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V.S. NAIPAUL AND HIS INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, winner of Nobel Prize for literature in 2001 was a Diaspora writer who saw India through the eyes of his people who had been deeply rooted in Indian culture and recreated India in the foreign land. So though he had never seen India he imagined what India was like. He was inquisitive about it but was actually objective and was himself like an outsider He had Indian blood but the air that he breathed was foreign. He questioned the traditions, the orthodox life style. For him India was a land of fairies, of childhood stories. In this article his journey through the country of his ancestors, his apprehensions, his changing views as he observed India shall be delineated. His travelogues have an extensive report of his experiences in India. It shall be shown how his views about India changed over time.

Key Words : immigrant, dismay, repulsion

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Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, winner of Nobel Prize for literature in 2001, is a well-known Indian writer on India He was born on Hindu stock in Trinidad. As an adult, he went to Britain in 1950 to study at Oxford. Since then, he has been living in London .Naipaul's first visit to India in 1962 was undertaken as a quest for his roots in the country from where his grandfather had migrated to Trinidad as an indentured laborer at the beginning of the twentieth century. India shows up in Naipaul's earliest fiction through his memories, in *Mystic Masseur (1957)*, *The Suffrage of Elvira (1958)*, *Miguel Street (1959)* and *A House of Mr. Biswas (1961)*. He excels in presenting the indentured Indian in immigrant's predicament in the West Indian context. V.S. Naipaul's travel writings -- *An Area of Darkness (1964)*, *India: A Wounded Civilization (1977)* and *India: A Million Mutinies Now (1990)* express his complex identity of an expatriate. While in Trinidad, he understood India through his people who had deep rooted Indian consciousness. Naipaul did not grow up in India but his family almost recreated India around him. It was like a dreamland for him,yet his attitude was objective towards it. He had Indian blood but the air that he breathed was foreign. His practical approach to life made him question the Indian orthodox way of life. He had little emotional bondage with India yet India was like a fairyland of the stories heard in childhood. Bombay was the first city he visited and was dismayed at the very sight. His travelogues have an extensive report of his experiences in India.

Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness (1962)*¹ a migrant text, shows evidently the impact of colonization, along with the cultural metamorphosis in the country. The writer was imbued with the diversification of taste that developed during the British Empire. *An Area of Darkness* narrates Naipaul's own experiences of India.

The book is a quest for family roots and he being a third generation immigrant, the pull for a visit to India is not out of love but out of curiosity. Having established himself as a British writer, he made his maiden visit to India in 1961. He had memories of India as a land of myths and legends which he had heard from his grandmother. As a traveller in the cultural spaces of India, he anatomises social mannerises, tradition and customs but his western, rational mind is unable to cope up with cultural shock. This shock is a natural outcome of his being face to face the reality of India. He was attracted towards India for having an Indian background in a foreign land and also because of the country had also been a British colony and shared this aspect of the past with Trinidad. India of his mythological conception, the residence of his childhood memories is a land different from what he really thought it would be. His ancestral village attracted him to India but he could not be one with the sentiments of his relatives. He was at heart a foreigner. Jussodara's tears did not move him and Ramchandra's warm welcome did not touch him. There was a prevailing sense of superiority sometimes. In Bombay he went unnoticed by the surging crowd. The feelings of an expatriate made him feel defected: "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."...

A fear of drowning in the Indian crowd gripped him and recognition of name was important to him. India to him signifies strangeness, a painful absurdity and a hopeless country progressively ravaged by moral and historical degeneration. He finds that the future of India is dark. The shadow of the British Raj has engulfed the people, everybody wishes to go abroad. During the colonial rule, natives bribed officials. The same corrupt practices became widespread in the postcolonial India. Naipaul realises that colonial systems of education, law and administrative machinery have created mental colonisation in the elites.

