From Mutiny to Mutinies: A Post-colonial Study of Naipaul’s Indian Trinity

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Since 1857, the date of the first official mutiny in India, the nation has perceived various socio-political, cultural, economic and historical upheavals, and the upturns have not only affected the nation and its discourse but at times the globe. Race, moment and milieu have always been the primary source of literature and their glimpse are very much apparent in every field whether it is science, religion or philosophy. India has been the acreage of great men like Lord Ram and Lord Krishna as is ostensible in Hindu mythology but the fact is that they were required in their respective eras. Mahatma Buddha, Mahavir Jain, Swami Vivekananda, M K Gandhi, was born in the period when the very institutions of societies were crumbling and collapsing. They were desperately required since they brought revolutionary and drastic changes in the aura of mythology, religion, science, philosophy or their respective fields. They came forward not only to kindle and enlighten the mind of common folk but also to serve the humanity. This, due to the above-mentioned luminaries and their accomplishments and impacts on the societies, has attracted the world travellers from time to time.

Travel writings are considered as a genre of literature, but the fact is quite different. Travelogues are the reflections and replications of contemporary socio-cultural and ethnic societies in which they were inscribed. However, with the elapses of time their purposes were manoeuvred intentionally. Earlier travelogues were used to be informative but in the colonial period, colonizers distorted and manipulated the very objective of these writings for their own advantages. They were projected in such a way that the settlers could easily prove the ‘otherness’ of the colonized. The culmination of the West’s fictive dramatization of the East begins in travelogue mixed with fantasy, such as those by Marco Polo. Historians of medieval trade now tell us that Marco Polo was not the medieval backpacker as we always thought, but a fellow invented by the West to fulfill its thirst for palatable understanding of the mysterious East. Switching centuries, from him to Naipaul via inescapable filter of Edward Said’s Orientalism, have beheld that the twentieth century reincarnation of Marco Polo was none other than V S Naipaul, an invention of the West to fulfill its prejudiced and deliberately fantastic understanding of the East. Foreign visitors visited our country at regular intervals, and produced plethora of travelogues on India’s contemporary socio-political, cultural, historical, economic, religious and even architectural edifice. Eighteenth and nineteenth century travellers have been successful in not only watching the nation silently and applauding wherever required but also produced the televisual commentary, critique and discourse on it.
I

This paper studies the ‘nation’ from an emigrant’s perspective. By questioning the identity of India, beyond geography and place, the point of view of the emigrant helps to broaden the framework within which India is defined. Through a meticulous reading of V S Naipaul’s trilogy on India, it will be argued how his worldview strikes on ambivalent relationship with his experience in India; how emotions of tenderness and pleasure vie with the zeal and short sightedness of a colonialist. In the present paper I intend to explore and explicate V S Naipaul’s Indian trinity, comprising An Area of Darkness (1964), India: A Wounded Civilization (1977) and India: A Million Mutinies Now (1990), which gives the odysseys of the nation’s postcolonial insurgencies, at times insurmountable, which not only wounded once, twice or thrice but million times and even then India has been washing the blood stains from her delicate aanchal.

While the travellers of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, pre-empting colonialism, often found beauty, richness, fertility and virginity, the postcolonial contemporary traveller is quick to spot ugliness, disorder and banality. In the nineteenth century, the bounty of the discovered world was to be praised. Today, the absence of civilization and progress in regarded as a major disappointment and therefore the unruly and unwilling ‘Third World’ has to be treated with derisiveness. For Naipaul India is a problem not only with his buried past “…when I felt India only as an assault on the senses” (TheOvercrowded 46), but also with his neurotic feelings of the present “…India as an ache, over for which one has a great tenderness, but from which at length one always wishes to separate oneself” (51). That is why his visits to the country have been attempts as much to get grips over its reality as to come to terms with his own past. In 1962, he feels so cut off from this past that he almost abandons the hope of ever being able to dig it up or make sense of it. That is why he fancies himself as a “colonial without past, without ancestors” (AnArea 274).

The postcolonial discourse of the nation has brought forth several issues to the fore. The discourse used by the postcolonial travel writer is constantly evolving and is not directly opposed to the colonial discourse. The postcolonial world has been affected by travels in many respects; the countries in question were discovered, explored, conquered, or settled by the people who came there from Europe. Displacement is an experience particularly associated with the postcolonial conditions, which for many individuals, entails a history of transportation, migration, expatriation, diaspora or exile.

