

V. S. Naipaul's Response to India In An Area of Darkness

Aloy Chand Biswas

Egra S. S. B. College, West Bengal, India

Journey motif has become an important feature of writings of Third World immigration. Though the Third World expatriate writers inherit the journey motif from the colonialist writers, they use it as a mode of expression of their inner restlessness to find out their roots. The expatriate writers almost always have colonization as a theme in their works, but they use it not as a backdrop. Rather it is used as a foreground to establish the powerful bonds between the expatriates and their motherlands they have deserted. In most cases the expatriate writers are in search of 'home'. Unable to find out 'home', they write heaps of papers describing the lands they visit thereby supplying a lot of information including personal ideas to their readers. The post-modern label for those writers haunted by journey motif is 'the rootless searching for roots'. The characters in such writings are in most cases seen searching for 'spatial identity'. It is Viney Kirpal who has rightly pointed out :

Where journeys frequently represent transition from one mode of being to another, or from a state of innocence to a state of experience, expatriate fiction constitutes the feeling of not quite having arrived (Kirpal 71).

The greatest expatriate writer of the world at modern times V. S. Naipaul out of his 'fear of extinction' which he actually inherited from his father

produces a good number of fictions and travelogues which are the direct outcomes of his world wide tours and travels. Tormented by an expatriate's dilemma, a search without end for some certainties, Naipaul a Trinidadian born of Indian origin, makes a journey to India, his original homeland in 1962. He spends here nearly about a year. The product of this sojourn is An Area of Darkness (1964), 'less chronological and documentary, and more concerned with locating metaphors for Naipaul's personal odyssey as a writer than with unraveling the country's mysteries' (Mustafa V. S. Naipaul 92). The textual echo of Conrad's Heart of Darkness within Naipaul's first Indian narrative resonates beyond the title's allusion. It also serves as Naipaul's probe into the textual unconscious writing's unauthorized postcolonial potentialities. The theme of darkness is recurrent in British writings on India. In this context David Rubin's The Greater Darkness and Nirad C. Chaudhuri's piece 'Universal Darkness' may be referred to. But Naipaul's 'darkness' is a bit alien, alien in the sense when he makes his first visit to this country, he bore in him an Indian which was obviously a Trinidad-born one. During his stay in Trinidad with the transplanted Indian communities at his boyhood days, he formed an imaginary idea of India and he carried it all along within him as his 'el dorado'. But coming to this country in 1962 for the first time his imaginary homeland clashes with the reality here frustrating his hope of the extinction of his sense of rootlessness. His visit to India hammers down the last nail to the coffin of his search for roots. He has no hope but to think that India cannot be his country: "It was a journey that ought not to have been made; it had broken my life into two" (Naipaul An Area of Darkness 289).

In his Nobel-winner piece A House for Mr. Biswas Naipaul fictionalizes India as he saw it in Trinidad, but An Area of Darkness shows bare facts of India. In this travelogue a complex relationship between Naipaul and India is detected. “It is not Lawrence Darrell’s relationship to Alexandria, nor Kipling’s to India” (Sarkar 141). The Oedipal tug of the relationship of an expatriate writer and his mother long preserved in the mind of Naipaul shatters into sense of loneliness and rootlessness which is the essential condition of an immigrant writer. His experiences of his first sojourn in India which are noted in An Area of Darkness flare up innumerable controversies and conflicting opinions among the critics living all over the world. Naipaul comes to India with a predetermined set of ideas about imaginary India shaped by the experience of casual participation in Hindu ceremonies and memories of artefacts and other things of his grandfather’s migration. These ideas gathered from community-life led in Trinidad generate in Naipaul a dialectic form which ultimately makes him a new figure of cosmopolitanism rooted in the cultural amalgam of a post-colonial metropole. The scorching heat of Bombay and Delhi during his first visit to India creates almost a ‘hysteria’ in Naipaul and all his pre-set ideas of the land become flattened to a mere hallucination. Indian realities by no way appear before him as healthy and shining. India is to him is the India he dreamt to see after coming here. His very first landing on India’s soil shatters his preset ideas and he is awakened to an utter horror that reflects the colonial self still dominating over his mind :

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...It was like being denied part of my reality...recognition of

my difference was necessary to me (Naipaul An Area of Darkness 39).

But Naipaul's reconstruction of his imaginary India cannot be pitied against his observations of his first visit to the country. His experience gives him a creative shock which urges him to modify his mission of self-definition as a writer. For Naipaul is a writer who is always very conscious of what he writes : "It is my of Judging what I am doing which is never an easy thing to do" (Naipaul 'Nobel Lecture').

