

From Negation to Negotiation: Naipaul's Journey through India

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Abstract: *V S Naipaul has been one of the most acclaimed writers in the world whose writing has not only touched millions of Indian but also other countries. Despite his political, philosophical aspect on the status of today's postcolonial nations he has also incorporated the pragmatic and sympathetic touch in his writing. This paper is an attempt to highlight his physical and psychological journey through today's India to expose the issues caused by the colonial and neocolonialism. Besides that, it further exposes the real situation of the independent India after colonization and how has that changed his perception of looking the nation and become a better writer.*

Keywords: Postcolonial, Journey, India, Perception

It was natural that the ambition to become a writer was given to Naipaul by his father. When Naipaul was eighteen, he travelled "from the periphery to the centre" ("Our universal civilization" 22) carrying his ambition to become a writer. The privacy of the London city has depressed him. London fails to give the moral support he needs. Naipaul's isolation symbolizes the barrenness of his life in London. His regret is one of disappointment:

I came 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 not the centre of my world. I had been misled; but there was nowhere else to go. (An area of Darkness, 42)

As a young and serious writer, Naipaul fears that living in London, "will eventually lead to my own sterility" (*The Overcrowded Barracoon* 16). Naipaul explains that his early life has deeply been disturbed by "a sense of being in wrong place" ("Unfurnished Entrails" 721). In that big city he is confined to a smaller world: "It became my flat, my desk, my name" (*An Area of Darkness* 42). In an interview he regrets that "it was a mistake" (Mel Gusscow "Writer without Roots" 16) that he moved to London at first. But now Naipaul seeks an escape from London, but does not know where to go. To refresh himself Naipaul decides to travel to Trinidad, to India.

Naipaul's journey to India was carried out with careful preparation and with much expectation. To him, India was only an area of imagination. India was a dream. It was an area of darkness, which needed to be understood in the light of experience. With his ancestral relations and acquaintance Naipaul was able to establish during his childhood days a sort of illusory intimacy with Indian ways of life and culture. As William Walsh observes:

It was illusory, at least, if it was expected to make for understanding, because the Indian ethos and Indian values, if they were internal to Naipaul's family, were external to Naipaul's spirit. The substance, above all the religion, which quickened them with life and endowed them with solidity and continuity, was incomprehensible, and distasteful to Naipaul's intensely Western, almost protestant,

intelligence which had long since opted for skepticism, openness, individuality practicality, results. (V.S. Naipaul 23)

Naipaul comes to India with a view to re-establishing his roots in India. He visits India with his Indian feeling and with his western sophistication and he hopes to find in India "a resting-place for the imagination" (*An Area of Darkness* 27). In India, Naipaul is looking for a "balanced rural landscape of Indian Trinidad," (*An Area of Darkness* 141) with the help of his racial intimacy. The balance is not there. Certainly, such landscape exists only in Naipaul's inner self and it does not exist in India. His western consciousness and his pre-conceived idea of Indian landscape lead him to disappointment. The ugly sanitation of Indian horrifies him. He attacks Indians as "dirty; they wish to appear as dirt." (*An Area of Darkness* 75)

The physical India distresses Naipaul. It causes him much pain. Yet, he does not curse India. He does not "want India to sink; the mere thought was painful" (*An Area of Darkness* 243). This feeling of Naipaul is clarified when he speaks to C.D. Narasimiah, "Why are you angry with me?" apparently referring to a strongly worded review article written on his book by C.D. Narasimiah. "I am profoundly Indian in my feeling, profoundly Indian in my sensibility, but not in observation" (*Moving Frontiers* 35). This state of Naipaul's mind gains importance because later he is able to get a balanced perception of India.

