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A Futile Sojourn: V.S.Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness*

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V.S. Naipaul's life was a journey which he has expressed through a variety of narrative forms ranging from fiction to travelogues to autobiography and history. For Naipaul, travelling was not a journey to reach destinations of far off countries, but a new way of seeing things. His urge to travel was the symbolic manifestation of the tendency to experiment with the novel form. He felt that fiction is an inadequate vehicle to express the authenticity of details and voice. Thus he used travel writing to strike a balance between mere fictionalization and factual representation and continued to render his material in the form of literature. This paper argues that home for Naipaul exists within his writing and not in a geographically located place such as Trinidad, India, or England.

Home is, I suppose, just a child's idea. A house at night, and a lamp in the house. A place to feel safe.

V. S. Naipaul

In "A Bend in the River", one of the characters points out, "home was hardly a place I could return to. Home was something in my head. It was something I had lost." V.S. Naipaul's life was a journey which he has expressed through a variety of narrative forms ranging from fiction to travelogues to autobiography and history. For Naipaul, travelling was not a journey to reach destinations of far off countries, but a new way of seeing things. His urge to travel was the symbolic manifestation of the tendency to experiment with the novel form. He felt that fiction is an inadequate vehicle to express the authenticity of details and voice. Thus he used travel writing to strike a balance between mere fictionalization and factual representation and continued to render his material in the form of literature. This paper argues that home for Naipaul exists within his writing and not in a geographically located place such as Trinidad, India, or England.

One of the most fascinating aspects of travelogues is the way they ambivalently conjure up the notion of home. One's concept of home is very closely related to the history and cultural practices of one's native place. Nevertheless, not everyone rejoices upon returning home. "I admit that my first night home I woke up in a sudden sweat of fear," writes F. O. Matthiessen after returning from a six months sojourn in Europe, "I was no longer in the favored position of an observer in a foreign country. I was back in a very uncertain battle" (Matthiessen 57). Travel usually remains meaningful precisely because its exhilarations are thrown into relief by some notion of home. Travel writings promise adventure and return, escape and homecoming. The temptation of leaving home to find another home is expressed in the following lines from Canto IV of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1818): "and should I leave behind/ The inviolate island of the sage and free,/ And seek me out a home by a remoter sea" (Byron, Complete Poetical, vol. II, 127).

Travelogues help in establishing knowledge of foreign countries and cultures. However, their authors are hardly free from preconceived notions and images of those places. The confrontation between Naipaul's idea of an India of his ancestors and his encounter with the "real" India is detailed in his book, *An Area of Darkness: A Discovery of India*. To his utter dismay he finds that "here [India], and not in Greece, the East began: in this chaos of uneconomical movement, the self-stimulated din, the sudden feeling of insecurity, the conviction that all men were not brothers and that luggage was in danger" (3)

An Area of Darkness reflects his disappointing encounter with India. He feels deeply troubled and is shocked by the extreme poverty and the shortcomings in social organization which hinder any prospects of economic and human development. However Naipaul's emotional attachment to the land of his ancestors was not severed and in India: A Million Mutinies Now, he is seen in a reconciling mood. According to Helen Hayward (2002:111)

"He begins by writing a travel book and comedy of manners in *An Area of Darkness.* In *India: A Wounded Civilization*, he appears in the guise of a prophet of doom, and has excited hostility by assuming the position of one who knows more about India than Indians do, and by forecasting an impending chaos in Indian civilization, while satirizing the progress of Indian self-rule. In *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, Naipaul is reborn into a new persona: accepting and tolerant, he listens to characters as they recount the narrative of their own lives, and he refrains from offering overt authorial judgments."