But Naipaul does not outrightly condemn the British Rule in India. He feels that Indians should forever be obliged to the British. He points out that even Indian History, as read today, is revealed to the Indians by the Europeans. India's Ancient History has undoubtedly excellent achievements unparalleled with the history of the world. He reiterates that the Indians have no sense of history because they continue to read the history written by Britishers without anger and pain. As a result, people have developed a myopic vision and take refuge to fantasy and fatalism. (*Area of Darkness*. 201) The colonial past, he realises, has ravaged the cultural past and has hampered the creativity and artistic development of the country. Even if the British Government established somewhere a biscuit factory, it was a poor exchange for gold embroidery. Naipaul holds England responsible for the artistic failure. Unlike the Moguls, the British were never absorbed by India. The British never considered India a Paradise. The basic motive of the British Government was to extract capital and convert India to a useful market for England's finished products.

On the other hand Naipaul is unable to understand the enigma of Indian social life. He derides the attitudes of Indians who are entangled in the traditions and customs of India. He does not even spare his grandparents for this. "Customs are maintained because they are ancient." (*Area of Darkness*. 29-30) The reasons are not far to seek. He was brought up in a multiracial society, educated at Oxford. His heart was in the process of hunting for his real self. The self was neither in India nor in Trinidad and nor in England.

Naipaul, in *Area of Darkness*, is distraught by the conditions for whichever reason they may be. This book arouses deep passion and is much in demand. It has evoked amazingly divergent and diverse critical responses. Prof. C.D. Narsimhaiah² and Nissim Ezekiel³ have analysed it searchingly and exposed Naipaul's arrogance, lack of sympathy, his failure to find identity in India. Dom Moraes accepts Naipaul as a "Writer of our times. He calls it "not only a brilliant piece of literature, but an interesting psychological study of Naipaul by Naipaul."⁴

Naipaul published his second book on India in 1977- *India: A Wounded Civilization*.⁵ In this book, he reinforces his view that India is wounded by a foreign rule and has not still found an ideology of regeneration. He makes a serious attempt to dive deep into the psyche of India by going into the socio-economic and cultural problems that are peculiar to his country but his attitude of India remains unchanged. "How often in India- at every level rational conversation about the country's problems trails away into talk of magic, of the successful prophecies of astrologers.... When men cannot observe they don't have ideas, they have obsessions. (*India: A Wounded civilization* 221)

In this travelogue, Naipaul includes personal indepth analysis : The narrative is less descriptive than other travel narratives because he analyses Indian's present conditions and then makes social, economic and political observations. Some passages deal with aspects of 'cleanlines' as in *Area of Darkness* but the narrative tends to be more analytical, and perhaps more philosophical : "The poor are needed as hands, as labour, but the city was not built to accommodate them....." (IWC. 56). "To be in Bombay is always to be in a crowd. By day the streets are clogged; by night the pavements are full of sleepers." and "it was unclean to clean.....until the sweepers came, people were content to live in the midst of their own excrement." (IWC. 68). There is strong sarcasm in the lines which later in the book changes to the voice, of a social critic offering solution to the problem. He tries to wake up The Indians before it is too late. "While India tries to go back to an idea of its past, it will not possess that past is to be seen to be dead, or the past will kill. (IWC 191).

Coming out in 1977 Naipaul's second book on India, *India: A Wounded Civilization* is a work of a writer whose mind is made up and who is only out to prove a point. He speaks of Indian. Civilization as a "Wounded Civilization", decaying and dying. The book is a selective documentation of this fact. His specific observations are astoundingly penetrating. He perceives India as still depending on the west. He feels that all the disciplines and the skills that India now seeks to exercise are borrowed. He makes piercing remarks about the nature of colonialism. There is awareness that Slavish imitation of dominating culture is a universal phenomenon, not exclusive to any race, land or culture. He almost obsessively dwells on the inability of the Indian to move away from the impact of Britishers and are still under the object admiration of the dominating power. Poverty in India, from which Naipaul recoils in appalled horror is entirely a creation of British Rule.

India: A Wounded Civilization extends little hope of recovery to the Indian Civilization: "The crisis of India is not political : this is only the view from Delhi. Dictatorship or rule by the army will change nothing. Nor is the crisis only economic. These are only aspects of the large crisis, which is that of a decaying civilization, where the only hope lies in further swift decay." (IWC 174-175).

