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An Area of Darkness: A Broken Dream of V.S. Naipaul

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Abstract:

V.S. Naipaul, an eminent scholar, a critic is a Trinidadian born British writer of Indo-Trinidadian decent. As a writer, his main aim is “a commitment to deliver the truth” which he has done more authentically in his non-fictions than fiction. His *An Area Of Darkness(1964)* is the first of his acclaimed Indian trilogy which minutely scrutinizes Indian culture and civilization. It is an emotional travelogue written during his first visit to India which describes his first journey to the country of his ancestors, is evidently a very emotive experience for him. India shocks Naipaul because it challenges his idea of himself about the country. The contradiction between the actual India and the imagined India of Trinidad is too overwhelming to be confronted.

Keywords: aboriginality, universality, journey, disillusion.

The Noble Laureate Sir V.S. Naipaul, an eminent scholar, a critic is a Trinidadian born British writer of Indo-Trinidadian decent. He has produced an expanded corpus of writings especially on India. As a writer, his main purpose is “a commitment to deliver the truth” which he has done more authentically in his non-fictions than fiction. His *An Area Of Darkness(1964)* the first of his acclaimed Indian trilogy, minutely scrutinizes Indian culture and civilization. It is an emotional travelogue written during his first visit to India which describes his first journey to the country of his ancestors, is evidently a very emotive experience for him. It is not only a description of typical travel book, but it also shows the reader a picture of India seen through the eyes of one of the most excellent observers, who has made a very intimate relationship with the country through his ancestors. Naipaul does not hesitate to reveal his true feelings about India and gives the reader very melancholic and ironical depictions of what he observes. India becomes an area of pain from which he wishes to separate himself. This work is considered as one of the best documents about the cultural studies of India.

India shocked Naipaul because it challenges his idea of himself about the country. The contradiction between the actual India and the imagined India of Trinidad is too overwhelming to be confronted. The only solution for him is to escape from the country. In this travelogue, he paints a dismal picture of India, and yet it evinces his great passion and indefatigable fascination for it. This love-hate relationship with India makes his writings more interesting and more complex. His narration focuses several allusions from religion, mythology, ancient literature to modern writings like from The Gita to Kamsutra. However Naipaul is shocked by India’s backwardness, its superstitions, caste system, poverty,

illiteracy, and unhygienic conditions, and lack of concern on the part of the government officials through which he tries to portray the dark side of Indian culture.

An Area of Darkness begins with A Resting Place for the Imagination and ends in Flight---A metaphoric elopement from reality. Naipaul reflects: "It was a journey that ought not to have been made; it had broken my life in two"(Naipaul265).He comes to visit India with certain preconceived notions which have been shaped in his psyche since his boyhood. He writes "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..... It was a country suspended in time, it couldn't be related to the country discovered later." (Naipaul, 27) Practically, when he visits this country for the first time, it shatters his dreams. Memory of his past and first hand experiences in time and place, he cannot appreciate India in the way she is appreciated and highlighted in the books he has read. India had always been in his thoughts but gradually it faded and became an area of darkness with no promises to fulfil. It depicts the dirt and squalor of India devoid of civilized values. Naipaul criticises Nehru, Gandhi, Hinduism, language confusion in India, the poverty of the country and almost that comes to his notice. His cutting ironical remarks on caste system, corruption reveal his true feelings about India and gives the reader very melancholic and ironical depictions of what he observes. In *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul observes that, "Nothing remains of Gandhi in India except his name and worship of his image". In spite of this, Gandhi according to Naipaul fails in his mission. He says, "India undid him. He became a Mahatma. He was to be revered for what he was; his message was irrelevant. Indian nationalism grew out of Hindu revivalism, this revivalism which he so largely encouraged, made his final failure certain. He succeeded politically because he was revered; he failed because he was revered. (Naipaul82-84)

He criticizes Gandhian philosophy because he finds that Gandhi himself has not injected it into the minds in a right spirit. He further complains that his followers have thrown away the essence and has started practicing his formless spirituality". He laughs at Indian politicians who deliberately forget Gandhian scheme for upliftment of poverty, untouchability and all types of disparities but on the contrary they never forget their Mahatma when they deliver their speeches with respect to Gandhi.

