



## ISSUES OF BELONGINGS AND CULTURAL AFFILIATION: A SELECT STUDY OF V.S NAIPAUL'S FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

V.S. Naipaul has emerged as the most significant contemporary English novelist: his status reaffirmed by the 2001 Nobel Prize for literature. Of Indian descent, born in Trinidad and educated in England, Naipaul has been placed as the quintessential **exile figure, a rootless nomad** in the cultural world, always **on a voyage to find his identity**. His fiction has reinforced the metaphor of exile in diverse ways. All his protagonists have laboured under a sense of **angst and alienation possessed by what they no longer possess and unpossessed by what they possess**. It may be poor Mr. Biswas searching for a *house* of his own, Ralph Singh living in an illusory world of *Mimic Men*, Salim on the run from terrorism in *A Bend In the River* or the poor Hindu boy living just *Half A Life*, all Naipaul heroes are bewildered men in quest of security and identity that only tradition can provide, but their own tradition has been lost in a limbo of *dislocation and exile*. Overall a critical consensus has emerged that Naipaul's world is people with rudderless and rootless protagonist who in many ways are incarnations of the author himself.

This article is an attempt to break this misconception of Naipaul's **rootlessness**, to *deconstruct* his writings to find his roots and affinities that exist even though the author may be unaware of the **racial sub-conscious** that has shaped his sensibility as a man and as an author. My submission is, however Naipaul may deny this, that Naipaul is deeply affiliated to the **Hindu World**. Separated from India by a century of time and thousands of miles in space, Naipaul's heart beats with Indian sympathies and empathies, he feels for India and is nostalgic about its ancient Hindu spirit of enquiry. This is why, he keeps coming to India again and again looking for novel assurance may be for a larger cultural perspective. He wrote three travelogues on India- *An Area Of Darkness (1962)*, *India: A wounded Civilization (1977)* and *India: A Million Mutinies Now (1990)*. All the three are based on his visits to India in 1962, 1977 and 1988. The travelogues on India show his deep interest in Indian culture and tradition and depict the social cultural and political scenario of India.

**Keywords:** Alienation, Rootlessness, Cultural Affiliation, an Area of Darkness

## INTRODUCTION

Naipaul search for identity is ethnic as well as the spiritual quest of an agnostic. Born in Trinidad in a migrant family of **Girmitiyas**- indentured labourers- who went across the *black waters* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Naipaul was brought up in the Hindu ghettos of the West Indies: surrounded with pictures, icons and rituals of the enigmatic Indian Hindu gods and goddesses. Exiled at his very birth, far away from his ancient cultural roots, Naipaul suffered a **second exile** when he left Trinidad for England to pursue higher studies. In England, too he remained on **outsider** unable to identify with the world of the colonizing super power. **Alienation** and **identity-crisis** pursued him like the *Greek Eumenides* and became his obsessive themes when he chose the career of a freelance writer. The painful experiences of the exile recur in his works through different images and metaphors. He tramped through countries and continents to detect the **lost umbilical cord relation**. His literary journey from *Miguel Street* to *The Enigma Of Arrival* has the undercurrent of expatriate feeling. His first major mover *A House for Mr. Biswas* springs out of his emigrant feelings. Mr Biswas is a descendant of an **Indian Hindu** struggling in an alien land for freedom and stability. **India and Indians are part and parcel of Naipaul's works**. Even after years of separation he could not snap his relation from India. **Pigments of Hinduism and Indianness still survive in his cells**. Western culture and exiled life could not remove the **basic Indian** in him. In his Acceptance speech at the **Nobel Presentation**, Naipaul remembers his lost childhood in Trinidad where he was dimly aware of his ancestral Hindu past but had no clear understanding of his lost culture and identity. He mentions how certain themes obsessed his mind when he took to writing as a profession:

“When I became a writer those areas of darkness around me as a child became my subject. The lands, the aborigines; the New World, the colony, the history; India, the Muslim world, to which I also felt myself related; Africa; and then England, where I was doing my writing. That was what I meant when I said that my books stand one on the other, and that I am the sum of my books. That was what I meant when I said that my background, the source and prompting of my work was at once exceedingly simple and exceedingly complicated. You will have seen how simple it was in the country town of Chaguana.

And I think you will understand how complicated it was for me as a writer. Especially in the beginning, when the literary models I had - the models given me by what I can only call my false learning - dealt with entirely different societies.”