Naipaul visited India again in 1988. This visit is delineated in *India: A Million Mutrines Now*(1990)⁶ The book is quite different from *An Area of Darkness*, which revealed a highly subjective, opinionated and disappointed traveller. But in his last account he has chosen, a fresh style with directly quoted speeches with numerous interviews. *India: A Million Mutines Now* (1990) reveals a mellower tone of its author. The book records those voices from all sides of India which tell him that India has changed. The narrators voice emerges time to time strewned with amusement and often irony. In his 1988 visit Naipaul first reached Bombay, where he was awestruck to see a long procession and standing line of Ambedkar's followers. After enquiries he came to know about hundreds of revolutions which he calls "million mutinies now." He visited many persons in Bombay then proceeded to Banglore via Goa, then turned to Madras, Calcutta, Lucknow, Delhi and Punjab. Naipauls hears about the activities of Shiv Sena in Bombay and the role of Bal Thackerary. The poet, Namdeo, convinces him that both Sena and Dalits were demanding separate land. Naipaul notices the changing agrarian system in India. When he goes to Goa he notices a healthy change in Indian agriculture. In Banglore, he understood the caste, class and power factor, Madras showed him the marketing that had started in India. He is struck by the mutinies like Dalit Movement, Dravidain Movement against Brahminism, Hinduism and North and Tamil Tigers Movement. Pereira, Veeraswami and Prabhakaran appeal to his intellect. At Calcutta, Dipayan and other sub leaders of Maoism peasant movement or Naxalbari told him several objectives mainly rooting out the Zamindari system. His interview of Rashid opened his eyes towards the downfall of museums after independence. Joseph Lelyveld states "The most notable commitment of intelligence that post has.... India has evoked. He is indispensable for anyone who wants seriously to come to grips with the experience in India."⁷

Naipaul latest novel, *Half a Life*⁸ which was published in October 2001 depicts the agony and dilemma of an immigrant through the tale of three generations of an Indian brahmin family. The novel runs into three uneven sections, subtitled a) A visit from Somerset Maugham (b) The first Chapter c) A Second Translation. The novelist signals the variety of problems due to cultural pluralism. There are institutional conflicts as well as class conflicts but the novel primarily is a record of Willie Somerset Chandran's quest for identity. His story is set in Post-Independence India, then in London and then he travels to a Pre-Independence African country, later on to Berlin. Wellie's travels bring him so many characters who are leading half life in exile. He feels at

home with people who are faceless because of the affinity he has with them. The author takes up the task of satirising the Indian way of life through the ironic rendering of the protagonist's father: Willie Chandran recalls how his father, who belonged to a traditional family of priests, stood at odds with the world striving for greatness while leading a dreary life that was given to him by his ancestors.

Naipaul's ancestral memory exercised a kind of moral, spiritual and psychological influence on the plots, characters and themes of the novels and travelogues. His first impression of India was more of shock as for him India was what he gathered from the incidents and stories told by his grandparents. It was a far off fairy land, the land where everything was right and a land that was always longed and missed by his grandparents.

There was an initial repulsion and shock when he first visited the land of his ancestors. India was a land of darkness- of ignorance. The second visit pained him further. The entire civilization was wounded, diseased beyond the control of humans. His criticisms are an evidence of the agony that he suffered and the desire that things would improve. The last visit brought hope that there were efforts all across the country- a million mutinies that could establish the country once again. Naipaul repeatedly blames the colonial power, the British, for the conditions that prevailed in post-colonial India. The changed culture, the charged attitude, the rampant disorder, the threat to democracy and secularism, the diminishing artistic sensibility of the Indians, the love for power and money, the arrogance of the bureaucrats, the system of bribery, the industrial decadence, the poverty and the large scale mismanagements of government departments were all due to the British colonialism. They had reduced India to nothingness - to an area of darkness, a wounded civilization from which it was emerging and evolving out, to make place in the world through a million mutinies.

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