Through his journey Naipaul is hoping to discover that the ambiguous idea of the India he grew up with in Trinidad would live up to the practicality of the circumstances he comes across during his travels. But such an amalgamation cannot occur because, as Naipaul comes to realize, the reality of something can never live up to the idea. Although traces of its customs and traditions were evident in Trinidad, Naipaul states that India was never "real for him in any significant way" beyond that of a place from which his ancestors had come. India, in this sense, was never "home" for Naipaul, just as Trinidad had never been "home" for him: "And India had in a special way been the background of my childhood. 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; and from it our journey had been final. It was a country suspended in time" (21). Naipaul's intention in *An Area of Darkness* is to return to India in order to reclaim the real India for himself. "India is a country of chaos, both bureaucratic and social," Naipaul informs us over and over. It is against the backdrop of this chaos that Naipaul begins to disassociate himself from not only the India he finds himself in at the time he is writing but what he calls the "idea of India," which informs so much of his past. Out of this collision between past (the idea of India as inculcated in him through his ancestors) and present (as Naipaul calls "India, the world's largest slum"), Naipaul begins to form a persona that will render him enigmatic and ontologically homeless. It is this profound sense of marginality, of homelessness, of not belonging to any one place, time, or community which informs his highly opinionated view of *civilization*: "To define is to begin to separate oneself, to assure oneself of one's position, to be withdrawn from the chaos that India always threatens, the abyss at whose edge the sweeper of the gay girl sits" (44).

Naipaul separates himself from his past by judging it, and in the harshest manner possible. However, this judgment is also an auto-critique in the sense that he is taking himself to task for undertaking the search for his past in the first place. As Naipaul states in his novel *A Bend in the River* (1979), "The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it" (3). That "the world is what it is" constitutes the harsh realization Naipaul comes to while traveling through India, the land of his ancestors, fifteen years before *A Bend in the River*.

An Area of Darkness was written while Naipaul was still a young man, and it can be a devastating experience to discover that one's past is largely based upon an illusion, or a fairy tale, containing only fragments of fact. Naipaul's bitterness emerges through his interactions with other Indians while on the sub-continent. Yet that bitterness is also self-directed. Naipaul resents the living conditions of the Indians and their third world status. Everywhere he looks he sees filth and extreme poverty. On a subtle level, perhaps this caustic criticism of India is merely a reflection of his utter bitterness for the homeland. *An Area of Darkness* marks a defining moment in Naipaul's life because it instills a sense of skepticism in him: "It was a journey that ought not to have been made; it had broken my life in two" (289). From 1964 on, Naipaul would continue to fight that skepticism by writing and by traveling throughout the world. In many respects his travel books are much more "literary" than his novels. However, his worldview has been criticized vehemently by a lot of critics. His judgments are often harsh to the point of racism, but his tireless pursuit of "truth" surpasses the highest level of sincerity. What Naipaul discovers in India between 1962 and 1964 is that, while we are all products of our time, as well as our heritage, an attempt to reclaim the past is always accompanied by a danger of losing ourselves completely to a bitterness informed by the illusion of the past. Therefore, one of the central motifs of *An Area of Darkness* could be a warning that not only can one not go back, perhaps one should not even try.

Naipaul does return to the land of his ancestors by returning specifically to the nineteen acres of his grandfather's land. What Naipaul comes to realize is that despite everything he is the one who is out of place. He does not belong to India, just as he does not belong to England or Trinidad. Naipaul, for what little effort he makes to discover India comes to realize not only his alienation from that land but his alienation from England as well. In one particularly illuminating section of *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul discusses the search for identity during his childhood in Trinidad:

"For in the India of my childhood, the land which in my imagination was an extension, separate from the alienness by which we ourselves were surrounded, of my grandmother's house, there was no alien presence. How could such a thing be conceived? Our own world, though clearly fading, was still separate; and an involvement with the English, of whom on the island we knew little, would have seemed a more unlikely violation than an involvement with the Chinese or the Africans, of whom we knew more. Into this alienness we daily ventured, and at length we were absorbed into it. But we knew there had been change, gain, loss. We knew that something which was once whole had been washed away. What was whole was the *idea* of India. (199-200)

Disenchanted with reality, Naipaul continually returns to the only "home" he knows; his writing. Naipaul's home is constructed through the agency of his writing. That is, if Naipaul's exilic condition informs every fiber of his being, and it is inherent in human nature to build a home, then Naipaul must be trying to construct a home through the writing of his texts. The text

becomes the only ground to which Naipaul can cling. Through the text Naipaul is assuring himself that he is human, that he is somehow, fundamentally a part of something. His sense of desperation reaches its zenith as Naipaul decides to leave the country. In the final section, "The Village of the Dubes," Naipaul returns to his ancestral land; the remaining nineteen acres of his grandfather's farm. It is here that Naipaul comes to a complete realization that he is fundamentally *exilic*: India had not worked its magic on me. It remained the land of my childhood, an area of darkness; like the Himalayan passes, it was closing up again, as fast as I withdrew from it, into the land of myth; it seemed to exist in just the timelessness which I had imagined as a child, into which, for all that I walked on Indian earth, I knew I could not penetrate. In a year I had not learned acceptance. I had learned my *separateness from India,* and was content to be a colonial, without a past, without ancestors. (274)

