

Naipaul-Complex: Naipaul's Love/Hate Relationship with India in *An Area of Darkness*

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Abstract: The paper attempts to trace the outcome of V.S Naipaul's first face to face encounter with India focusing the negative aspects as depicted in his travelogue *An Area of Darkness*, one of his least touched books. Further the paper shall try to make the image of India so created by Naipaul more transparent with an oblique acceptance of most of Naipaul's observations about it. The paper accepts his anger as an unconscious attachment to India. The phrase 'Naipaul-complex' in the title has been used in a particular sense.

Keywords: Naipaul-complex, Indianness, orientalist, babudom, culture.

V.S. Naipaul (Vidiadhar Surajprashad Naipaul), Vidia to friends and Vido to family, born in Chaguanas, Trinidad on August 17, 1932 is a descendant of indentured laborers shipped from eastern part of Uttar Pradesh, India in 1880's. He has to his credit the authorship of about fifteen novels and an equal number of non-fictional works. He got the Nobel Prize in 2001 and the Booker Prize in 1971 but surely no figure in contemporary literature has been as reviled as he. Over the years he has courted the wrath and hatched job of many of his contemporaries like Salman Rushdie, Edward Said, and George Lamming etc mainly due to his explicit and controversial writings. He has been in hot waters for his refusal to avoid unwelcome topics related to The Third World, racism, misogyny, disregard for Islam and his condescending comments about his contemporaries. He claims that he has never read Salman Rushdie (Suroor). Naipaul spent most of his childhood and adolescence in the capital Port of Spain that impressed and coloured his sensitive imagination. Naipaul's writings are merged with his personal experiences and no study on Naipaul can be conducted without taking into account the formative forces behind his literary talent. One such major force was the Hindu culture of the Caribbean in which he was born and brought up. His grandfather's house provided the first link with his Hindu self and with the India of his ancestors. Naipaul grew up with a highly eulogized idea of India and an image of an extremely extolled India got created in his mind. Although he could never understand much about the Hindu rules and rituals in his grandmother's house, there was always something sacred in his very idea of India. "Chaguanas, where Naipaul's grandfather had built his house was a place which kept its Indianness to its core. Amidst the 'Hindu rigours' of religion and caste, life was symbolically peasant Indian ..." (Zafir 262). His next introduction to India was his

father's stories which epitomized for him the unity of the old world. As he grew up, he observed a chasm between the two worlds that he inhabited—one was the colonial world of Trinidad and the other was the old Hindu World of India. The paper attempts to trace the outcome of his first face to face encounter with India focusing the negative aspects as depicted in his travelogue *An Area of Darkness*, one of his least touched books. Further the paper shall try to make the image of India so created by Naipaul more transparent with an oblique acceptance of most of Naipaul's observations about it.

An Area of Darkness which is a child of Naipaul's pigeonholed memory with an incredible exactitude and flow of pure spirit of comedy published in 1964 records the dirge of his first visit to India. For him, "India had in a special way been the background of my childhood. It was a country from which my grandfather came, a country never physically described and therefore never real ..." (Naipaul 27). When Naipaul was asked about the reason behind his interest in India, the answer was quite unexpected. He replied, "Well I was interested in India because, and I still am, because of my concern, I hate distress, I hate poverty, and I wish to see it alleviated, it can't disappear unfortunately, but I wish to see it alleviated, that's what I go back to look for, I look for signs of that" (Kohn). At another place, Farrukh Dhondy writes, Naipaul lashes out at some of his contemporaries; about Forster: "...someone who didn't know Indian people", Narayan: "...his India is a ruin", Soyinka: "...a marvelously Establishment figure actually" and Joyce: "...he is not interested in the world". For Naipaul, darkness has a double meaning. First, it symbolizes his ignorance about his ancestry, his native village and the country which has been described by colonial writers like Rudyard Kipling and E. M. Forster. That is why Naipaul came to India to dispel that darkness in his mind. Secondly, darkness refers to Naipaul's disillusionment with the mimicry society of contemporary India which is mired with filth, corruption, and communalism; a land which has not fulfilled the high expectations of its people after independence. He writes, "I have travelled lucidly over that area which was to me the area of darkness, something of darkness remains, in those attitudes, those ways of thinking and seeing which are no longer mine" (Naipaul 30).

