

A Study on Naipaul's Enigmatic Relationship with Reference to 'India: A Wounded Civilization'

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V.S Naipaul is one of the most gifted writers of the twentieth century: his status reaffirmed by the 2001 Nobel Prize for literature. Although his fiction is scattered in many differing locales, ranging from Trinidad to East Africa, India and Indians are part and parcel of Naipaul's work. The present paper throws light on Naipaul's enigmatic relationship with India with reference to one of his Indian travelogues—"India: A Wounded Civilization".

Key words:- Rootlessness, India, Cultural Degradation, Wounds, India: A Wounded Civilization.

V. S. Naipaul, the mouthpiece of displacement and rootlessness is one of the most significant contemporary English Novelists, of Indian descent, born in Trinidad, and educated in England; Naipaul has been placed as a rootless nomad in the cultural world, always on a voyage to find his identity. The expatriate sensibility of Naipaul haunts him throughout his fiction and other works, he becomes spokesman of emigrants. He delineates the Indian immigrants' dilemma, his problems and plights in a fast-changing world. In his works, one can find the agony of an exile; the pangs of a man in search of meaning and identity; a dare-devil who has tried to explore myths and see through fantasies. Out of his dilemma is born a rich body of writings which has enriched diasporic literature and the English language.

David Pryce Jones calls Naipaul 'a novelist with an over-hanging sense of loss.' According to Jones, *diminishing* is his favourite word, *narrow* is another¹. Naipaul's concerns are fantasy and myth, homelessness and quest. He frequently uses worlds like dereliction, violation, loss, illusion, fraud, corruption, degradation and idle. Despite these overwhelming concerns and repetitions, each of Naipaul's novels has a different texture and shape. The loosely connected stories of *Miguel Street*, the mock-history of Ganesh in the *Mystic Masseur*, the satiric political drama in *The Suffrage Of Elvira*, the brooding and expansive *A House For Mr. Bishwas*, the bitter sweet memoir of Ralph Singh in *The Mimic Men*, and the violent world of *Guerillas* and *A Bend in the River* are manifestations of different dimensions of the modern dilemmas that confront the global village that the world is coming to be. Overall a critical consensus has emerged that Naipaul's world is peopled with rudderless and rootless protagonists who in many ways are incarnation of the author himself. There can be little doubt that there is a lot of autobiographical baggage in Naipaul's fiction. The critical consensus on his fictional themes has been summed up by Leonard S. Kheined: "Naipaul's Progressive alienation from the three cultures (Indian, Trinidadian and British) that shaped him, his disaffection from any particular literary community or tradition, and his concern with political and moral freedom, exile and the quest for order, are the themes that in one way or another find their way into his writing."²

Naipaul's search for identity is ethnic as well as the spiritual quest of an agnostic. Naipaul was born in a Brahmin family in Trinidad in 1932 and he sums up his background as "fairly simple, barbarous and limited". He hated the brutal life of Trinidad - *a wasteland without scientists, engineers, soldiers or poets*. Naipaul felt Trinidad to be just "a dot on the world map" and a purely Philistine society which consists of people of Amerindian stock and the descendants of the people of the three continents- Europe, Africa and Asia- who have made their uneasy home in this island. Only this confused amalgam of many races remains as witness to the unhappy history of region. In the absence of proper history, composite racial atmosphere of Trinidad has retained the feature of a camp life. It is a place insignificant to the Trinidadians having no importance of its own. People are interested more in the world outside. For them, life going on in Australia is more important than going on in neighbour country Venezuela. The blacks, living in Trinidad, consider the English culture as their ideal. They speak broken English,

dress up like Englishmen and have no independent notion of nationalism or pride of race. With regard to the feelings of the blacks, Naipaul has written: "Ours is not a separate civilization, but a part of a great branch of civilization that is called Western civilization. At any rate, this is where begins our national life. Our culture is rooted in Western culture and our values; in the main are the values of the Christian Hellenic tradition".³

