

Understanding Naipaul's India: Socio-Political Contexts

Ritu Saxena

Abstract

V.S. Naipaul's repertoire as a writer of non – fiction is more impressive than his fiction. It is worthwhile to see Naipaul's non – fictional writing as a valuable interpretation of the socio – political and cultural contexts with which he is familiar : to see how history, colonialism have shaped societies and how their post – colonial milieu differs or draws from their colonial experience. Naipaul brings a freshness of insight that helps us to understand and come to terms with the tensions and conflicts between the past and the present. This paper is an attempt to focus on impressions and insights that Naipaul has formed in his extensive journeying across India. The knighted author went to Gorakhpur in 1962 and has maintained that it is the only real address he has in India. We find that with repeated visits, Naipaul's perspective has changed and his analyses have gained credence to an extent.

Key Words : History, colonialism, discovery of self, homelessness, rootlessness, disillusionment

Although ever since V.S. Naipaul started his literary career as a writer, he is known as a literary luminary, yet he never ceased to be a controversial writer for his oracle. As an interpreter of cultures civilizations and histories, Naipaul appears distinct and unique. V.S. Naipaul born in 1932, in Trinidad and descended from Indian Brahmins, has lived in England since 1950. He has carved a unique niche for himself in the Commonwealth literature. He belongs to the generation of the intellectuals who faced problems, which resulted from the withdrawal of imperialism and then subsequent cultural anarchy. As a homeless cosmopolitan of Indian origin with west Indian social heritage and British citizenship Naipaul's literary career spans over four decades. He has produced a huge corpus of writing that includes novels, short stories, non – fiction, travelogues, fictional biographies, auto biographies, journalistic writings and history proper among others.

Therefore, Naipaul began to travel in 1960 and since then he has been a restless wanderer – revisiting the Caribbean making many trips to India, travelling to Africa, America, Malaysia, Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia – looking for things to write about. V.S. Naipaul's literary career was a discovery of his own self – of the colonial who had ground up on a tiny backward island of Trinidad, amidst an insular Indian community and then with the racially mixed population of Port of Spain, the man who had no clear past or affiliations and who had to figure out the world he had been thrown into, while attempting to perceive the many strands that made up his self. His non fictional work seems to be the result of his own multilayered experiences: the many deprivations of Trinidad, the painful wretchedness of India as an outsider in England According to R.D. Hamner. "Naipaul is the kind of artist whose personal outlook and experience merge distinctly with everything he writes, whether fiction or non – fiction". He learns by all his senses; ears, eyes touch and feel. That is why there is an utmost clarity and directness in his language. Nobel – winning Naipaul provoked critical reactions all over the world, no less in India, though even before that recognition he had been recognized duly at different stages of his writing career.

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Most of Naipaul's writing issues from a desire to understand his own position in the world. The unique combination of circumstances which related him to three societies and yet left him with a deep sense of homelessness, undeniably play a predominant part in shaping his sensibility and determining his writing career. He was born into exile, separated from his racial and cultural roots, driven into another exile from the land of his birth, a third dispossession awaited him in England, he was really and truly lost and then he set out to "discover" himself through his work. The contradictions inherent in his background form the pivot of his work. It was in India that he recognized "how conditioned" he had been by the multiracial society of Trinidad. As an Indian in Trinidad, he belonged to a distinctive minority and in England too, as a Trinidad Indian he retained a separate identity. In India, when he blended unremarked in the crowd, he found it deflating and perceived then how necessary a stimulus – the sense of difference had come to him. His denunciation of Trinidad and India is itself a manifestation of conditioning – he himself has pointed out to be a consequence of colonialism and slavery – the unconscious acceptance of a typical European view of third world inferiority.

When Naipaul decided to write about India he was looking for a narrative usually as a novelist must do, but later India or other places he visited presented him with a different artistic interest, interest in the behavioral pattern which could easily suggest the core, sometimes of the individuals he came into contact with and generally of the whole nation or community concerned. Since his first visit to India, Naipaul seems to take a deep interest in India and develops a research attitude to the whole sub – continent. However, flatly he denies he is an Indian, he remains an Indian at heart.

India has attracted Naipaul more than any other country of the world. He visited India thrice in 1962 – 63, 1975 – 76, 1988 – 89 and wrote his account in three travelogues. These three works are *An Area Of Darkness* (1964), *A Wounded Civilization* (1977) and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990). His views about India in the first two of these 3 books on India gave rise to critical furor. However, his last book is totally different in tone and authorial attitude to India.