He feels that the vision of India as a great country becomes meaningless and the vastness of the country turns out to be oddly fraudulent. Naipaul does not like Indians still "Striving towards the colonials" (*The Overcrowded Barracoon* 50). In his second book on Indian, India: A wounded Civilization, Naipaul has throughout been attacking this mimicking of colonialism which defies individuality: "Mimicry within mimicry, imperfectly understood idea within imperfectly understood idea" (*India: A Wounded Civilization* 123). Naipaul pictures mimic men of post-colonial societies from this stand point. He rages against Indians for aping the colonial way of life:

Yesterday the mimicry was Mogul; tomorrow it might be Russian or American; today it is English. Mimicry might be too harsh a word for what

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appears so comprehensive and profound... But mimicry must be used... because so much of what is seen remains simple mimicry, incongruous and absurd; and because no people, by their varied physical endowments, are as capable of mimicry as the Indians. (An Area of Darkness 56-57)

The colonial paradox - Postcolonial India still mimicking colonials - is sharply felt by Naipaul. He sees India as "a wounded civilization" and thinks that the lack of intellectual aspect of India has failed to comfort him. This failure of India prompts him to attack India. To Naipaul, "where there is no play of the intellect there is no surprise" (*The Overcrowded Barracoon* 87). He becomes hypersensitive and angry towards India. He finds Indian civilization "wounded" and the intellectual failure would lead India to decay.

The spiritual side of India shocks him equally. Though he remains to be ignorant of Hinduism, he can be called a Hindu. His uncle often tells him that his "denial was an admissible type of Hinduism" (*An Area of Darkness* 32) and he relishes in it. When he comes to India, he is surprised to see that the Indian spiritual philosophy coincides with his own idea of life. Naipaul, here, intellectualizes this philosophy by studying his own life. This intellectualization of the philosophy during this travel to India helps him to form the nucleus of his later novels. The intellectualization of a problem or philosophy helps Naipaul to bear with the disappointment that India has offered to him. At the end of the book, *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul recalls the disappointment. He regrets that "a journey to India ought not to have been made; it had broken my life in two" (*An Area of Darkness* 265). The paradox of his journey becomes obvious; Naipaul, who initially is drawn towards India, is, at the end, drawn away from India. The man and the writer fall apart.

After his journey to India, in London, Naipaul expresses the state of his frustration: "facing my own emptiness, my feeling of being physically lost" (*An Area of Darkness* 266). India has disturbed him most. He tries to intellectualize the painful experience:

"It was only now, as my experience of India defined itself more properly against my own homelessness, that I saw how close in the past year I had been to the total India negation, how much it had become the basis of thought and feeling. And already, with this awareness, in a world where illusion could only be a concept and not something felt in the bones, it was slipping away from me. I felt it as something true which I could never adequately express and never seize again. (An Area of Darkness 266-267)

But, only in negation can there be a release. The irony of his journey gains significance, for, it seems to be productive. Naipaul has to discharge his disappointment and he has come to a state where he must reshape or recharge himself. As Landeg White observes:

Naipaul's sense of negation has become absolute, undermining both subject and form. It is not a

position from which he can advance as a novelist without a drastic reappraisal. (152)

His sense of personal emptiness takes him to the study of a universal emptiness of human beings. His disappointment in his journey to India leads him to a world of despair. This is aptly observed by William Walsh: "India could offer only a context for despair" (*V.S. Naipaul* 26). His personal despair introduces him to despair of mankind.

India: A Million Mutinies Now, the third travel book on India, explores the idea of community. This book reveals Naipaul's matured state of sympathy towards India. In this travelogue he renews his past rage and contempt, and reconsiders his state of communal attachment to India. He realizes that in India, the idea of community is deep-rooted in people. Naipaul recalls his first travel to India in 1962, when he "was a fearful traveller" (*India: A Million Mutinies Now* 491). India remained for him an area of darkness. But in twenty seven years Naipaul succeeds in getting over this fear and the darkness. As he says,

In 27 years I had succeeded in making a kind of return journey, shedding my Indian nerves, abolishing the darkness that separated me from my ancestral past. (India: A Million Mutinies Now 516)