Naipaul exists in an "area of darkness" that he is constantly trying to penetrate through the agency of writing. As such, he has consciously decided to leave his own past behind because it was not, nor could it have been, the past for which he had been searching. That past belonged to the memory of his grandmother's house, replete with people, smells, talk, and emotions. The India that Naipaul had been searching for existed entirely within his imagination. As he states in his follow up to *An Area of Darkness,* titled *India: A Wounded Civilization:* "In India I know I was a stranger; but increasingly I understand that my Indian memories, the memories of that India which lived on into my childhood in Trinidad, are like trapdoors into a bottomless past" (xiii).

Naipaul's search for India ends in bitterness, a bitterness that has carried over into his writing since that time. He discovered that he was not what he thought he was which caused him a profound sense of anxiety. The danger resides in finding oneself, as Naipaul did, completely cut off from the past: "The world is illusion, the Hindus say. We talk of despair, but true despair lies too deep for formulation. It was only now, as my experience of India defined itself more properly *against my own homelessness* , that I saw how close in the past year I had been to the total Indian negation, how much it had become the basis of thought and feeling. And already, with this awareness, in a world where illusion could only be a concept and not something felt in the bones, it was slipping away from me. I felt it as something true which I could never adequately express and never seize again" (290).

It is during his travels in India, and not upon the occasion of his first travel book, *The Middle Passage* that Naipaul begins to form his exilic persona. Naipaul's exilic state has afforded him the opportunity to *exist textually* within the "space of encounter." He states in his essay "Prologue to an Autobiography" that he inherited his "fear of extinction" from his father: "…His fear of extinction. That was his gift to me. That fear became mine as well. Naipaul's father's madness resided in his failure to become a writer. "And it was that fear, a panic about failing to be what I should be, rather than a simple ambition, that was with me when I came down from Oxford in 1954 and began trying to write in London. My father died the previous year. Our family was in distress. I should have done something for them, gone back to them. But, without having become a writer, I couldn't go back" (111) In order to write he had to go back— initially in literary form. Naipaul's status as a writer functions to combat madness and extinction by imposing a form; and that form is narrative. However, this existential homelessness should not be thought of as completely negative. Without his state of homelessness Naipaul would not be able to explore other "areas of darkness."

Foucault, in his essay, 'The Subject and Power' notes the dual aspect of individualism: "on the one hand, individualism is the right to be different, including everything that makes individuals truly individual, and on the other hand, the individual is anchored in a community life – and breaking this link forces the individual to back on himself, tying him to his own identity in a constraining way"(211-12). Thus identity is constructed on an individual basis, but within a given social structure, the alienation of which could lead to a corresponding alienation of identity. Thus following Foucault, a displaced identity equals alienation – a favorite Naipaulean theme. This is hardly surprising, because, as Stuart Hall famously noted: "We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always 'in context', *positioned"* (110).

Naipaul's reticence to claim either India or Britain as 'home' has been the source of several books. In an article 'Jasmine', written for the *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1964, he wryly remarked "The English language was mine, the tradition was not" (Naipaul, *Critical Perspectives* 19). Conversely, during his travels in India, he notes that he effortlessly melted into the Indian landscape, but the minute he spoke, he gave himself away as a foreigner, an alien. This displacement of cultural identity is underlined by an anecdote the writer relates in the same article. Naipaul recounts how, upon recognizing a sweet-smelling flower in a British Guiana garden from his childhood memories, he asked his hostess its name, and was told: "We call it jasmine". Naipaul comments: "Jasmine! So I had known it all these years!"
Putting a sprig of jasmine in his buttonhole, the writer smelled it and repeated the word jasmine, jasmine. But, he notes: "the word and the flower had been separate in my mind too long. They did not come together" (*Critical Perspectives* 22).