The book starts with the "Traveler's Prelude: A Little Paperwork" where Naipaul in an ironic manner describes his plight when he is trapped in the outdated permit system of Indian 'babudom'. His liquor bottles are confiscated and he has to run from pillar to post to obtain a permit since Bombay was 'dry'. The red tape involved in the process is so long that his companion faints from exhaustion. This incident sets the key note of his first visit to India since it begins with disgust and anger at official apathy. Naipaul describes his early experiences and comments on the sloth and naivety of Indians, their colonial mindset, class prejudices, corruption, filth and hypocrisies of Indian society. He is critical of Indians' mimicking their colonial masters when he sees the dirt, poverty, disease, illiteracy and the corruption of our society. Naipaul perceives India as a "country suspended in time", a land of mimics; and the mimicry, he says, is present in every sphere of existence (Zafir 280). On his arrival, he finds an entirely different country from the one whose image had been in his mind for years. He feels bitterly angry because his idealized India looks far inferior

to the West. He harshly satirizes the upper class illiterate Hindus who have an obsession for everything which is associated with foreign. He writes, "mimicry ... It is the special mimicry of an old country which had learned to make room for outsiders, but only at the top ... yesterday the mimicry was Mongol; tomorrow, it might be Russian or American; today it is English" (Naipaul 56). This anger is further given vent in a later novel titled *The Mimic Men* although the approach there is more mature and scholarly. However Naipaul's observation somewhere depicts his rigid stance and lacking in understanding and warmth as he is insensitive to the natural repercussions of such a long colonization of India in the hands of the British. Quite contrary in *India: A Wounded Civilisation* Naipaul gives an impression that the British contribution to India's development was benign and it was they who introduced Indians to the modern institutions. A more mature stand would have been to find some explanation to this act of mimicry on the part of the Indians who had been under an alien rule for almost two hundred years. However this argument never means being on the side of the Indian mimics and no doubt can be raised about his mastery with which he places a mirror to our face and shows us the reality we live in. Naipaul finds the middle class Indians irritating who take pride in nicknames which are westernized so that Anand becomes Andy and Brijesh becomes Bunny.

Naipaul dislikes the Indian habit of fanaticizing and myth making which makes them escapists and impractical in day to day affairs. He is equally critical of Indian movies which add to this by creating an atmosphere of unreal characters and stories and which tend to make people romantic and sluggish. In the same vein, he makes fun of the Indian tendency to deify leaders like Gandhi about whom he says, "India undid him. He became a mahatma. He was to be revered for what he was; his message was irrelevant ... He failed to communicate to Indian his way of direct looking ..." (Naipaul 81-82). Quite cleverly and may be in order to avoid the wrath of Gandhians, he retreats by giving the impression that by treating Gandhi like a God, his sacred message is diluted and lost. However at many places he is somewhat critical of Gandhi and says,

"... he moved out of his own historical blindness to great passion" (Kohn). He writes, "nothing remains of Gandhi in India but this, his name and the worship of his image: the seminars about non-violence, as though this was all he taught" (Naipaul 81).

Naipaul's visit to the Indian paradise, Kashmir finds a special mention in the book. He also makes reference to Jammu, where he stopped for lunch. Regarding Jammu he writes, "In Jammu city you will see them collecting filth from the streets with their bare hands. This is the degradation the society requires of them, and to this they willingly submit. They are dirt; they wish to appear as dirt" (Naipaul 75). His critical comments on the unhygienic conditions in India reflects something of Swift's microscopic scrutiny and recoil:

Indians defecate everywhere; they defecate, mostly beside the railway tracks ... defecate on beaches; they defecate on the hills; they defecate on the river banks, they defecate on the streets, they never look for cover (Naipaul 70).

The holy Shankaracharya hill in Srinagar is also used as an open latrine by the Indian tourists. In Madras the bus station near the high court is one of the most popular latrines. And in Goa defecating is a social activity. When a young Muslim boy defended this habit by saying, "Indians were a poetic people ... And nothing was as poetic as squatting on a river bank at dawn" (Naipaul 70). Quite humorously, Naipaul becomes speechless as he could find no answer to such an expression. Naipaul somehow could not come to terms with the human degradation and suffering on a scale that simply defied any easy explanation or remedy. In an interview he says, regarding his ancestry,

I think we all knew that we had come from a very poor country and that we had migrated there, because of the wretchedness of conditions in India in the 1880s when there were famines. I don't know why there should have been famines in India in the 1880s, or why it was so specially wretched... (Kohn).