This realization gives an added emphasis to the book. He starts negotiating with India and Indian people. Naipaul meets many Indians and comes to know of their history. He laments over the loss of the fundamental idea of India — the India as a whole. He also discovers that the past-wholeness has been replaced by communal bonds. He hears from people how Muslims and Hindus clash in Bombay when a cricket match is played between India and Pakistan. People are fueled by religious feelings. Their activities are justified by religious beliefs. In Madras, Naipaul finds a rational movement led by Veeramani, the successor of the great rational leader of South India, Periyar. Throughout India, Naipaul observes people identifying themselves with a small community and threatening violence. Their caste-consciousness intensifies this communal feeling. The poor people are full of emotions and are "rejecting rejections"(119). Naipaul finds,

India was now a country of a million little mutinies. (517)

What the mutinies were also helping to define was the strength of the general intellectual life, and the wholeness and humanism of the values to which all Indians now felt they could appeal.

The book ends with an optimistic vision. However, one cannot on this account call Naipaul an Indian. However, one may also be tempted to do so because this book abolishes his past darkness, and brings him close to India. To confine Naipaul to India or to any other nation is to deny him universality. Hence, as Naipaul remarks,

But what's nationality these days? I myself, I myself, I think of myself as a citizen of the world. (In a Free State 9)

The propriety of Naipaul as a citizen of the world strikes one when he talks about the probability of a universal civilization. In one of his most powerful essays, "Our Universal Civilization," Naipaul discusses this proposal. As William L. Sachs remarks, "He gets to the heart of what this sensibility means for the possibility of community". ("Local Truths" 1067) He realized that this communal feeling - the cohesion, the meaningfulness and the common dominating sensibility - was necessary to achieve a universal community for further humanistic development. Hence, towards the end of the essay, he launches his most startling admission of the concept. He discovers the Christian precept,

Do unto others as you would have others do unto you ('Our Universal Civilization' 25)

His travels take him to different places and slowly, as he realizes, the world starts decolonializing itself. People have changed their values. Naipaul has also found his process of de-colonialization complete. The accomplishment of this process has brought about a synthesis of the man and the writer. This paradox between the man and the writer gets resolved here and finds expression in his novel *The Enigma of Arrival*

Man and writer were the same person. But that is a writer's greatest discovery. It took time-and how much writing!-to arrive at that synthesis. (110)

His attitude towards India has changed. His past darkness has been dispelled. He acknowledges the intellectual capacity of India through various group- excesses, which he finds as part of intellectual life of India and part of India's growth. In his recent book on India, *India: A Million Mutinies*. Now Naipaul has expressed his compassion for India. Naipaul's changing attitudes toward India reveal his broadened sympathies. He writes in his *An Area of Darkness*,

Anger, compassion and contempt were aspects of the same emotion; they were without value because they could not endure. Achievement could begin only with acceptance. (249)

It can be viewed as a parallel to the paradoxical feelings of love and hate springing from the same root. It still remains a mystery what makes love turn into hatred and hatred into love. Naipaul has had only an illusory relationship with and knowledge of India through stories and myths. When he comes to India carrying with him this illusory knowledge of India, the real India creates disillusionment, which causes him pain. And this pain turns into anger and hatred. Still, he is emotionally attached to India. This attachment to India brings him back to India. Again, India fails to appeal to him and he expresses his contempt for India by writing that Indian civilization has become wounded and India is leading towards a swift decay. But on his next visit, Naipaul is a changed person and he feels that India has also changed.

The re-arrangement of the aspects of one emotion "Anger, compassion and contempt" as "Anger, Contempt, and Compassion" would reveal Naipaul's way of maturing. His *An Area of Darkness* (1964) can be cited as the expression

of his anger towards India; *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977) expresses his contempt; and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990) his compassion towards India. A significant point to note is that a period of thirteen years spaces the first from the second and the second from the third respectively. As William Walsh observes:

One feels true creative effort in the necessity Naipaul feels to expel everything extraneous from himself in order to conceive the idea of a novel, in order to register the experience, in order at once to let it occur and realise it in words and fiction. And yet the thing about Naipaul is that he does seem above all other things, a natural writer:..He is not simply a but the writer, all his private nature absorbed in his function as artist. He is not only a natural writer but a natural novelist. (V.S.Naipaul 3)

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