An Area of Darkness is divided into three parts and eleven sub parts. It also has a prologue--- Traveller's Prelude: A Little Paperwork and an epilogue---"flight". The sub parts are closely linked patters of his experiences. According to him, India is indeed an area of darkness and will perpetually remain so as it is caught in the grip of age-old superstitions and traditional beliefs that prevents its inhabitants from undergoing fundamental changes. Caste is what primarily defines each person with in society. He writes: "Class is a system of rewards. Caste imprisons a man in his function. From this it follows, since there are no rewards, those duties and responsibilities become irrelevant to position. A man is his proclaimed function. There is little subtlety to India. The poor are thin; the rich are fat." (Naipaul 75)He asserts that in the beginning, caste system was useful social division of labour in rural society but it has now divorced function from social obligation position from duties. It is ineffective and

destructive; it has created a psychological which will frustrate all improving plans. People of India have accepted work outside the realm of their caste skill and in doing so they never forget their degree. This is working as a paradoxical manner and led to a split at the interior level in his Indian psyche. Ramnath the steno refuses to type because it was not his job. Another example is related with Jivan, who rose from an odd job to an office Clarke earned huge money but he has continued to sleep on pavements because of his lower caste. Two Brahmin brothers in the south started a leather business but were “anxious to protect their children against caste contamination”(Naipaul 55) He comments on some old and most practiced samskars. He remarks “I had no belief; I disliked religious ritual and I had a sense of the ridiculous, I refused to go through the janaywa, or thread ceremony of the newborn with some of my cousins...”(Indian Hindus worship the Naipaul34) The Gita, and even take oaths of it in their judiciary but they are so much obsessed with the false sense of social stratification and hierarchy that one feels affronted at the encroachment of one’s allotted duty. So the clerk won’t bring a glass of water and the stenographer won’t type a letter. This is the worst thing and common in Indian offices and society. He also criticises Indian people’s worshiping and kowtow to their leaders but they try the least to learn something from their imitable life. Every Indians pays his due respect to Gandhiji but the number of true followers can be counted in finger. A huge number of examples of these kinds are satirised by him with sardonic tone.

Naipaul comes to India, which is a drift by its social and political crises. The economic situation is shattering due to a high extent of corruption and ineffective governance. His reactions to the country of his origins were shock and despair. The picture of India, which he describes during his first visit, was too severe and cruel for him to be able to maintain an objective eye. Instead, he let all his emotions burst out of him. He cannot stand to look at all the squatting people in the dusty streets, ragged, scruffy beggars, and pervasive dirt in the ruins of the long-ago burnt-out glory. Even larger desperateness grows in Naipaul with the sad realization that the real India and the India of his childhood are completely different places. His memories of the practices of Indian customs and traditions, which he experienced in the Hindu community in Trinidad, differ considerably from what he experiences later in India. That is also one of the principal reasons for his depression and melancholy that he feels in the Indian environment. The real India fails to fulfil the vision of India of his imagination. He is a born unbeliever and keeps an outsider’s approach but he cannot reject his Brahmin sensibility too. His Brahmin self hood is disturbed on breaking of tradition in India—

“I had rejected tradition, yet how can I explain my felling of outrage when I heard that in Bombay they used candles and electric light for the Diwali festival, and not the rustic clay lamps of immemorial design which in Trinidad we still used”(Naipaul p36)

Naipaul often compares India and Trinidad in terms of their colonial past. Both countries are bound by the same fate as former British colonies. England has a very important role within the book, not only as a place of Naipaul’s contemporary residence, but mainly as a former colonial ruler over India and Trinidad. Naipaul examines the Indian colonial past and its influence on contemporary Indian situation. He sees the colonial experience of India as the source of all the inadequacies that are described in the book. He also evaluates the Hindu

principles that shape the core of the Indian society and affects the overall behaviour of Indian people. In this travelogue, he serves mainly as a representative of the western ideas and visions of the world and stands in contrast to the rest of Indian society. It is a writing where Naipaul describes the India as a darkness area and he thinks that third world countries are such the place where people suffer from humiliation and tyranny, there is no human rights, no equality between men and women. The story abounds with descriptions of the extreme poverty of India. Naipaul describes India as 'the poorest country in the world.' The Indians defecate everywhere but fail to face up to this fact according to Naipaul. He analyses in a very logical way the reasons why he thinks Poverty exists in such a real way in India. The concluding section abounds in grim and rather depressing images of poverty. When Naipaul pays a trip to the village and meets the emaciated Ramachandra who is surrounded in dire poverty he is appalled and simply wants to leave the country at once. Poverty is seen as a self-defeating and destructive reality in this country.

