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Revisit, Revise and Rewrite: V.S. Naipaul

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Writers have been visiting India off and on, and projecting their views and visions on Indian life and manners. The first Englishman known to have visited our country was a Jesuit priest named Thomas Stephens who came in 1579. He was the first European to study the Konkani language and he composed two poems in Marathi. Thus missionary enterprise precedes commerce or colonization in India, though it cannot be read as a direct precursor to the later. Stephens was followed by many others, some of whom kept journals or wrote letters home. Others published memoirs when they went back, recording their impressions of the country and the people.

Writers like William Brown Hockley, Miss Sydney Owenson, Moyle Sherer, Philip Meadows Taylor, William Delafield Arnold, Philip Stuart Robinson, Rudyard Kipling, E.M. Forster and V.S. Naipaul, and many others have visited our country so far. One can easily discern that some of these writers revealed a deep affection for India and some others showed the colonial bias which pervades their writings. It is possible to discern that towards the second half of the nineteenth century the colonial stance became more pronounced and hardened. This can be attributed partly to historical reasons. The white man had got over his initial awe and euphoria in his responses to India and had become conscious of what he regarded as his superiority of status. The first Battle of India in 1857 which colonial historians subversively refer to as the Sepoy Mutiny, had been put down effectively and the colonizer had realized that in order to retain one's hold on the colony one must tighten the administrative reins, at the same time make the indigenous Indian conscious of his/her inferiority and the inevitability of dependence on the British. In keeping with this mood, George Otto Trevelyan wrote, 'it is difficult to imagine how any business was done before we came in to the country- how anyone ever made a road, or a boat, or a journey'.

Western travellers have been visiting India and never stopped to visit this country even after the independence. V.S. Naipaul is one such traveller who visited the country in 1962, twelve years after independence. He travelled much more extensively than other western travellers and recorded his Indian experience in Indian trilogy in which he projected his views on India, its social, cultural and political scenario. V.S. Naipaul, the dissector of civilizations, cultures and histories across the world, is generally among a few prominent expatriates of our time, particularly writers with Indian background who have emerged as the most eminent writers in English in the West and have made significant contribution to Commonwealth literature. Naipaul, a great novelist, short story writer, essayist, journalist and nonfiction writer, was born in Chaguanas, Trinidad, on August 17, 1932. His parents were descendants of Hindu immigrants from northern India, and as a youth he felt alienated from his surroundings and what he felt was the cultural poverty of Trinidad. These feelings of displacement became a recurring theme in his later fiction and essays. While attending secondary school at Queen's Royal College in Port-of- Spain, he was awarded a government scholarship to study abroad, which led him to

University College, Oxford, in 1950. Since then England has remained his principal home. After graduating from Oxford in 1953, Naipaul worked briefly for the cataloguing department of the National Portrait Gallery in London before taking a position with the British Broadcasting Corporation, writing and editing for the programme *Caribbean Voices*. It was during this period that he began to write stories for what was eventually to become *Miguel Street* (1959). Naipaul spent much of the 1960s abroad, visiting India, a number of African nations, and his native Trinidad. These travels provided Naipaul with a wealth of material and served as motivation for works such as *The Middle Passage* (1962) and *An Area of Darkness* (1964). By 1971, Naipaul had won all of Britain's leading literary awards, including the 1971 Booker Prize for *In a Free State* (1971). During the next few decades, Naipaul continued to travel for his literary inspiration and published several books that explored political, cultural and social issues. It was at Oxford that he met Patricia Hale whom he married in 1955. She died in 1996 from cancer and Naipaul married Nadira Khannum Alvi, a Pakistani Journalist. Naipaul was knighted in 1989 and in 1993 he won the first David Cohen British Literature prize for lifetime achievement. Naipaul's manuscripts and extensive archives have been deposited in the University of Tulsa.

Naipaul wrote a large number of books that won him the Nobel Prize for literature in 2001. Besides fiction, he wrote various nonfiction works mainly travelogues. Research on Naipaul shows beyond doubt that it is through his various nonfiction works that he received international attention and recognition for his views, visions and remarkable narrative technique. The unusual and startling views on various objects, people and nations expressed in a dazzling style have made his travelogues most interesting as well as thought provoking. In case of some such nonfiction novels the unusual attention granted to them as compared to Naipaul's other works is not, however, entirely due to quality of his writings but to the central issues they deal with. These nonfiction works have demanded world wide attention for the most frank, free and sometimes even the most controversial observations that he made therein.