Naipaul's grandparents had also readily joined the bandwagon of the indentured labourers to Trinidad with some hope of a better job prospects but the devastating consequences of it were realized soon by them. They found themselves alienated in a land with strange culture. They were Brahmins of India but social and political systems of the alien land had compelled them to alter their social and the religious rituals. Though financially their status had become elevated but emotionally they felt desperate and rootless. Naipaul was never at home in Trinidad which was discouraging place for him: *it was a place where stories were never stories of success but of failure*⁴. It seemed to him as if it was "a peasant-minded, money-minded community, spiritually static because out of from its roots, its religion reduced to rite without philosophy."⁵ So shortly before attaining the age of 18, he departed for London to seek better education and made an attempt to strike his roots but this time also he failed. He could only become a *second class Sahib*. He found himself lost in the chaos of urban life. He himself states: "In England, I was also a colonial."⁶ After 30 years of residence in England he says: "living there has been a kind of castrations really."⁷ Whatever his admiration for the culture, Naipaul has always been clear-eyed about his own fundamental distance from it. He states, "London is my metropolitan center; it is my commercial center, and yet I know that it is a kind of limbo and that I am a refugee in the sense that I am always peripheral. One's concerns are not the concerns of the local people."⁸ In an interview given in 1973 to Ronald Bryden, Naipaul said of London: "it is not a place where I can flourish completely. It does not feed me."⁹ Naipaul is unable to write about London life because it does not provide him inspiration for his creative work. He states: "I have been living in England, but really I think it is truer to say that I have been attached London these few square miles which made an international city, a great metropolis. As soon as I move out of that little enchanted area, I am in a foreign country in which I am not terribly interested."¹⁰

London just turned out to be Naipaul's commercial center, making him materially comfortable but did not provide him any spiritual pleasure. Rejecting London Naipaul turns to India, looking upon it as a haven where his tormented-self may have some kind of relief. As the grandson of a labourer of Dubeys and Tiwaris Brahmins of Uttar Pradesh, India layd around him in his infancy, in the things of the house, the coloured pictures of Hindu deities, the string bed, the brass and sandalwood. Naipaul's colonized self had sought a recovery of self-esteem in the realm of fantasy by building on picture of India seen in the religious objects of his grandmother's pooja room and pictures of the blue Himalayas, lofty and unconquered. It existed to in the secret premises of family actions, in a preferred case of self-possession. Naipaul had grown up surrounded by momentos of India and this kept India alive in his mind even though only as a mysterious land of darkness from which his ancestors had arrived. Naipaul himself states that *the India, which was the background to his childhood, was an area of the imagination*. Naipaul's journey to India is an exploration of the self. It is an inward journey to the land mysteriously darker and farther away than Trinidad. William Walsh writes about Naipaul's journey to India; "Naipaul's returned to India is as much as a research into himself as into another country. He is crawling on sensitive naked feet through the tunnels of his own self."¹¹

India was always an integral part of Naipaul's unconscious; he was no stranger to India, to Indian culture and all the went, with it. As a student in an English school, young Vidiadhar read a number of books dealing with English life and Christian saints, yet he never understood the real meaning of Greek or English myths. For him, Indian gods and Hindu rituals were far more real. He writes how he went to a Ramlila in Trinidad and was enchanted with the spectacle: "One of the first big public things I was taken to was the Ramlila, the pageant-play based on the *Ramayana*, the epic about the banishment and later triumph of Rama, the Hindu hero-divinity. It was done in an open field in the middle of sugar-cane on the edge of our small country town.... Everything in that Ramlila had been transported from India in the memories of people. And though, as theatre it was crude, and there was much that I would have missed in the story, I believe I understood more and felt more than I had done during the *Prince and the Pauper and Sixty Glouries*

Years at the local cinema. Those were the very first films I had seen, and I had never had an idea what I was watching. Whereas the Ramlila had given reality, and a lot excitement, to want I had known of the Ramayana."¹²

Although his grandfather shifted from India, but India could never be shifted from his mind. Pigments of Hinduism and Indianness still survive in his cells. Western culture and exile life could not remove the basic Indian in him. Even after years of separation, he could not snap his relation from India. This is why he keeps coming to India again and again looking for novel assurance, may be for larger cultural perspective. He wrote three travelogues on India. *An Area of Darkness* (1962), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977), *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990). All the three are based on his visits to India in 1962, 1977 and 1988. *Naipaul first visited India in 1962 with romantic notions but found India an area of darkness.* He was rudely shocked by the Indian reality. *His initial response to India was of distress and disillusionment*, as he has written in an essay entitled 'Reading and Writing' "It was to this personal India, and not the India of Independence and its great names, that I went when the time came. I was full of nerves. But nothing had prepared me for the dereliction I saw. No other country I knew had so many layers of wretchedness, and few countries were as populous. I felt I was in a continent where, separate from the rest of the world, a mysterious calamity had occurred."¹³

He found India poor, disordered, disorganized, above all devoid of all vitality. Naipaul feels angry at the present condition of India, the pride which Naipaul felt that he would have in belonging to India was not possible in the present scenario of India and at the same time the continued British presence through buildings, institutions and westernization made him angry. It was like a violation. India's simplicity, its poverty, its submissive attitude and its self-absorption irritates him, "He writes India is old and India continues. But all the disciplines and skills that India now seeks to exercise are borrowed. Even the ideas Indians have of the achievement of their civilizations are essentially the ideas given to them by Europeans scholars in the nineteenth century. India by itself could not have rediscovered or assessed its past...for too long as a conquered people, they have been parasitic on other civilizations."¹⁴ He was shocked to see the decline of India where people were unable to cope with their problems. He found India obsessed with her internal glory. They were captured in the limbo of India's eternal culture. He realized that he could never be only a tourist visiting India for its beautiful Himalayas or rivers. He accepts: "India is for me a difficult country. It is not my home, and yet I cannot reject it or be indifferent to it, I cannot travel only for the sights. I am at once too close and too far."¹⁵