The most striking to the eye for Naipaul, before he can penetrate into the psyche of India, is its visual aspect. He sees the country full of dirt, dust, starved and sick people and poor beggars. Indian poverty, commented on throughout the travelogue, is for Naipaul an enormously painful experience. His vivid descriptions of people squatting in the streets and of dirty, decrepit beggars craving for alms create a typical picture of Indian environment.. For Naipaul, "India is the poorest country in the world" (Naipaul 44)

As Naipaul highlights, beggary has its special position in India and cannot be judged from a European perspectives. Beggars have a secure position within the society. It is an inseparable element of India. Beggary has its "function" because every act of giving to the beggar is seen as the automatic act of charity, which is an automatic reverence to God.

Defecating is as usual as beggary in India. It becomes almost a ritual. People walk in the streets full of excrements they do not notice, or even see. Although latrines and toilets are still not commonplace in India, the only reason for this situation is that Indians prefer defecating in an open air. It has become their daily routine and habit. For the westerner it is altogether incomprehensible as Naipaul asserts.

Indians defecate everywhere. They defecate, mostly, beside the railway tracks. But they also defecate on the beaches; they defecate on the hills; they defecate on the river banks; they defecate on the streets; they never look for cover. [...] These squatting figures [...] are never spoken of; they are never written about; they are not mentioned in novels or stories; they do not appear in feature films or documentaries. [...] The truth is that Indians do not see these squatters and might even, with complete sincerity, deny that they exist. (Naipaul 70)

Part two of this travelogue, opens with the image of a Doll's House on the Dal Lake. This is in fact a hotel called Hotel Liward, which is situated in Kashmir. Naipaul speaks about his relationships with the various people who work in the hotel and how he is encouraged to join a pilgrimage to the Cave of Amarnath the Eternal Lord, which is ninety miles north of Srinagar. He, speaks about his joy and that of the other pilgrims as they climb the Himalayas and try to get inside a cave. Even though they are on a pilgrimage, Naipaul states how as soon

as they get inside the cave it was like a typical Indian bazaar. Himalaya, the next prominent feature of the chapter has a special place in Naipaul's childhood memory: "I felt linked to them..... India, they went together. In so many of the brightly coloured religious pictures in my grandmother's house I had seen these mountains, cones of white against simple, cold blue, They had become a part of the India of my fantasy. (Naipaul 167)

But actually when he encounters the actual Himalayas, they seemed to him "as the Indian symbol of loss".(Naipaul167) He reveals that there is no truth in the pictures of the Himalayas which he has seen in Trinidad. Thus, pilgrimage for him is something which cannot be claimed.

The third part begins with 'Fantasy and Ruins'. It is Naipaul's direct confrontation with his imagination. He digs up the roots of his imagination, dissects his past experiences and reveals that how the British possessed the country completely. They are responsible for the death of Indian art, for the break in continuity. Their withdrawal is irreversible. Naipaul mentions Kipling and how he is a good chronicler of Anglo-India. He talks about how the 'Taj Mahal' is a great monument without any function. He proposes to transport this monument to the United States. It is interpreted as his hatred of the squalor of India. A huge number of this kind of examples are visible in this book. Naipaul has steadily comes to the conclusion that India for him remains an area of darkness. His comments on most socio-political events of the day are peripheral. The Chinese attack on India in 1962 shakes up the entire country. Naipaul is in India at that time but does not feel concerned about it. Nehru's greatest blunder, ill-equipped war against the Chinese, makes Naipaul angry and turns him bitterly satiric in his chapter on Emergency. He is then in India and scrutinizes the hollowness which is seen everywhere in this land, a total misfit in a modern world. Naipaul is quite upset on the failure of Mr. Nehru. Shri Aurobindo has already warned Mr. Nehru regarding Chinese invasion, but Nehru is careless about the land, saying that is 'the waste land.' Naipaul hears many rumours. He writes that the Indian Marwari merchants, it was said, were already making enquiries about business prospect under Chinese rule; the same rumour had it that, in the south the Madrasis, despite their objection to Hindi were already learning Chinese. But these are peripheral like his comments on the Kashmir. He made no attempt to explore the psyche of a nation, jolted out of its post-colonial euphoria, bordering on a sense of invincibility. Throughout an area of darkness, there is a sense of humiliation, of a personal frustration that the India of his secret imagination and longings, of his imagined origins, in another oriental third world country despite its size and ancient history. He is angry at the dirt, decay, incompetence, corruption, passivity, the humiliation by the threatening Chinese army. Like many other nationalists, Naipaul wants a modern, western efficient industrialized state, and he wants a revitalized native, traditional, authentic culture. As a person of Indian ancestry, his comments must be taken seriously as good counsel.