In the same interview he blames the Muslims rulers in India whom he holds responsible for the poverty and utter wretchedness where people had no faith in institutions and had no one to appeal to. In Bombay he describes the gays, sweepers and filth as symbols of India's ever increasing degrees of degradation. Naipaul hints that the poverty in India is due to the blind faith of the people who believe in the idea of holy poverty. It is deducible from his writings that Indians live with a sense of defeat and do not want to come out of it. He says Indians are "unimportant, cynical ... a dot on the map" ("Naipaul's Anger"). If urban India disappoints Naipaul with its bureaucratic obsession, rural India leaves him more disillusioned: "Indian villages:

The narrow broken lanes with shine in the gutters, the choked back to back mud houses, the jumble of faith and food and animals and people, the baby in the dust, swollen believed, black with flies, but wearing its good-luck amulet" (Naipaul 45).

Commenting on the Indian communal living, Naipaul feels that Indians belong to a particular family or area and are never comfortable outside their community. Naipaul's focus on family and customs contrasts sharply with the western concept of individualism. He observes that the cloistered and sectarian approach of Hindus and Muslims towards religion create barriers amongst the people and prevents the creation of a secular state. Regarding Muslims he writes: "at an early age I understand that Muslims were somewhat more different than others. They were not to be trusted, they would always do you down" (Naipaul 31). During the visit Naipaul meets a variety of Indians from various social classes. Jivan and Vasant represent the villagers who are lured by the material temptation of the big city. Malik and Bunt Boxwallah are the new Brahmins whose love of lucre drives them to envy the foreign returned Indians like Malhotra. They reject the traditional values of caste and symbolize a new class whose motto is money. Naipaul tells Kohn that a very few people can come out of the caste system. "The caste system, that friendly society which provides people with every kind of cushion, in bad times, will be around for most people in India" (Kohn). At another place he says about *An Area of Darkness*, "What it says about caste is influenced by ideas I had picked up here, British ideas. I think differently about caste now. I understand the

clan feeling, the necessity of that in a big country” (Dhondy). Naipaul dislikes the Indian habit of not respecting other person's privacy and wherever he goes, same question is asked again and again, “Where do you come from? I had been answering it five times a day” (Naipaul 94). He feels Indians dislike physical effort and labour of any sort unlike the Europeans who are physically agile and value dignity of work:

In India however the top bunk has the added advantage of being free of dust, the lower bunk is preferred, not because it is easier to spread one's bedding on it—there are porters and servants to do that, but because climbing to the top bunk involves physical effort, and physical effort is to be avoided as degradation (Naipaul 72).

Naipaul feels that service is not an Indian concept and that Indians join civil services only for prestige. In the chapter titled “Emergency”, with a typical western orientalist view, Naipaul is critical of the impractical approach of the Indian government to the Chinese aggression. Prime Minister Nehru, Defence Minister Krishnan Menon and the Army Chief General K. M. Cariappa are found short of tune by Naipaul with the enormity of the problem. They made no attempt to explore the psyche of nation jolted out of its first independence euphoria, bordering on a sense of invincibility. It explains why, when China invaded, the administration in Assam collapsed. Only plans were made with no real intention for the well being of the people. This attitude bred delay and corruption which is the hallmark of the Indian system. Naipaul refers to one such incident of corruption. He writes, “It is estimated that in Kashmir, as in rest of India, one third of development funds drain away in corruption and the exchanging of gifts ... it was the only system that could work” (Naipaul 135). Naipaul has no respect for Indian politicians who are considered above the law. Ministers are not required to stop at the traffic signal. In order to get elected a man had seventeen people murdered and still remains free and unpunished. Naipaul is severely critical of the Indian spiritual Godman and Gurus who peddle to the western taste for instant salvation and have turned spirituality into a big business. In one such instance in the book Naipaul gives an example of the luxurious attitude of a holy man who fears that the journey from Delhi will strain him and he decides to follow by viscount aeroplane.

The book on the whole conveys Naipaul's keen perception and sense of comedy and there can be no denial to this fact. He describes the places, people and incidents and manages to convey the meaning which lies behind them. With his profound vision and linguistic simplicity, he gives the reader a deep insight into India. Yet the contradictions and the writer's subjective mind exist simultaneously. Although he has written two other books on India namely *India: A Wounded Civilisation* and *India: The Million Mutinies*, yet his stand on the country is paradoxical; at one place he says he wants “to settle down in Bombay and rediscover (his) identity by losing (himself) in the millions of India” (Gupta), yet at another, he contradicts, “I do not write for the Indians, who in any case do not read. My work is only possible in a liberal, civilized western country. It is not possible in primitive societies” (Hardwick). With such a stand he has earned the offence of most of the Indians across the length and breadth of the country.

