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Space and Formation of Identity: A Study of V.S. Naipaul's Trilogy on India

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Abstract:

The dislocation of people in the post-modern scenario is governed by an urge to relocate, to reconstitute and to examine one's social space. This migration created a construct of new spatial order that gave birth to displaced identities. Foucault defines about the emergence of contestation of the space as heterotopias. It means mixing of several incompatible spaces in a real place. This space signifies modern social space. It was the result of coming together of own and the other and a manifestation of reality. V.S.Naipaul's engagement with India falls within this framework. His trilogy on India was of knowing India against cultural barrier between him and ancestral homeland was negotiated in terms of migrant's encounter with 'heterotopic' reality of India. It took three books on India to arrive at an understanding of India. Naipaul's personal circumstance which went into his making as a writer has much scope for spatial analysis. The exploration of the place with people, landscapes and culture find meaning for his space that he inherited. The present study attempts to analyse the formation of the writer's identity by geographical inquiry into the reality of India with imaginary and spatial historical experience.

Keywords: Space, place, heterotopic, identity.

Movement of all types has intensified in this modern world. Migration and migrants' space and places reflect where people come from, how they have migrated and what their relation to the host society. Places are landmarks of migration routes. Space became the factor in analysing migration thus creating specific relational spaces. Foucault's primary definition of social space point out the ambiguous relationship that the migrants share with their spaces of location. This ambiguity as the hallmark of modern spaces prevails in-between state, a sense of identity, rootedness, or belonging on the one hand, and its contradictory suggestions of dislocation, alienation and non-belonging on the other. Thus, these spaces forge one's identity in an ever-present migrant condition of displacement without origin. Naipaul's Indian trilogy with the problematic of knowing India, overriding the cultural barriers that exist between Naipaul and his ancestral homeland, must be negotiated in terms of the migrant traveller's

encounter with the colonially produced “heterotopic” reality of post-independent India in the formation of identity.

Naipaul’s achieving a sense of belonging became difficult because of his partial relation to multiple nations. His interest in his relationships with places becomes inevitable to the idea of space and place. Many of his works produced by his imagining and writing about places were geographically far away from him. This distance also caused Naipaul problem because he lacked his own settled place and has no society to write about. He constantly undertook journey to look for material. Thus, Naipaul’s lack of his own society brings forth the spatial life of a traveller. His characters also revealed spatial sensibilities.

Naipaul’s journey to India made him sketch the trilogy on India, *Area of Darkness* (AOD), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (IWC) and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (IMMN). His journey to India was both familiar and strange and was far more personal and emotional because it was the land of his ancestors. The present study is an attempt to analyse the spatial understanding of India by the writer and his formation of identity in his trilogy on India. Trilogy on India signified how Naipaul negotiated with his homeland in terms of migrant’s encounter with heterotopic spatial reality of India.

V.S. Naipaul’s *Area of Darkness* was the first book on India written after his first visit to the nation. The author-traveller made a convincing attempt to negotiate with ‘otherness’ of India, the land of his forefathers. It was a culture shock because of his sudden exposure to the foreign reality of the place. In spite of the ambivalent attitude of the narrator and the narrative showed a gradual development of a greater willingness to negotiate with the complex spatial reality of India.

Naipaul confronted with two realities or maps of India, one the visible India of the physical and the imaginary India of migrant memory that he carried with him. His physical encounter provided him with the narrative occasion to textualise his ‘heterotopic’ experience of Indian subcontinent which challenged his metropolitan standards of judgement. Visible spatiality of India frustrated him and provoked anger in him, there was always a hidden tension between the text and the writer in the novel. The psychological presence of the India of ancestral memory was always present:

And in India I was to see that so many of the things which the newer and now perhaps truer side of my nature kicked against ... the smugness, as it seemed to me, the imperviousness to criticism, the refusal to see, the double-talk and double-think ... had answer in that side of myself which I had thought buried and which India revived as a faint memory. I understood better than I admitted. (AOD 35-36)

Spatial status could be found more on Naipaul’s own journey into the ‘self’. Through the lens of India the author examined his own self. The heterotopic construction of India between past and the present, the familiar and the unfamiliar the real and the imaginary provided ample opportunity for the post- modern spatial analysis. The narrator’s first encounter with the physical place was after his sea- voyage with the customs at Bombay in retrieving his liquor bottles revealed his inaccessibility of India. The deferred nature of the

migrant, the initial shock had led him to a chain of psychic processes which revealed both past and the present in the narrator's life. India was a narrator's lost ancestral home land as well as an excluded space of cultural identification in the writer's consciousness. It was reconfigured into a complex spatiality:

And even now, though time has widened, though space has contracted and I have travelled lucidly over that area which was to me the area of darkness, something of darkness remains in those attitudes, those ways of thinking and seeing, which are no longer mine. (AOD 30)