The "Village of the Dubes" is the last chapter in the book which is related with his visit to the ancestral village of his maternal grandfather. It might be his final homecoming but it was not. He says "In a year I had not learnt acceptance. I had learned my separateness from India, and was content to be a colonial, without a past, without ancestors."(Naipaul 202).He just wants

to escape himself from this situation. Fearing the loss of unity of his world, Naipaul is ready to flee. He is ready to reject his roots. The epilogue titled 'Flight' also explains this clearly .

For many Indian critics, *An Area of Darkness* is an example of misinterpretation about India. They think that Naipaul denies the optimistic side of India, despite making some strong valid points; C. D Narasimhaiah's essay 'Somewhere something has snapped' is a systematic attack on *An Area of darkness*. He remarks that he almost never touches optimistic side, as if he has decided to turn a blind eye towards the positive side of things.

Naipaul's identity plays a crucial role in the trilogy. His ambiguity in terms of national feeling and belonging to a particular country is a core predisposition for his perception of India. Although he grows up in a Hindu community in Trinidad, he remains detached from the country of his grandfather. The long distance induced the main differences between the Indians in Trinidad and the Indians in India. Through almost a hundred years in emigration, the gap between those in Trinidad and those in India widened and finally two distinctive cultures aroused of this separateness.

The real India is completely different from what the author dreamt of as being his homeland. The shock that he has to overcome, when he realizes that the real India has nothing in common with the India of his imagination, is crucial for the overall mood of this book. His family ancestors, who moved to Trinidad, cherished their memories and traditions and it becomes the source of his ideal thoughts of his mother country.

"The India, then, which was the background to my childhood was an area of the imagination. It was not the real country I presently began to read about and whose map I committed to memory."(Naipaul 41) He realizes that his image of India is not adequate and feels ascertain separateness and distance from the country. *An Area of Darkness* is not only about the failure of India, but also about the failure of the myth of Naipaul's childhood. Naipaul's identity is strongly connected to his imaginary world. With the loss of his ideals the loss of identity comes immediately. The author feels alienated, not knowing who he really is. He fails to identify himself with Indians.

"In India I had so far felt myself a visitor. Its size, its temperatures, its crowds: I had prepared myself for these, but in its very extremes the country was alien."(Naipaul 41)

Nonetheless, Naipaul has very contradictory feelings about his homeland. He feels a very strong bond to this country. His confusion may easily be traced in this book. On one hand, he is distressed of his rootlessness ; he does not feel to be an Indian. On the other hand, he is frustrated when he is denied his dissimilarity: "Now in Bombay I entered a shop or a restaurant and awaited a special quality of response. And there was nothing. It was like being denied part of my reality. [...] I had been made by Trinidad and England; recognition of my difference was necessary to me. I felt the need to impose myself, and didn't know how.(Naipaul 16)The feeling of separateness and disillusion leads Naipaul nearly to a complete negation of India, as it is suggested at the end of the travelogue. "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.”(Naipaul 265) The overall mood of the book elucidates in the last chapter, where Naipaul provides the reader with a very personal declaration . This book functions not only as a title, but as a metaphor for the idealized India of Naipaul’s ancestors. Darkness is a resonant and complex metaphor that runs all throughout Naipaul’s writing. He confesses,

“I was a tourist, free, with money. But a whole experience had just occurred; India had ended only twenty-four hours before. It was a journey that ought not to have been made; it had broken my life in two. (Naipaul 264)

These are the words V. S. Naipaul writes in the final of *An Area of Darkness*, the most lyrical, sad and melancholic book of the whole trilogy. It is the first time that Naipaul has a chance to see the country his grandfather left at the end of the nineteenth century. From the very beginning, it is noticeable that Naipaul is enormously disenchanted with the reality that he has to face during his first journey in the country of his ancestors. He attacks the culture and morality of India both collectively and individually. It is for him a powerful emotional experience, which not only changed his whole life but, it also strongly influenced his further writings.

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