Naipaul is a writer of brilliant techniques that he used it transforming the travelogues into texts, especially postcolonial texts. His travelogues are not merely an
almanac of his physical visits but also disseminate its colonial past vibrantly as Barbara Korte opines:

If travel is of special pertinence to Britain’s former colonies, the travel writing produced in these parts of the world has been practically ignored by scholars until recently with the prominent exception of V S Naipaul. (English Travel 152)

Among the post-independence travellers to India, V S Naipaul has a special place because of his curious love-hate relationship with the country. It is a strange predicament, mainly a tension emanating from Naipaul’s desire to remain apart from the mainstream tradition of the country visited. Resultantly, he inscribes some sensitive travel writings that are impressionistic, emotional and erratic and his first book on India, rather controversial. The paper is a candid account of Naipaul’s feelings that the vast, mysterious and agonized country has aroused in him and he promulgates his irritating and irksome thoughts in Indian trilogy in a way to discover a postcolonial India—India that is suffering in the hands of its postcolonial leaders who are still in the clutches of colonial tools. The paper studies Naipaul’s experiences chronologically as he has expressed in his treatise on India.

II

An Area of Darkness (1964)

Naipaul has been in India a much longer time and travelled much more extensively. Yet, the impressions of his first visit as recorded in An Area of Darkness are journalistic and lack depth in some areas of observation. Naipaul journeys India, for the first time, with the professed aim of discovering his Indian identity. It has always been significant for a writer to establish a district identity, especially when s/he is an outsider or wants to be considered one. This leaves a mark on his writings. To quote from his Acceptance Speech at the first David Cohen Literature Prize awarding ceremony:

I have always felt the need…to establish the identity of the writer, the narrator, the gatherer of impressions: To make the point that, whatever association came with the language, this English language traveller in the world was not English but colonial, and carried different pictures in his head. (SundayObserver)
His first visit to India in 1962 was undertaken as a quest for his roots in the country from where his grandfather had migrated to Trinidad as an indentured labourer, at the beginning of this century. He first visited Bombay and found that it was not what he had expected. He hated being part of a crowd at Church gate station and craved for preferential treatment, something that he had always got-in Trinidad and England. But here in India he found no special attention from Indians. He kept himself seeing the film posters that seemed to divine from a cooler and luscious world, Naipaul writes:

…Cooler and more luscious than the film poster of England and America, promising greater gaiety, and ampler breast and hip, a more fruitful womb. (AnArea 43)

Naipaul’s observation is based on his assessment of the Indian characters as romantic, emotional and exotic, which is typical Western orientalist bravura. His comments on most socio-political events of the day were peripheral. The Chinese attack on India in 1962 shook up the entire country. Naipaul was in India at that time but did 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 was then in India and saw the hollowness everywhere in the land, a total misfit in a modern world. Naipaul was quite upset on the failure of Mr. Nehru. ShriAurobindo had already warned Mr. Nehru regarding Chinese invasion, but Nehru was careless about the land saying that that is ‘the waste land.’ Naipaul heard many rumours in Calcutta. He writes:

…according to bazaar rumour, Chou-En-lai had promised the Chinese people as a Christmas present. 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. (264-65)

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.

Apart from above-mentioned contemporary post-colonial events, the other aspect of India that Naipaul encountered in his visit was the caste system, especially as manifested in professional skills. From the sociological point of view such situation are common in societies undergoing rapid socio-political changes. The rigid hierarchy of the caste system in India, which he condemns, therefore, disturbs Naipaul, “…in India caste was unpleasant; I never wished to know what a man’s caste was…” (29) as dissolute and dissipated that propagated a kind of separatism. Naipaul writes, “Class is system of rewards. Caste imprisons a man in his function” (76).
There is some truth in this observation though one notices a strong urge in Naipaul to say something sensational that would appeal to the western reader. His view on reservation of jobs was similarly biased and in the context of sixties, showed a definitely Brahmanic way of thinking that would be considered offensive today, “Reserving government jobs for untouchables helps nobody. It places responsibility in the hands of the unqualified…” (82). The aforesaid views have authenticated Naipaul as a colonial mimic and have been successful in portraying him as a postcolonial predictor who foretells and compares the destiny of India to that of Trinidad saying that “Yesterday the mimicry was Mogul, tomorrow it might be Russian or American; today it is English” (55). The entire experience is deeply personal one and Naipaul himself behaves like a fussy, grudging and tight-fisted foreign returned guy 2. It is true that today he is English and this is the reason why he looks at India from an occidentalist’s eye in proving its age-long civilization as wounded. An Area of Darkness, much inspired by Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, conveys the acute sense of disillusionment of Naipaul, capturing the whole crazy spectrum of India.