But the writer here tried to reclaim the darkness through the process of painful recognition of the places, culture and people. During the period of his life in Trinidad, India was a site of cultural resources like religion, rituals, food and social customs which was the private sphere of East Indian community. But the acknowledgment of the place of the present is not easy for Naipaul as the intervening years since the days of his childhood and adolescence had brought with them accounts of further displacement from Trinidad to England. These displacements with wider exposure to the multiracial reality of Trinidad and experience of cultural alienation at London resulted in dislocation. He also preferred for the difference of an outsider to the anonymity of an insider: "I had been made by Trinidad and England; recognition of my difference was necessary to me" (AOD 43)

The awareness of this difference occurred to the narrator when he found himself among the crowd in Church Gate station. At Bombay, he felt that he might sink without trace among the Indian crowd. India carried a threatening impression of heterotopic collectivism but without any sort of socio-cultural anchorage. The migrant identity of the narrator had to be protected against the heterotopic anonymity of the crowd. At the same time the desire for a home did not desire for lost homeland but a longing for a new space that accommodate the emigrant identity. His stay at London did not satisfy his need for feeling at home: "I came to London. It had become the centre of my world and I had worked hard to come to it. And I was lost. London was not the centre of my world. I had been misled; but there was nowhere else to go" (AOD 42).

This became the narrator's unconscious motivation for his visit to the land of his ancestors. His repressed urge for a new space of belonging goaded him to view the place in terms of heterotopic alienation. Throughout the novel the narrator frequently came up with sudden bouts of anger, exhaustion and shame with his own incomprehensible material realities of the place. This is apparent during his stay in Delhi where he "could only escape from one darkened room to another, separate from the reality of outdoor" (AOD 93).

Naipaul's visit to Kashmir turned out to be of greater realization and of integration with the landscape and its people: "I wished I was of their spirit. I wished that something of their joy awaited me at the end. Yet a special joy had been with me throughout the pilgrimage and during all my time in Kashmir. It was the joy of being among mountains; . . . I felt linked to them; . . . India, the Himalayas: they went together" (AOD 167). The place Kashmir

reawakened the memory of the bright coloured religious pictures of his grandmother's house at Trinidad. The mountains served as a hidden link to his childhood memory. The imaginary centre of his childhood and the physical centre of the present enabled Naipaul to claim the spatial aspect of India which he thought to be unattainable.

The visit to his ancestral house in the village of the Dubes turned out to be a moment of despair and pent-up regret over the loss: "India had not worked its magic on me. It remained the land my childhood, an area of darkness; . . . In a year I had not learned acceptance, I had learned my separateness from India, was content to be a colonial, without a past, without ancestors" (AOD 252). The real episode of migrant narrator's homecoming in which the past collapsed into the present, the imaginary penetrated in to the physical. In his grandfather's house when his family photographs were shown to him he felt, "as old to me and as forgotten as the images; and it was again disturbing to my sense of place and time to handle them" (AOD 256). Naipaul's this encounter with his forgotten past erased the outsider and insider division and ended in "fertility, and impatience, a gracious act of cruelty, self – reproach and flight"(AOD 263). He was not able to respond to the darkness of India, the heterotopic signifier of the unfamiliarity of his identity. On his way back to London he wrote about his visit to India "it was a journey that ought not to have been made; it had broken my life in two" (AOD 265). This implied the beginning of his identity crisis.

With the oblong cloth that was presented to Naipaul in India he felt: "I flattened and studied it for the clues which I knew existed, which I desired above everything else to find, but which I knew I never would" (AOD 266). The word 'clues' rendered an open ended narrative with unresolved tensions and future possibility of revisiting to his ancestral homeland in search of the clues that will enable him to have a fuller comprehension of his self-identity. Area of Darkness provided him a profound heterotopic experience of self-questioning. There was a gradual shift in Naipaul's ways of looking and feeling from physical reality to intellectual engagement with cultural space of the country. Though he repeatedly failed to accept India he could not ignore it. The cultural encounter correlated between space and self- identity and a new vision of space and cultural geography brought out a new identity on the part of the writer.

Naipaul's second novel on India, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, lead him gradually to a new self-awareness and enabled him to reconstruct the cultural space of the nation in terms of his perspective of belonging and identity. Between the writing of this novel and the earlier one Naipaul made visits to African countries and India and began to depict different form of expression among diversity of spaces that were within the real places. With his intellectual engagement he distanced himself from social space. In the maturing aspect of his engagement with the space and cultural geography of the post-colonial world, Naipaul gradually learnt to engage with the past and matured into personality with a firm faith in his fractured identity and displaced origin. The mode of spatial query in his treatment of heterotopic and nationalist space of India culminated in his second novel on India. By the process of remaking of society, Naipaul has made his personal search for a new space of belonging and identity. India tutored the arrogant visitor to transform the old India as a

heterotopic countersite to his self-identity into a vision of new India as an emerging social space for discourse.

India: A Wounded Civilization therefore was loaded with modernizing dynamic that propelled everyone out of their native place of origin. Hence Naipaul took this novel to know about how far the post-colonial India “easily raided and plundered and learned so little from its disasters” (IWC 7-8). In spite of such a past the nation was capable of coping with the new trends of global modernity.