Naipaul infact has a love-hate relationship with India. It is his love that came out in the form of anger and distress. He could not close his eyes to the defects or weakness of India and after a gap of about 15 years, Naipaul returned to India afresh and tried to search the wounds of India's cultural degradation.

He comes to the conclusion that India is a wounded civilization, defunct, dead or sick. But his attitude is post-colonial as he does not put the blame on the outsiders who came to India. India was defeated by her own weaknesses that have been ignored for centuries. His diagnosis can be noticed in his second travelogue - *India: A Wounded Civilization*: "The turbulence in India cannot be passed over to foreign invasion or conquest. It has been generated from within. India cannot respond in her old way, by a further retreat into archaism. Her borrowed institutions have worked like borrowed institutions, but archaic India can provide no substitutes for press, parliament and courts. The crisis of India is not only political or economic. The larger crisis is of a wounded old civilization that has at last become aware of its inadequacies and is without the intellectual means to move ahead".¹⁶

Naipaul, in *India: A Wounded Civilization* tries to find the answers of the question that raged all over in *An Area of Darkness*. *He tries to analyse India's decline from past to present, the cause of the wound, why and how the wound festered.* He has made a genuine attempt at locating the exact malady that lies deep underneath the degeneration of the people of India. He appears like a social scientist in making a correct analysis of the disease that underlies the crisis of the country. Thus it becomes clear that though Naipaul feels repulsed by India, the country has something to offer to his psyche which he himself is unable to define. Taking the help of history, sociology, politics & literature, Naipaul is digging out the shortcomings of India. At the root of India's problems, he finds superstitions, rituals, traditions, obedience, caste & Karma. Not only this, Naipaul has

also thrown light on the economic problems of India. In the Foreword, Naipaul seems to be angry that India does not learn anything from her mistakes. Indians, he comments, have a *defeatist mentality*. They have become habitual of digesting one defeat after another. He comments: "No Civilization was so little equipped to cope with the outside world, no country was so easily raided and plundered, and learned so little from its disasters. Five hundred years after the Arab conquest of Sind, Muslim rule was established in Delhi as the rule of foreigners, people apart, and foreign rule – Muslim for the five hundred years, British for the last 150 – ended in Delhi only in 1947".¹⁷

"India: A Wounded Civilization" was published in 1977, at the time when India was undergoing the crisis of internal Emergency imposed by Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Naipaul, like other western observers, concludes that democracy has no firm foundation in India. The reason is that, Indians have always been used to slavery. When they got the reins of their country in their own hands, they were not capable of bringing stability. Hinduism has made a virtue of submission to authority. Indians, he claims, are unwilling or unable to do anything practical to improve their conditions either socially or individually and this according to him is the curse of their life. The imposition of the Emergency was a proof that Indian politics was not mature and was deteriorating day by day. Thus this travelogue on India reflects not only cultural and social events but her politics as well. The first chapter of this travelogue is entitled- An Old Equilibrium, in which he has presented an analysis of the psychology behind the eternal continuity of India. By old equilibrium Naipaul means: "The Hindu equilibrium surviving the shocks of an alien language, and making harmless even those new concepts it appeared to welcome. Identity became an aspect of Karma; self love was bolstered by the ideal of non-violence".¹⁸

According to Naipaul, Old Equilibrium is in fact a philosophy of *quietism* which is a retreat from the distress of life. It is a running away from responsibility in the name of so called religion. Indians believe the rituals and rites are the weapons to save them from difficulty. It is a withdrawal into security and the lack of courage to cope with life that comes in the wake of modernity. The people of India are afraid of disturbing their old equilibrium and want to maintain it at any cost. Naipaul is shocked to see that Indians have lost their individuality owing to numerous conquests. They have lost their ego and they have sacrificed the blush of defeat on their faces. They suffer from the wrong conception that continuity of India is eternal due to its religion, tradition, customs and rituals. He has cited an example from history. Vijaynagar was established in the fourteenth century. Historians from world over had written about its glory in a very appreciative manner. A Portuguese traveller, Peas, had called this city, as large as Rome and very beautiful. It was full of charm and wonder with its innumerable lakes and waterways and fruit gardens. The King Krishna Deo Raya was a noble King who ruled over his kingdom perfectly. Though the name of the city suggests victory land, the land could never be victorious. It was attacked again and again by Muslim rulers and the city was completely shattered.