Naipaul has been criticized for this detached attitude; Rob Nixon (1992: 17) exposes his "fashioning and sustaining an autobiographical persona who is accepted at face value as a permanent exile, a refugee, a homeless citizen of the world". However, it is surprising to note that other critics, from very different backgrounds and attitudes to the world, such as is the case with Gayatri Spivak (1990: 37-38), refer to their expatriate condition in terms which remind us of Naipaul: "I think it's important for people not to feel rooted in one place. So, wherever I am, I feel I'm on the run in some way. [...] I'm devoted to my native language, but I cannot think it as natural, because, to an extent, one is never natural … one is never at home".

In the foreword to The Middle Passage, Naipaul says "Travelling is often glamorous only in retrospect…"It is a paradox that Naipaul is a reluctant traveler and yet one of the most travelled writers of his generation. As Paul Theroux points out Naipaul falls into the category of travelers who can claim no country as their own. They travel because they belong nowhere. Moving from one place to another, they encounter cultural dilemmas while undergoing a series of negotiations about their personal survival ethics. On the one hand, the self-searching journey can certainly be a way of mapping out one's own niche in the world; on the other hand, travelling is an "unsettling" activity in that the experiences of wandering across various designated borderlines lead to the sense of deracination or displacement.As a traveler, one occupies the position of an outsider, which makes travelling a powerful and complicated activity. Travelling indicates the returning to one's "dwelling place", namely, one's understanding and acceptance of one's place as a relationship with space and one's selfhood (Heidegger 157).Travel

opens up a new space for one to understand oneself; this new self-cognitive position also includes the original departure place.

A voyage, in its traditional sense, implies that one leaves a familiar shore to confront the unknown and return back home. In fact the very thing one always expects of a voyage is that it will deliver "the other" –the unknown, the unexpected– in a familiar way, a translation of the unknown into the known. There are numerous postcolonial writers who have studied and written on colonial travel writing from various perspectives. David Spurr's *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing and Imperial Administration* (1993), Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), Ali Behdad's *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (1994), and Stephen Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (1991) are arguably among the most sophisticated and comprehensive studies of colonial travel discourse.

The influences of imperialism, Western industrialization, the World Wars, and decolonization are some historical phenomena which heighten the complexity of "differences" among humans. These phenomena create hierarchical orders within political, economical, and cultural annexation of regions, dividing the world into a First World and a Third World. These phenomena also show how people labeled themselves into different collectivities and communities, and therefore recognizing others as not belonging to the same groups. The developments of nation and nationalism after French Revolution have faced challenges of the transformation from monarchical order into the legitimacy of the states. According to E. J. Hobsbawm, one of the reasons that people would imagine nation as a particular type of collective community is because "states and national movements could mobilize certain variants of feelings of collective belonging"(46). Certainly this sense of belonging is not imperative and not universal for all, but it shows the congruency of one's political, cultural, social, ethnic, and even linguistic identities with one's national identity. The twentieth-century is a period and a space in which one cannot disregard the shaping of nationhood in individual belonging. In *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said points out the paradox of nationalism as a belonging that "fends off exile" yet starts from "a condition of estrangement" (176). This is an example which illustrates how the forging of communities and alliances galvanizes
binary thinking: we/they, self/other, black/white. If print-language is one factor that shapes national consciousness as Benedict Anderson explains, then travel in the twentieth-century is not simply a literary theme but also a notion that has been expanded into all aspects of modern lives; moreover, it has become a metaphor for hybridity and migrancy, for home and away. In the perspective of 21th-Century readers, the twentieth century is a period of time when various international affairs and conceptual frameworks stimulated "plurality and multicultural citizenship against monocultural national identities"