Naipaul’s spatial study of the history of the nation and the imperial conquest revealed his own interpretative strategy. He evaluated India as a wounded civilization in terms of the damage that was caused to the nation by invasions. He explored the internal physical space of the country with the national past, identity and culture. With his newly realized self-identity. He analysed the nationspace with cultural and political authority on one hand and people and subject on the other hand.

India of Area of Darkness provided him with heterotopic experience from which he wanted to escape but could not. Out of his previous Indian experience he emerged now with the ‘wounded’ self which was but the crisis of his own identity. That is why he maintained Indian space as: “India is for me a difficult country. It isn’t my home and cannot be 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” (IWC 8-9). The initial spatial shock of India had evolved into an intellectual comprehension later. The same Indian space which was personal choice between approval and disapproval had come to be identified to explore that hidden resourcefulness of a displaced nation.

It has taken India, which I visited for the first time in 1962, turned out to be a very strange land . . . It has taken me much time to come to terms with the strangeness of India, to define what separates me from the country; and to understand how far the ‘Indian’ attitudes of someone like myself, a member of a small and remote community in the New World, have diverged from the attitudes of people to whom India is still whole (IWC 9).

The personal space of India has now become a collective space. The heterotopic India here took into the textual production of the ‘lived social space’ the discussion of emergency of 1975 had to be looked in the context of his spatial engagement with the existing democratic framework of India. In this novel Naipaul’s narrative engagement with India as a heterotopic ‘other’ was rather a new Indianness sympathetically shared between him and post-independent India.

The democratic system in India, according to Naipaul functioned as “borrowed or inherited ones” (IWC 69). If this became disabled the only option was to take refuge in its Gandhian rhetoric for democracy or people’s government. But according to Naipaul the post independent Gandhianism missed the much needed reference to the social materiality of

contemporary India. But at the same time Naipaul opined about the blindness of Indian government to the disruption of civilization by the foreign invasions:

India, without its own living traditions, has lost the ability to incorporate and adapt; what it borrows it seeks to swallow whole. For all its appearance of cultural continuity, for all the liveliness of its arts of dance, music, and cinema, India is incomplete: a whole creative side has died. It is the price India has had to pay for its British period. (IWC 126)

Throughout the novel Naipaul questioned the possibility of preserving of this cultural continuity. With the new encounter of “unknown India on the move” (IWC 53) Naipaul arrived at the alternative version of modernity. This was more relevant to the Lefebvre’s ‘representational spaces’. Naipaul’s perception of the spatial difference of this new India from the familiar India was evident from his assessment of the journalist he met and talked to in Bombay: “And the journalist was insecure. As an Indian he was not yet secure enough to think of Indian identity as something dynamic, something that could incorporate the millions on the move, the corrupters of the cities” (IWC 71).

With all these encounters India forced him to acknowledge its spatiality that Naipaul must come to terms with in order to develop a sense of new belonging and identity to his ancestral homeland. This perception of a new India will be reinforced in *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (IMMN). With this third novel on India, Naipaul configured the Foucaultian’s contest between ‘old’ and ‘new’ and Soja’s ‘Third’ spatial specific to his textual imagining of a restructured cultural geography of India. “The old equilibrium had gone, ... India was learning new ways of seeing and feeling” (IMMN 48). But to recognize the third space, focus must be made on Naipaul’s spatialization of culture, history and identity in a nationality.

In *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, Naipaul adopted an alternative mode of viewing India of new reality with the spaces of modernity. This spatiality of contemporary India had all the problematic issues of modern India like caste, gender religion, politics on the foreground to the process of nation building, hence with the discourse of national modernity evolved a common programme of spatializing the national culture and identity in the post-colonial context.

The novel has ample number of interviews of people belonging to diverse phases of society by Naipaul. This strategy was adopted in this latest novel on India: “I thought it was better to let India be defined by the experience of the people, rather than writing one’s personal reaction to one’s feeling about being an Indian and going back” (Jussawalla 111). This huge change of temperament in his personality also paved way for the change in the formation of his identity. These dialogues produced a unique discourse of national moderate view of identity politics. Spatial engagement with the nation he achieved a clear view of the spatial contestation which formed the beginning of self – awareness. The identity formation of Naipaul with the nation revealed that:

What looked sudden had been long prepared. The increased wealth showed; the new

confidence of people once poor showed. One aspect of that confidence was the freeing of new particularities, new identities, which were as unsettling to Indians as the identities of caste and clan and religion had been to me in 1962, when I had gone to India only as an 'Indian' (IMMN 9).

Here Naipaul emerged as a new Indian in a larger sense of shared identity. Naipaul in course of time acquired a greater intimacy with the Indian spatiality. During the final period of stay, India opened up an imaginary route to his ancestral homeland: "In 27 years I had succeeded in making a kind of return journey, shedding my Indian nerves abolishing the darkness that separated me from my ancestral past" (IMMN 516). Hence *India: Million Mutinies Now* was portrayed more of the postcolonial discovery of new spatiality of his home space and the formation of his identity through spatial remapping in Indian trilogy by which Naipaul explored a new space, a new reality and new identity.

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