When Naipaul began his first journey to India in February 1962, just two months after the conclusion of the West Indian tour, it could not have been without some hope of finding at last a society in which his wandering spirit could find its moorings. On his first visit to India, he had no concrete plan of what use he should make of it. He knew then that he was to visit the land of his ancestors and know first hand what it was like. In 1962, Naipaul came to India, the mythical land of his roots, but he failed to embrace it and he consciously rejected it as his own land. India was the land from which his father's father had been brought to Trinidad as a baby and from which his maternal grandfather had come as an indentured laborer. In spite of his early detachment from ritual and religious belief – Naipaul could not remain untouched by Hindu attitudes. He grew up surrounded by mementos of India for "is its artefacts India" existed whole in Trinidad". This kept India alive in the mind even if only as a mysterious land of darkness from which his ancestors had arrived: "The background to my childhood was an area of the imagination (AOD 41) The journey to India was undertaken as an exploration of this "area of the imagination" - "the area of

darkness” The result was shattering. “It was a journey that ought not to have been made, it had broken my life in two” (AOD 265)

The involvement with India is manifested in a violent rejection, turning away. His rejection of India came at the first visit he paid to the country which had been in a special way the background of his childhood – “an area of his imagination” in 1962. He had paid a visit to the village of his maternal grandfather who had come to Trinidad from India as an indentured laborer. Naipaul’s disillusionment with the ‘mythical land’ was complete by then. The contact with the reality taught him only how far he had grown away from the country. It was a disturbing experience. He had come in the hope of discovering his roots the trip only confirmed his rootlessness. Some irresistible fascination has drawn him into India – again and again though every encounter saddened and emphasized further his own separateness from what he saw. *An Area of Darkness* is Naipaul’s deep reckoning with his ancestral homeland, India. It is a chronicle of his first encounter with India. In it, he responds to India’s paralyzing caste system, its serene acceptance of poverty and squalor and the conflict between its desire for self determination and its nostalgia for the British raj. A man of strong opinions, his unflinching look at unpleasant realities reveals a man who is deeply troubled by what he sees. He had transformed his anger into lucid, detailed observation Naipaul is most effective when he is sarcastic for eg. When he quotes Gandhi. On the squalor and shortcomings of India and point out that Gandhi’s observations are valid today. The colonial depicts the colonial’s view of India. Incidentally, the colonial happens to be Mahatma Gandhi. According to Naipaul, the idea of Britishness is inextricably bound up with the Indian empire and the British created the themselves as an imperial people with a God-given mission, even as they created Indians as a subordinate race and state. India is not a modern country because there is no sense of the passage acceptance of everything and an escape into the land of imagination to compensate for what otherwise would be a reality too painful to bear.

Naipaul succeeds in being the unsentimental observer. His are the original responses to India. He criticizes almost every aspect of India. When he sees India, he does not see the rich spiritual heritage or the long lasting ancient civilization. Instead, he sees the country which has stripped off its resources. Religion has wrongly ingrained into the society and he thinks that these ideas and traditions are decaying Indian society. He sees the attitudes of accepting traditions blindly and never questioning one’s own belief system. The people have pride of belonging to the oldest lasting tradition but have a very strong reluctance to grow. His criticism extends into every aspect of Indian culture language, people and history. No negative attitude escapes his eye including subtle Indian habit of escaping into the land of imagination to avoid the painful reality of existence. It seems as if he has decided to turn a blind eye towards the positive side of things. He fails to see India which has just been given freedom. He points out the problem, but is unable to identify the root causes. Thus *An Area of Darkness* serves as a catalyst in the process of change that we all desire as Indians. The 1962 visit taught him the painful lesson of his “separateness from India”. Here too, there could be no homecoming for him and he would have to be content to be “without a past, without ancestors.”