By leaving one's country or residence, an individual transits through many alternative spaces to contemplate his or her existence in the world. The force of crossing national boundaries causes the alien agent to confront different dimensions of his or her selfhood—geographical, linguistic, cultural, social, and customary differences. Collective identifications create opportunities for the characters to identify themselves and be identified by their counterparts. Amartya Sen says in *Identity and Violence* (2006) that this sense of identity "can make an important contribution to the strength and the warmth of our relations with others," while a focus on particular identities "can enrich our bonds and make us do many things for each other and can help to take us beyond our self-centered lives" (2). Most of the time, individual identities are

influenced by this sense of collective identification. Sen reminds us that while inclusion brings out the positive side of collective affiliations, exclusion can be antagonistic, bringing out conflicts and aggressive conduct. The later exclusive propensity is easily observed in the stories where characters are challenged as lacking specific affiliations. Traveling offers a period of time and a peculiar space in which a traveler may consciously disregard or utilize national, political, cultural, religious, ethnic, and any other collective identification. A traveler may be inclined to feel a strong sense of alienation and isolation as an individual may become the reference point for concealing or revealing his or her identity. We see in Henry James's and Kazuo Ishiguro's novels in which national identity remains the ingrained masculine American identity and the imperialized British identity, whereas V. S. Naipaul and Gao Xingjian's protagonists migrate from one place to another in order to affirm their beliefs in individual freedom and to experiment with their hybridized ways of living. Within each specific periphery of identification, these characters illustrate the conflicts between their individual identities and their collective identifications. They are singular loners seeking remedies to their solitude in their journeys. Through trans-national or cross-cultural journeys, which create the most fictive and displaced spaces for reflecting upon their own identifications, these characters enter their personhood through role-playing modes. Because traveling engages their individualities within unfamiliar scenarios, they have to walk through the detritus of memories, personal beliefs, cultural behaviors, and social practices. They have learned in their lives to come to terms with the roles they represent. They become highly aware of the "mask" they put on when they confront people who regard them as others. During their journeys, the characters in the novels are forced to communicate with the others and their environments, thereby conjuring up the sense of instability and alienation.

Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* defines the question of identity as "the frame or horizon with which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose" (27). Taylor's argument has also his intentional phrasing when he uses the term "stand" to describe one's understanding of identity. For a traveler, this stand is an "in-between" space instead of a solid position, in which much observation and questioning are needed before making an endorsement or any specific prioritization. Travelers also easily "question the automatic endorsement of past traditions" (Sen 114). These stories disclose the discrepancy between individual values and communal values. Each specific writer indulges in describing the explicit situation of "lacking" home. One of the salient elements within the mazes of identity formation is the consistency of one's understanding of his or her selfhood. Travelers are challenged to question their identities and their previously defined positions by birth, profession, gender, and possession. Moving from one place to another, they encounter cultural dilemmas while undergoing a series of negotiations about their personal survival ethics. On the one hand, the self-searching journey can certainly be a way of mapping out one's own niche in the world; on the other hand, traveling is an "unsettling" activity in that the experiences of wandering across various designated borderlines lead to the sense of deracination or displacement. Their movement heralds an increasingly visible group of characters in postcolonial and post-national states, where migrants, immigrants, refugees, diasporic artists, and many alternative workers are claiming the world as their dwelling place.

Traveling opens spaces in which the characters are allowed to inaugurate a more navigable arena for plural affiliations. Moreover, the transitory position in travel allows

protagonists to reclaim their "possessive individualism." In other words, traveling can be seen as an experience that creates authority of owning one's selfhood. Psychologically, traveling is an extraordinary experience which also provides the quality of "being autonomous" in that a character comes to a distinctive personal identity (Kamler 228). In the first essay "The Worm in the Bud," collected in *A Writer's People,* V. S. Naipaul reflects on Caribbean poets' descriptions of the beauty of their islands. Naipaul reminds us that travelers "who go to the islands before the Great War of 1914 didn't go for the sun; they travelled to be in the waters where the great imperial naval battles of the eighteenth century had been fought; or they took in the islands on their way to see the engineering works of the Panama Canal before the water was let in" (21). He reminds readers that the concept of these islands as plantations with a colonial past has been overturned into a sunbathing cruise paradise. The transition of the islands to holiday stops has taken years of foreign influences such as stamps, travel posters, and travel books to be changed (21). It is not just travel, tourism, and the products of modern mobility that alter the concept of a place. Naipaul is describing a process of hybridization in the way people perceive history and its correlation with places and people. They leave their past behind but the more they try to forget, the farther they travel. Their traveling reshapes their understandings of their past through their temporary relationships with people from afar.

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