III

India: A Wounded Civilization (1977)

The abovementioned book is V S Naipaul’s second thesis on India which documents the political insurgencies of the decade of 1970s. As a post-colonial traveller who was unable to establish an Indian identity and had given up the attempts after his first visit to this country, Naipaul held the view that India should sever all connections with the past, which is understandable. After his first visit to India, Naipaul realized that the country was not and could not be his home. Yet he could not reject it or remain indifferent to it. When Naipaul revisited India in the said decade, he could find that this country takes much time to understand even after the departure of the British. However, Naipaul is not appeared with the independence of India. He expects something else. What he beholds, in post-independence India, he writes in these words:

But Independent India, with its five–year plans, its industrialization, its practice of democracy, has invested in change. There was always a contradiction between the archaism of national pride and the promise of the new; the contradiction has at last cracked the civilization open. (India 8)

In the course of his post 1962 visits to India, Naipaul conceived himself with ethnographic analyses of India, at the same time keeping a distance from the ordinary person most of the time, talking mainly to those in authority and power, like an IAS
Officer in Bombay, the commissioner in Rajasthan, among others. He never tried to meet ordinary Indians on an equal footing until recently, always judging them based on standards borrowed from the West. The judgment of Naipaul is not confined to the people only but to culture, civilization, religion and politics also.

However, to Naipaul, India was not a socio-cultural alternative. For him at that point of time, India—a ‘third world’ country, without a sense of history, without a racial sense—had to break off all ties with its past in order to get the best out of its present, which, according to Naipaul, would progress as understood in the Western context. Naipaul criticizes a prince who had travelled outside India. And that prince always wishes to compare India with the western world. Unquestionably, he criticized westerners who consider India an alternative and was quite contemptuous about them. That is why Naipaul says that India should be judged in Indian way:

The world outside India was to be judged by its own standards. India was not to be judged. India was only to be experienced, in the Indian way. (90)

I can surmise that nobody writes like VS Naipaul. His visual descriptions of ordinary people always hit the nail on the head. His central theme is the vibrant, pulsating, intellectual Hindu civilization. After the initial burst of optimism following independence, India has faced one obstacle after another, turning inward, revealing ‘a wounded civilization’, a stilted and stiff culture who does not know herself any more or what made her great. Using his own method of analysis, V S Naipaul may not be an ideal person to do this analysis because like Gandhi and Nehru he studied outside India. But unlike them he seemed to be on the other side of the country. His passive support to Emergency, imposed on the country by Indira Gandhi government: “…Mrs Gandhi, that formidable lady in New Delhi, who had done a de Gaulle on the Congress…nationalized the banks… ‘de-recognised’ the princes… intended to change the constitution” (TheOvercrowded 110) which was criticized not only by political activists but also by writers, media stalwarts, social reformers and so on. Salman Rushdie too denounces the very act in his magnum opus Midnight’s Children (1980) in these words “Emergency heralded the beginning of continuous midnight which would not end for two long years” (Midnight 612).

Naipaul further holds that Hindu India invited conquests and finds that this drawing upon the Hindu past in the present times has led to the creation of a new sense of identity. One can, of course, come to an agreement with Naipaul. Mohammad Gajanavi attacked and looted Somnath temple in Gujarat, Bakhtiyar Khilje destroyed and burnt Nalanda University and its library and Babar made Babri Masjid after destroying Rama temple in Ayodhya. Naipaul tries to cope with such movements in India which are trying to take avenge with its past. Naipaul considers the demolition of
Babri Masjid in Ayodhya is true and justified and he declared that his observations in *India: A Wounded Civilization* is valid. He saw the demolition as a very small part of the vast change in the Hindus’ idea of themselves and as an attempt to retrieve their identity of the pre-Islamic period. He saw in it the seed for a greater” Intellectual’ of India provided it was kept safe from the hands of the fanatics in an interview with Dilip Pandgaonkar Naipaul confesses:

The people who say that there was no temple there are missing the point. Babar, you must understand, had contempt for the country he had conquered. And his building of that mosque was an act of contempt for the country. In Ayodhya the construction of a mosque on a spot regarded as sacred by the conquered population was meant as an insult. It was meant as an insult to an ancient idea, the idea of Ram, which was two or three thousand years old… *(TimesofIndia)*.

The travelogue can be seen as a critique of blindness of Indians to the 'real' world that prefer to live and judge themselves and others through the myopic glass of perceived high culture of ‘centuries of rich civilization’. But the problem is that after being settled in the Western country most of the Indians start thinking and comparing the nation on the touchstone of the West. And they, sometimes, seem to be the recalcitrant of India and the country craves and cries for her ungrateful son(s).