An Area of Darkness is a cogent account of how Naipaul's phantasmagoria about India jostles with reality after coming to this country. Corruption, nepotism, general apathy to perform duties which Naipaul sees strewn at every part of the country are sufficient enough to ruin his fantasy. The horror awakened in the mind of Naipaul is that of Kurtz and Marlow in Conrad's Heart of Darkness. The problem of Naipaul at his first visit to India is that he tries to attach himself too much to India, but cannot. All the time India appears before him a distant reality. It is he who feels the difficulty at heart to separate himself from the observed. Ultimately he is totally lost in delusion. India remains a mystery to him as it did to Mrs. Moore and Adela in Forster's A Passage to India. India is left to him as 'an area of darkness' as it has been since the days of his boyhood in Trinidad. How far he tries to come close to India, too far it appears alien, unfamiliar and distant to him. Therefore he rightly determines to take his final flight from this country and to confess before leaving it : "I had learned my separateness from India, and was content to be colonial" (Naipaul An Area of Darkness 274). Actually An Area of Darkness is one of Naipaul's hardest attempts to come to terms with the problem of identity. The book is

a detailed investigation of one part of Naipaul by the other, the Indian acts as data, the Western the microscope. N. Sharada Iyer has rightly commented :

Naipaul's writings dealt with the cultural confusion of the Third World and the problem of an outsider, a feature of his own experience as an Indian in the West Indies, a West Indian in England and a nomadic intellectual in a post-colonial world (Iyer 85).

Naipaul in his own life suffers from the experiences of 'a double exile'. His grandfather long ago had to leave India and went to Trinidad as indentured labourer. There he became settled within Indian communities and led a life in exile. By the time Naipaul visits India he can still well recollect his Trinidadian experiences. Again he had to go to London at the age of eighteen leaving their Trinidadian exile. In Trinidad the indentured labourers were exposed to cultural patterns imported from England. So when Naipaul came to England the difference he felt was not in culture, but in his adaptation to it. For in Trinidad he was fostered in imported colonialism, but in England he is placed in the very home of colonialism. Therefore the first thing after coming to England he had to do was to learn to be blinded of his inheritance. His arrival in London makes him feeling a rootless. His chartered journey to London cut off his link with Hindu heritage. Now the real dilemma appears – his past collapsing before him and the possibility of a new set of culture appearing a distant reality. It is first enigma of arrival in his life. A Caribbean by birth, an Indian by heritage, a down-right colonial by culture, Naipaul, when visits India in search of his resting place, it is very natural India appears to him a void, a featureless area of darkness. But the darkness Naipaul sees in India is not the darkness in India itself. It is the darkness having frozen in Naipaul since the days of his Trinidad life. Naipaul himself has confessed: "In 27 years I had succeeded in making a

kind of return journey, ...abolishing the darkness that separated me from my ancestral past” (Naipaul India : A Million Mutinies Now 516). Therefore the darkness of India is the long-preserved darkness of Naipaul’s mind. Naipaul as an expatriate carries his origin of darkness within him. His India is not the India he visits. For his India was an el dorado born out of some imported ideas of indentured labourers living far away from India. But the India Naipaul visits is the real India always brimming with ambivalences to the outsiders. Naipaul himself has confessed it better :

It was the country from which my grandfather came, a country never physically described and therefore never real, a country out in the void beyond the dot of Trinidad (Naipaul An Area of Darkness 21).

P.C. David’s comment is very circumstantial in this respect— “The darkness of Naipaul is the darkness of his own situation born out of a romantic reverie which cannot stand the glare of the day” (Jussawalla, ed. New Writing In India 71).

An Area of Darkness is a travelogue which narrates a vision for a traveler who is constantly haunted by a sense of rootlessness. Unable to become intimate with his Trinidadian origin, apathetic to his foster culture Naipaul makes his visit to India with a hope to find out his resting place at last. But when the hope of such a writer shatters, it is quite natural for him to make some harsh comments against those who cannot fulfil his hope. There are a lot of critics who have duly tried to judge the mind-set of the author behind making such harsh comments against India and its realities. N. Sharada Iyer has stated his reason for Naipaul’s nauseous attitude towards Indian reality— “Naipaul continually tries to impose his personalized, romanticized image of India on the reality, and when the reality militates against his pre-conceived notion he allows his narrative to slip into an exercise in banter,

unwarranted moralizing and misplaced criticism” (Iyer 88). Other critics like John Wain, V. S. Prichett have considered Naipaul’s first book on India as ‘excellent and exciting’. Even Dom Moraes feels no compunction to call Naipaul’s An Area of Darkness “not only a brilliant piece of literature, but an interesting psychological study of Naipaul by Naipaul” (Moraes ‘Gentleman’). All these critics look into the very inner struggle of Naipaul whose Indian trip pushes him utterly into a world loneliness. The past, the present and the future of his life are all lost in no-where. His visit to India only confirms what he had been thinking so far of his land of childhood as an area of darkness. He cannot bridge up his separateness from India. Therefore before taking the flight from India he feels no hesitation to express his satisfaction of being a colonial without a past. That a colonial always lives within Naipaul becomes true even in Naipaul’s own rude reaction in the seminar held in Jaipur in 2002, which was the first ever festival of letters on such a large scale on *At Home In The World*. “At Neemrana, where he invites ‘retreated’ for a literary exchange, Sir Vidya was rude to Nayantara Sehgal, called her concern with colonization banal and was, in turn, called obnoxious by Ruchir Joshi” (web).

