns him bitterly satiric in his chapter entitled 'Emergency' where he writes:

...according to bazaar rumour, Chou-En-Lai had promised the Chinese people as a Christmas present.

The Indian Marwari merchants, it was said, were already making enquiries about business prospect under Chinese rule; the same rumour had it that, in the south the Madras, despite their objection to Hindi were already learning Chinese. (1981:266-267)

Here Naipaul presents contemporary post-colonial events and openly criticizes them. In India, Naipaul also suffered from cultural shock, he felt aghast with uncivilized redtapism of Indian bureaucracy. Being an accomplished writer of postmodern times, Naipaul's writing should be seen as an activity leading to self knowledge, a platform to express his state of being. He does not regard tradition to be the only touchstone for the existing realities but he does not find himself capable of the absolute rejection of everything of the past merely in the name of novelty. He writes:

I had rejected tradition; yet how can I explain my feeling of outrage when I heard that in Bombay they used candles and electric bulbs for the Dipawali festivals, and not the rustic lamps of immemorial design.... (1981: 36)

Here two different types of phenomena emerge, the two separate selves that had stayed together as long as Naipaul was in Trinidad or in England: one is the persona of a totally self-aware non-believer with an actual distaste for the rituals and the other one who gets angry after hearing that candles and electric bulbs have replaced clay lamps during Diwali in Bombay. That Brahmin self gets disturbed on breaking of the tradition which had otherwise flouted the rites and ceremonies and does not hesitate in considering the 'thread ceremony' a 'theatre'. Naipaul further criticizes almost every aspect of India like language, people and their weird sense of history. He is very unhappy at the way people of India live with the tendency of forgetting their past *en masse* so easily:

And it was because it was without a sense of history that it was capable of so complete a conversion. Many Kashmiri clan names –like that of Mr. Butt himself – were often still purely Hindu; but of their past, the Kashmiris retained no memory. (1981:129)

'Pilgrimage' begins with a description of five-foot ice lingam of Amaranth: "It was mystery, like Delphi, of the other world. It had survived because it was of India and Hinduism which without beginning, without end, is scarcely a religion, continued as repository and living record of man's religious consciousness (1981:154). The poor sense of sanitation on the part of the yattris had irked Naipaul. It is really painful to Naipaul to witness the state of various aspects of human life including culture, language and so on but he is more aggrieved because Indians have completely shut their eyes to the age-old squalor around them. Himalayas, the other most prominent repository of his imagination enjoyed a special place in Naipaul's childhood memories: "I felt linked to them ...India, the Himalayas together. In so many of the brightly coloured religious pictures in my grandmother's house I had seen these mountains, cones of white against simple, cold blue. They had become a part of the India of my fantasy." But when he encountered the actual Himalayas, they stood before him as "the Indian symbol of loss" (1981:167).

Naipaul ridicules the way we owe buildings in India to the past, whether it is Victoria Memorial in Calcutta or the Taj Mahal in Agra. He mocks at the city Shimla which has turned out to be narrow and winding. He feels that in India everything is inherited. To conclude, in *An Area of Darkness* the quest for 'self' is notable and there is an intense preoccupation with the self and it colours the whole of Naipaul's writing. The struggle in *An Area of Darkness* is double-bind, it is the struggle to establish a perspective to look at India and it is also a struggle to discover the process through which the meaning of that perspective could be unravelled. The book is the story of the conflict between writer's myth and acute obscurities perceived by him. He longs to search for his roots in India, the country of his childhood romance, memory and imagination. The book ends in ambivalence. The 'area of darkness', as Naipaul defines it at the very outset, is that of aspect of Indian sensibility which remains impenetrable to him. The area of the light is the area of his "experience in time and place" (1981:30). The book is a wonderful chronicle of the claims of conflicting selves of a person in search of his identity.

References

- Mishra, Vijay. 'Diasporas and the Art of Impossible Mourning' in *In Diasporas: Theories, Histories, Texts* ed. Makarand Paranjape. Indialog Pub. Pvt. Ltd.: New Delhi, 2001.
- Naipaul, V. S. *An Area of Darkness*. New York: Vintage, 1981.
- 'Two Worlds: The 2001 Nobel Lecture': *World Literature Today*, Vol. 76, No. 2, Spring 2002.
- Nandan, Satendra. 'The Diasporic Consciousness: From Biswas to Biswasghat' in *Interrogating Post-colonialism Theory, Text and Context* ed. Harish Trivedi & Meenakshi Mukherjee. IAS: Shimla, 2000.
- Trivedi, Darshana 'Journey through Hell', *Critical Response to V.S. Naipaul and Mulk Raj Anand* ed. by Amarnath Prasad, No. 1, 2003.
- French, Patrick. *The world is what is*. London : Picador, 2008.
- Mahadevan, T.M.P. *Outlines of Hinduism*, 72.