However Naipaul, whom Peter Webb calls the “Delphic Oracle” (qtd. in Zafir 15) of the post modern literary era, has proved himself to be a universal writer with his disliking of being associated with any particular country. Naipaul loathes the idea of being called an Indian writer. He says, “To be an Indian from Trinidad is to be unlikely. It is, in addition to everything else, to be the embodiment of an old verbal ambiguity. For this word 'Indian' has been abused as no other word in the language; almost every time it is used it has to be qualified” (qtd. in Garebian 29).

Many of his contemporaries have criticized Naipaul for his partial view of India: the principal accusation being that he has presented India from an occidental point of view and thus contributed to the Orientalist view of India. Many critics say that he is at his snobbish best in the books on India and still others blame him of writing polemics rather than travel accounts. Although he loves to be called an independent writer, his detractors term him as a reactionary, a man who attempts to dress up his thinly disguised prejudice in the grab of a courageous love for veracity (Iyer 86). C. D. Narasimhaiah argues that his views are 'obtrusively personal'; there are some critics also who hold an extreme view that the books are more about Naipaul's perception of his Indian sensibility than the India that he visited (Zafir 278). At another place noted critic Edward Said denounces him as a “native informer” (Wheatcroft). George Woodcock, while discussing the first two books on India writes:

As one reads through these two very uncharacteristic books, it becomes evident that Naipaul is writing less about India than about himself. In fact, on none of his journeys did he travel widely in the Indian hinterland, with its extraordinarily in cities founded by the British, like Bombay and Delhi and Calcutta, and in the old resorts of the raj like Kashmir and Simla. (8-9)

Iyer writes, “Naipaul's narrative is abstracted from reality, it is an exposition of Naipaul's own mind, a long essay of observation. It moves from travelogue to reminiscences and reflection” (88). A between the lines reading of *An Area of Darkness* creates a doubt in the minds of common readers that the impression given in the book is ill conceived and based on his impression rather than his experience. In this context, “what he saw or chose to see was not what he had expected to see, and he became sullen, he felt disillusioned ... The things he saw and recorded with a tiresome peculiarity were certainly there, but there were other things too which his observant eye shouldn't have missed” (Nandakumar 267). His non-commitment to India along with his macabre tirade and private responses against it may be attributed to his disinheritance from all the traditions and his rootlessness; the roots for which he visited India but found them sterile and gnarled. Although a few things in India like the majestic Himalayas, the fantasy of his childhood, does appeal to him but quite cynically he somehow manages to attach it to the Indian symbol of loss. Yet on the other hand, a sensible Indian cannot deny all the observations made by Naipaul particularly the ones regarding red tape, poverty, unhygienic conditions and corruption, keeping in view the slow development in all these areas and the recently unearthed scams in our country. In this context Anna Hazare's recent hunger strike with a mass following substantiates the concept of a corruption ridden India.

Conclusion: The Indian society is marked by gross lack of sanitation, nationalism, religion, history, economic and social development. The lack of governance and dishonesty on the part of politicians inhibit the development of modern progressive society. Naipaul is contemptuous of Indianness which pervades throughout and bears a negative influence on the aspects that make up our national identity and impedes Indian's progress and development. India, the country remains a complex abyss to Naipaul. He sees it as a puzzle which cannot be completed because the pieces of the puzzle keep it apart. He wanted to illuminate what was in his mind a sphere of darkness; he wanted to find himself in India, not the India of Kipling or Forster. However he returned disappointed. Although Naipaul dislikes to be labeled as an Indian writer but his observations about India in the book give ample proof of his unconscious attachment to India. Unlike Naipaul who feels angry, a typical western writer would have described India quite objectively. Naipaul's anger gives a proof of his being an insider. Besides, Orientalist writers find an exotic charm in the elements like snake charmers and sadhus in this country which is missing in Naipaul and is again an indication of his uncanny Indianness. *An Area of Darkness* is the median encounter of diasporic writer- though not diasporic in the strict sense of the word- with the place of his ancestry. He came to India with high expectations, but found that reality didn't match the romantic image he had harbored in his mind for so long. He ends at neither being an Indian nor English or Caribbean but a talent who knows no nationality.

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