Removedness from the country of origin and adaptation to the cultures of the adopted country begets a distinctive perspective of colonization in the Third World expatriate writer. Such novelists often treat colonization as an important subject in their works. Wherever they visit, their critical eyes always are in search of the impacts of ex-colonies on the natives there. Born and brought up in colonies Naipaul can never shake off his colonial nerves altogether. The colonial nerve is so strengthened in Naipaul that he questions the relevance of the immortal art and culture of India. According

to Naipaul “the Taj Mahal is exquisite. Transported slab by slab to the United States and re-erected, it might be wholly admirable. But in India it is a building wastefully without a function” (Naipaul An Area of Darkness 220). Even he goes so far to call India’s civilization as “Indian schizopherenia” (Naipaul An Area of Darkness 229). Naipaul’s basic mistake is that he takes the shrub for the woods. Actually he arrives in India with an attitude that he travels another British colony. He does not therefore like the Indian tendency of evaluating the material from a moral point of view, the outer with an inner scale of measurement. I am again going back to Viney Kirpal who has said, “His (Naipaul’s) basic theme is the impact of colonization on the native’s consciousness” (Kirpal 152). The problem of Naipaul is that he tries live within his experiences in the new land on one hand, but he survives on a memory of old experiences. Therefore the evaluation of the first experiences is deeply motivated by that of the latter. His interpretation of Indian ‘Varna’ is an example of such a problematic experience. According to Naipaul classification of ‘Varna’ in the Gita is outmoded today. But Naipaul cannot catch the point behind Lord Krishna’s classification which is based upon the inner truth the ‘Guna’ intensifying the excellence of ‘Karma’ (activity). That is why India hides itself in darkness to Naipaul. Naipaul slams the Indians for living on the past, but none can deny the fact that only those who have a past, can live on it. It is Nirad C. Chaudhuri who has stated very clearly the difficulty of catching its varieties :

On account of its vastness and variety India is treacherous ground for all foreign writers (Chaudhuri “The First Story About India.....” 47 or 49).

Though Naipaul belongs to Indian ancestry, he is essentially a foreigner in his visits to this country. He lacks the visionary power to read India in its right spirit. Even Naipaul himself expresses his doubt at a crucial point of his first visit to India :

Was it my colonial, Trinidad – American, English-speaking prejudice which could not quite accept as real this imposition, without apparent competition, of one culture on another (Naipaul An Area of Darkness 203)?

Naipaul's position is very like that of a colonial foundling who is always in search of a certainty which is nothing but a distant reality. His reactions to India's realities are irritating to many a critic, specially the Indian ones. From Trinidad he comes to India via England in search of a kind of 'metropolitan largeness'. Failure to find it in India, he thinks it may live elsewhere, in Europe or America. It is William Walsh who has made a significant comment on Naipaul's An Area of Darkness :

Naipaul's return to India is as much a research into himself as into another country. He is crawling in sensitive naked feet up through the tunnels of his own self (Walsh 63).

Even Naipaul himself has confessed it in one of his interviews with Andrew Robinson — “Yes, it's (An Area of Darkness) about me really, being an Indian immigrant in Trinidad” (Robinson 10). It is obviously true that anyone who is not in Naipaul's position can understand his problem fully. But when an author who is himself not aware of something properly, yet he reacts, it is obviously that his reactions must create some counter reactions. His Indian responses in his first visit to the country as recorded in his first travelogue are such reactions producing so many counter-reactions. It is I. K. Masih who very sharply reacts to Naipaul's An Area of Darkness. He

says, “My first response on reading V. S. Naipaul’s An Area of Darkness was that here was a gifted writer with the dexterity of a magician to forge fact and fiction together” (Masih 142). He thinks that before making any harsh comment against India, Naipaul should have thought for once that in spite of the assaults and exploitations done to India by the British for hundreds of years, Indians have not broken down. Naipaul’s accusation of India’s mimicry of the west is nothing but his ‘fantasy’. “We have a tradition, a heritage to keep us going even the west has tried to annihilate us economically” (Masih 147). Sometimes Naipaul is criticized for his detailed accounts on Indian realities as a spokesman of the Ministry of Information of the Union Government of India. Even Nissim Ezekiel who praises Naipaul as a gifted writer of the century cannot stand in favour of his An Area of Darkness. To him the book is flawed in detail (Naipaul’s India And Mine). Even a West Indian critic Helga Chaudhary in an article (Naipaul’s Changing Vision of India...) expresses her opinion that An Area of Darkness bears a concrete example of Naipaul’s problem of ‘alienation and psychological ambience’ both in relation to the Caribbean and to India. Whatever the critics think of Naipaul’s An Area of Darkness, the problem of Naipaul remains where it had been even after his visit to India. His desperate attempt to come out of the cocoon of colonialism ends in smoke when he has to take a flight from this country with a repentance in mind, “It was a journey that ought not to have been made; it had broken my life in two” (Naipaul An Area of Darkness 289). Therefore his search for his roots in Trinidad as well as in India come to an end with a realization there can be no going back and he cannot ‘be what he had ceased to be’.

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About the Author - Aloy Chand Biswas, Head, Department of English
Egra S. S. B. College, Egra, Purba Medinipur, West Bengal.