IV


Naipaul's third book on India, *A Million Mutinies Now* leaves his account of postcolonial impressions. This book stands closest to the idea of home coming for Naipaul. It marks Naipaul's surfacing after a long quest amongst the now diminishing ripples of socio-political and cultural paradoxes of India. He sees a million mutinies breaking out in the margins: mutinies of castes, of class and of gender. Compared to *An Area of Darkness* and *India: A Wounded Civilization*, the title of the latest book is less negative. But the use of word mutinies indicates that Naipaul's writings still have strains of the colonial discourse, though, by and large, they can be considered as the works of a postcolonial writer. To quote from Naipaul:

What the mutinies were also helping to define was the strength of the general intellectual life, and the wholeness and humanism of the values to which all Indians now fell they could appeal. And–strange irony—the mutinies were not to be wished away. They were part of the beginning of a new way for many millions, part of India's growth, and part of its restoration. (518)
Naipaul's *India: A Million Mutinies Now* is his great tour de force. And he has very beautifully painted the postcolonial picture of India. While in Bombay, Naipaul visited Muhammad Ali Road with Nikhil Laxman, a journalist, his first impression of the area as described in his book, captures the claustrophobic atmosphere which gives a ghetto insularity that infuses the dwellers with a sense of security. Naipaul sensed it as a very sensitive subject in Bombay. He noticed that everybody should survive in his/her community if he or she is from minor community. After seeing the *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi* of Muslims in Bombay, he reminds his own situation in Trinidad. Naipaul recollects “I felt that if I had been in their position, confined to Bombay, to that area, to that row I too would have been a passionate Muslim.” (31)

Political upheavals and separatist movements have perturbed India from time to time in post-independence era. Naipaul was also in the mood to paint such movements and upheavals. Though he was not there but he collects all the pieces of information from people, newspapers, and gazetteers and so on. For the first time, when Naipaul visited India in 1962 he was not aware with political setup. But during the course of second visit he depicted the period of Emergency very skillfully. In the third visit he was vigilant and curious and enough about such movements which created digressions in day to day life of Indian people. The chapter ‘After the Battle’ is Naipaul’s documentation of the movement in the Indian social fabric that occurred in the 1960s and 70s. This movement marks intellectual confusion of the times when the old ideologies were set aside and a search was on for a new set of ideologies to live by. This coupled with economic crisis accentuated the confusion of those times.

Thus, Naipaul seems very much on the side of India. His response is totally positive. He talks in support and favour of India and its mutinies. The excess he sees now felt to be excess in India. The mutinies were helping to define the strength of the general intellectual life. Mutinies not to be wished away as were part of the beginning of a new way for many millions a part of India’s restoration.

The compassionate narrative vision in this book enables Naipaul to capture the theme of India collapsing, mutinying and reaching after a final integration. It is his ability to look for the sense of life in a mutinous spirit order that is a significant aspect of Naipaul’s writing. Even in the midst of apparent chaos, he sees a semblance of continuity, coherence and harmony. Thus, the million mutinies come to symbolize the dawn of a post-colonial society for Naipaul. The new attitude expressed in this book brings to light a new Naipaul with ‘a central will, a central intellect, a unifying idea’ suggesting that the conflicting components of his identity are not to be wished away as they have been responsible for his growth and restoration and achievement of the particular truth he had in his mind all through.
Notes:

1. Since time immemorial, India has attracted many foreigners by its culture and civilization, trend and tradition and its flora and fauna. I would like to mention a few travellers of ancient and medieval India who not only delineated the contemporary events of the country but also provided the base for the researchers and archaeologists of today. The travellers were no less than Megasthene, visited India in reign of Chandragupta Maurya, threw the light on the contemporary culture and society in his book Indica. Fa-hein, a Chinese traveller, visited the reign of Chandragupta II and he penned down about the society and culture of Madhya Pradesh. Huen-Tsang, educated at Nalanda University, visited in the regime of Harshvardhan, wrote a travelogue known as Si-U-Ki in which he described 138 countries. Muslim Imperialism in India properly started when the Turks stepped on the scene of history not before. One of the most remarkable episodes of this time was the journey and long sojourn in India of one of Islam's greatest intellects, Al-Beruni, forever known as the master, philosopher, mathematician and astronomer of great repute, had accompanied Mohammed Ghazni down to the Punjab. Having settled there, he proceeded to make a thorough study of Sanskrit and Hindi literature, and has left to us a penetrating description of India in his famous work, Tahkik-i-Hind (An Enquiry into India).

2. When Naipaul visited India at that time he was 30 years old who criticises the loss of his ‘imagined world’ without bothering to delve deeper into the reasons for it. This plundered country was struggling to fight with its colonial past and tackling some enormous problems at hand.

3. ‘Ism(s)’ in India have played a vital role in wounding its civilization in the contemporary era. However, isms like Naxalism, Maoism, racialism etc. have appropriated themselves claiming their acts as devout but their means are detrimental. Neither school of thought has gained anything except widening the wall of parochialism and instigating communal disturbances. Indian politics is totally accountable for encouraging these mis/deeds.
Works Cited