Every Anglo-Indian writer had Indian consciousness i.e., understanding about India, its life and manners. They expressed their opinions on the basis of their personal experiences. Since V.S. Naipaul spent much time in India than other Anglo-Indian writers and travelled much more extensively, he got the opportunity to probe deep into the psyche of India. He wrote many books on India like *An Area of Darkness* (1964), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977) and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990). These books record his growing perceptions of India, the country of his origin. However, the country remained outside his experience as 'an area of darkness'. He found ugliness and squalor, boredom and horror but little of glory. He denounced India as 'an area of darkness' and 'a wounded civilization'.

There is no doubt that Naipaul saw India from a great distance with a sense of the expatriate. He would not have said unpleasant things about the country of his origin if he had seen India from a very close quarter with Indian sensibility. At the outset of the book entitled, *An Area of Darkness*, he asserts that he doesn't feel the presence of Hinduism in himself. Such a man with no religious sense can neither be accepted nor trusted even if he says the truth. It is religion, whether Hinduism, Islam or any other religion, that unites us and in the past, helped us to get rid of imperialism anywhere, in any form. Therefore, Naipaul can easily be disproved when he attributes the failings and shortcomings of

Indians to the influence of Karma. Hinduism is a religion of faith in gods. Naipaul believes that the Hindu theory of *karma* expounds faith. It preaches faith in religious rituals and principles. There is no room for individual freedom or reason. Faith and devotion are basic virtues. Hindus accept religious matters without doubt or challenge. They patiently accept what they get as a result of karma. Religious preachings are accepted as dharma against which nothing is said or done. Devotees accept preaching with reverence and regard them as gospel truths without bothering for logic or reason. He was an ignorant Hindu who would have found solace if he had embraced Hinduism wholeheartedly. He took advantage of our generous attitude, exploited it and went on castigating whatever he came across.

Naipaul criticised not only the religious philosophy of India but also the major political and spiritual leader of India and the Independence movement. Naipaul says that Gandhi has peculiarly Indian “defect of Vision” but in actuality Naipaul himself has a defect of vision and could not realize that it was Gandhi who led India to Independence and inspired movements for civil rights and freedom across the world.

In order to justify his unacceptable and highly objectionable views against the country of his origin, he recorded certain historical events like China’s invasion, Indira Gandhi’s murder, emergency in 1975, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a preacher turned militant leader in Punjab, his rise and his various confrontations, and various other events, so that people all over the world may believe in his wrong opinions. Naipaul was aware of the fact that if he criticizes India its culture, religion, heroes, he will get recognition in the West. Although he received the attention of the West, yet he did not find home any where. He exploited our friendly and generous behaviour and dubbed us ‘mimics’. A discriminating reader quite easily observes that Naipaul misunderstands Gandhi and his activities. Naipaul’s observations that Gandhi had ‘defect of vision’ and lacked in his racial sense, are objectionable. Similarly, another objectionable observation on Indian personality that he makes in his book *India: A wounded Civilization* relates to what he calls the under-developed ego of Indian. Naipaul criticizes Nehru, Gandhi, Islam, Hinduism, language confusion in India, the poverty, and the ‘death city’ of Calcutta, almost everything that comes across to his notice. The reason for all this is that he had come to India with a preconceived notion and negative mindset, and this negative mindset is the result of his homelessness. He is the product of three different societies viz. India, West Indies and England. V.S. Naipaul never cared for the land of his own birth and his people. He admits it was a mistake to have been born there, that he always wishes to forget it. Trinidad was for him a “destitute society”, without history, without achievement, it is unlikely, he cared for India. How can one expect a gratitude to India, his ancestors’ birth place, when he cannot show a gratitude to his birth place? Indeed, Naipaul writes for English-speaking people. An Indian reader may agree with Dom Moraes who views *An Area of Darkness* in a larger perspective and he feels sorry that it ‘has come in for much unwarranted criticism in India’. He calls it not only a brilliant piece of literature but an interesting psychological study of Naipaul by Naipaul. It hints at the fact that *An Area of Darkness* reveals Naipaul and not India. The opinion of Naipaul is based on impression rather than information. It is a picture of India as Naipaul sees it.

Naipaul has been in search of home ever since he started his literary journey, but till this day he could not find a home. Had he visited India as an Indian he would have found a home. The greatest misfortune with Naipaul is whenever he visited this country,

he did not come as an Indian but as westerner and could see only poverty, litter and horror. It is a fact that if Naipaul had seen India with Indian sensibility, he would have discerned social, political and economic development. Let me clarify that Naipaul can be a free commentator but not a free thinker.

It is an open invitation to V.S. Naipaul to revisit our country and it is sure he would revise his opinions and rewrite his works on India.

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