This lament over the ruins of Ancient India shows the close relationship of Naipaul with his ancestral land. He has focused on the hollowness of Indian culture. He is not an outsider who ignores the weaknesses of India but he feels his duty is to improve India. He has a critical eye to see the permanent loss of human talent and intellectual capacity. He remarks that India submits before her conquerors and retreats before them and thus with these continuous wars and invasions India has suffered *intellectual depletion*. "He writes: I began to wonder about the intellectual depletion that must have come to India with the invasion and conquests of the last thousand years. What happened in Vijaynagar happened, in varying degrees, in other parts of the country, in the north ruin lies on ruin. In the history books, in the accounts of wars and conquests and plunder, the intellectual depletion passes unnoticed."¹⁹ Naipaul thus feels that the *old equilibrium breeds passiveness* amongst Indians and they try to escape from the problems of life. The old equilibrium is a typical Hindu philosophy of quietism. He is sad as he finds the Indians lost in moral bewilderment. Thus the crisis, which India has suffered during emergency, is not only economic or political but also moral and spiritual. Indians believe in *Moksha, salvation, mingling of Atma with Parmatma*. For getting salvation, Indians take the path of *Sanyas*, renunciation, that is nothing but running away from responsibility. Naipaul claims that the Indians are not still prepared to enter the modern world full of challenges after independence because they escape in the lap of religion-Karma, Bhakti and Vedanta. They are unchanged or unmoved and this stoicism will take them to the path of complete

destruction. Indians could not be awakened by the Emergency. "Such security in the mindset of world change, India even during this emergency, was unchanging; to return to India was to return to knowledge of the world's deeper order, everything, fixed, sanctified everyone secure."²⁰

The next part *A New Claim On the Land* shows a movement in the middle and lower classes of India. Naipaul, here breaks the glamorous picture of so called fashionable city Bombay and presents the hellish picture of this city. He comments that on one side the industries are growing day by day but it is not possible without the support of labour class. He laments on the life of poor who live on the streets and pavements: "The poor are needed as hands, as labour; but the city was not built to accommodate them. One report says that 100,000 people sleep on the pavements of Bombay."²¹ when these low classes are not given any place, they have established "chawls" for themselves. But living in "chawls" is in fact a curse. During the course of his journey the villages, Naipaul realizes in the country side the problem of landlessness is responsible for rural poverty. Naipaul laments that in India the poor or low classes are suppressed by the feudal classes. Two decades had passed since the dawn of independence and yet large segments of the Indian population like peasants, workers and tribal continued to suffer the worst forms of exploitation. The results of this are violence. *Naxalite Movement* is one of the Example. Naipaul points out that in Bengal, the North East and South the Naxalite movement rose as a disparate attempt to gain land from the landlords. The movement spread like wildfire to different parts of the country. Some of the finest brains and the cream of India's youth in certain areas left their homes and colleges to chase the dream of a new world, a new social order. They fought and seized lands, and killed the landowners but it was bound to fail and controlled by the army.

The last section *Not Ideas but Obsession* deals with conflicting ideas. Naipaul comments that *India has lost all the originality as it depends on borrowed institutions and Indians are victims of mimicry*. He begins with Gandhiji. He finds Gandhi ji admirable because he fought for twenty years in South Africa against ignominy and sacrificed his life for the sake of the nation. But his philosophy was unable to sustain India. He preached for the virtues of truth, honesty and non-violence. He wanted to make India *Ram-Rajya* but he could not tell how. He had built a nation of followers with no leadership. All that remained in the name of leadership was endless mimicry. Naipaul also condemns Gandhi for developing a fantasy of village republic in a civilization, which is driven by scientific technology. Naipaul is of the view that India has been unable to tackle the modern problems due to the *QUIETISM* of eminent Indians like Gandhi, Vivekanand, VinobaBhave, and J.P. Narayan, who tried to find the solution of every problem in the past. Gandhi's appeal of returning to village is not the right slogan. Gandhi's teachings will not enable the Indians to cope with modern challenges. Naipaul says: "Archaic emotions, nostalgic memories when these are awakened by Gandhi, India became free. But the India created this way had to stall. Gandhi took India out of one kind of KalYug, one kind of Black Age, his success inevitably pushed it back into another."²²

Naipaul's argument is that the claim to nationhood based upon the tradition of spiritual values, Bhakti, Karma, Obedience, has resulted in Quietism, a withdrawal into security and a retreat from the distress of life. He believes that Indian society has looked back to a past Arcadia - Paradise - a Ram- Rajya which is not possible. India is a diseased land which needs a surgical operation. Like a doctor, he brings out the wounds of India that demand for change or mutinies.

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