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Naipaul's second book on India came but in 1977 after a visit in 1975 – *India A Wounded Civilization*. It is the work of a writer whose mind is made up and who is only out to prove a point. In 1975, Naipaul returned to India and portrayed a society traumatized by centuries of foreign conquest. Based on news reports, novels, political memoirs and his own encounters with Indians – from an engineer to a homeless, Naipaul captured agonized country barely visible to its own people. His second journey shows a distorted picture of India. It speaks about lack of scientific inclination, lack of humility that encourages learning and experimentation. With due diligence, Naipaul pointed out that research and development in India is based even today on mimicry. Hypocrisy and arrogance are rampant in India along with a lack of civic sense and concern for society or collective development. *India : A Wounded Civilization* is an eye opener to the underlying psychology that has driven India for most of the past millennium; Naipaul captures its many facets without being stereotypical and provides a truly damning account of contemporary India.

Naipaul sees India as locked in infantile self absorption unable to find an ideology, suited to the challenges of the modern world. Gandhi may have provided the energy for India finally to escape British colonialism, but his romantic attachment to simplicity and a highly romanticized view of the Indian countryside froze Indian politics and intellectual life for decades. In Bombay, Naipaul visits chawls where dwell the factory workers of city, unwanted but necessary, with their allegiance to Shiv Seva and their committees. In them, Naipaul finds a people who have broken away from post and who are making a new claim on land. This is where Naipaul is least pessimistic about India, for everywhere else he finds people just barely surviving without a want for more in complete acceptance of their karma. This is the distress of India which Naipaul finds impossible to accept.

His second travelogue records his opinions and impressions about India both as a country and civilization. Being a person of Indian descent and brought up outside India, he simultaneously looks at India both as an insider and as an outsider. Some of his observations are astute and nuanced, some of his comments can be considered brutal Naipaul scorns at Indians who speak of their civilization as great while simultaneously having no idea about it they lack a sense of history, at sense of cultural, identify and a sense of being a people while simultaneously hanging on to imperfectly understood and incorrectly interpreted ancient concepts like Karma and Dharma and misapplying them with very bad results. He literally rips through the Indian psyche in uncompromising and practical manner. Every aspect of India, its education system, its mindset, its administrative setup political and religious beliefs has been ridiculed. His second visit is an explanation of the character of India during one of its darkest hours-emergency Naipaul was obviously frustrated when he wrote this book wanting to lift Indians out of their social religious and economic predicaments, alluring them to pursue the goals of equality and justice. Perhaps he had some positive influence to motivate change.

Although Nobel laureate's last journey through his ancestral homeland shows a different viewpoint. His last work on Indian trilogy – *India : A Million Mutinies Now* (IMM) arises out of his life long obsession and passion for a country that is at once his and totally alien. It relates the stories of many of the people he met travelling there

more than 50 years ago. Here he recognized that it was his ancestral culture that governed who he was and how he thought. In this passionate portrait of a culture, a society and a country, he returns to India, a nation in turmoil. In more mellow tone and compassion, he writes about the rage of each community and caste and religion in India and perceptively holds that one's own rage and historical injustice suffered is more important than other groups' injustices (Dalits, Brahmins, Communists Sikhs). Although he evokes strong resentment among Indians, he casts the incisive and critical eye on India's major failings.

IMM talks much about India and its development. Naipaul allows us entry into the lives of gangsters, film makers, terrorists, politicians, revolution poets, bureaucrats, writers and poor people. It is a large canvas befitting a country of a billion people and the mutinies abound. Out of this huge and diverse place complex struggles emerge for wealth, survival and power. He is a great observer of humanity. This is a wonderful look at how India's current renaissance has come about. Naipaul is a rare talent of born narrator who offers stimulating insights. This non fiction shows certain optimistic implications. Its an innovative way of telling India's story from the eyes of the Indians. He says exactly what he wants to irrespective of consequence. Therefore, we can say that Naipaul views underwent a sea change in *India Million Mutinies Now* that he wrote after his visit to India in 1988 – 89. He explores himself too and studies it to diagnose why he failed to grasp India in the past. During his first visit, his visit was conditioned. India of his fantasy and heart clashed with India of reality and the India of his heart and dreams had one meaning in real India. The Indian identity as a nation or the identity of people as Indian was divided into class, creed and caste identities. He now portrays, India as an area of awakening. He presents various shades of Indian life marked with the spirit of the mutiny, which stands for "the cry of the liberation" and "the idea of freedom" among people (2) Thus it seems, Naipaul had come full circle in the 3 books on India in terms of understanding and penetration.

To conclude, one can say that Naipaul never treated India as his home, has had cultural and literary connections with India and the fact that he has written three books on India is a testimony to the fact. His three journeys to India justify the fact that he is somehow or the other Indian at heart.

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