Naipaul goes on to say great novelist wrote about *highly organized societies*. However he had no such society to prop him up. He hated the brutal life of Trinidad-a **wasteland** without *scientist, engineers, soldiers or poet*. He felt Trinidad to be just “a dot on the world map” and a purely philistine society steeped in superstition, ignorance, fraud and deceit. Naipaul found himself misfit in Trinidad which was only a tradition ridden, decadent society based entirely upon the degrading and demoralizing fact of **colonialism**. He presents the vision of Trinidad as a confused amalgam of many races without mythology and tradition and without rules or patterns. He recalls in the *Middle Passage*: “I knew Trinidad to be unimportant, uncreative, cynical...It was a place where the stories were not stories of success but a failure”. He could not find an umbilical cord attachment with Trinidad which was a discouraging place for him. Right from his boyhood, Naipaul had nourished a picture of his homeland, **Hindu, India**, carefully preserved by his family in distant Trinidad. Some of those Trinidad memories have been recorded by Naipaul in ‘Prologue to An Autobiography’, which primarily deals with his first attempt of writing fiction in English, living as an *exile* in London. He remembers his boyhood in Trinidad where his grandfather had gone as an indentured labourer from India:

“We were an immigrant Asian community in a small plantation island in the New World. To me India seemed very far away, mythical, but we were at that time, in all the branches of our extended family, only about forty or fifty years out of India. We were still full of the instincts of people of the Gangetic plain, though year by year the colonial life around us was drawing us in. My own presence in Mr. Worms class was part of that change. No one so young from our family had been to that school. Others were to follow me to the exhibition class, but I was the first.

Mangled bits of old India (very old, the India of the nineteenth century villages, which would have been like the India of earlier centuries) were still with me not only in the enclosed life of our extended

family but also in what came to us sometimes from our community outside."

As a student in an English school, young Vidiadhar read a number of books dealing with English life and Christian saints. Yet he never understood the real meaning of Greek or English myths. For him, Indian Gods and Hindu rituals were far more real. He writes how he went to a Ramlila in Trinidad and was enchanted with the spectacle:

"One of the first big public things I was taken to was the Ramlila, the pageant-play based on the Ramayana, the epic about the banishment and latter triumph of Rama, The Hindu hero-divinity. It was done in a field in the middle of sugar-cane on the edge of our small country town.

Everything in that Ramlila had been transported from India in the memories of people. And though as theatre it was crude, and there was much that I would have missed in the story, I believe I understood more and felt more than I had done during The Prince and the Pauper and Sixty Glorious Years at the local cinema. Those were the very first films I had seen, and I had never had an idea what I was watching. Whereas the Ramlila had given reality and a lot of excitement, to what I had known of the Ramayana."

This was the romantic epical India that Naipaul came looking for on his first visit to his ancestral land in 1962. But he was rudely shocked by the Indian reality. His initial response to India was painful, India betrayed him and did not provide him any solace. As he has written in an essay entitled 'Reading and Writing': "it was to this personal India, and not the Indian of Independence and its great names, that I went when the time came. I was full of nerves. But nothing had prepared me for the dereliction I saw. No other country I knew had so many layers of wretchedness and few countries were as populous."

His first encounter with India as recorded in *An Area of Darkness* shows Naipaul's disgust and despair at the degenerate state of contemporary India. It is not a work that idolises India. It is more a lament on India's decline from a great civilization to a land of colonized **mimic men** wallowing in their ignorance, poverty and misery. *An Area of Darkness* is divided into three parts and eleven sub parts. It also has a Traveler's prelude. A little paper work and an epilogue- Flight. The sub-parts are closely linked

patterns of his experience and their examination. 'A Resting place for Imagination' provide the background for Naipaul's understanding of India. 'Degree', 'The Romancers' and 'The Colonial' are three major aspects of India that he encounter. His anger can be noticed at the very beginning of *An Area of Darkness* when he was harassed by custom officials. He found that Indians were static people, they had fixed norms and standards and they stuck to them. Naipaul found a ray of hope when he saw the people of India accepting work outside the realm of their *caste skill*. They wanted to rise, they were ambitious but afraid to make a revolt against the order of castes. He has proved his fact with the example of various figures like Ramnath, Jivan, Vasant, the two Brahmin brothers in the south, etc. This shows how the self esteem of the low class was broken by the Brown Shahibs who were caught in the vainglory of borrowed culture. They were separated from their society and caught in the web of English culture. He condemns the Indians and states that they are *mimic men*, having no individuality of their own. He compares India with Trinidad and states that in India:

"The outer and inner worlds do not have the physical separateness which they had for us in Trinidad. They coexist, the society only pretends to be colonial, and for this reason its absurdities are at once apparent. Its mimicry is both less and more than a colonial mimicry. It is the special mimicry of an old country which has been without a native aristocracy for a thousand years and has learnt to make room for outsiders, but only at the top... Yesterday the mimicry was Moghul, tomorrow it might be Russian or American, today it is English (Pg. No. 55)."

Naipaul has exposed the bitter truth about Indians that has never been mentioned. He has presented the ugly reality that Indians do not hesitate to defecate anywhere. Naipaul writes: "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 riverbank, they defecate on the streets, they never look for cover (70)". Naipaul is disturbed to see the lack of sanitation in India. He is of the view that the root cause of casteism is sanitation that has drawn the lines of diversion in the society. When India was divided in the narrow walls of caste, colour or clan she lost her strength.

Naipaul thus condemns the Indian for their unclean sanitary habits. In his eyes the East has nothing but dirt and filth. Naipaul does not agree with the philosophy of selfless action propagated by the great Indian religious book Geeta. The philosophy of action without reward decreases the enthusiasm to act.

Naipaul writes that India deals in symbols and gives many examples which prove that all the ideals are hollow as it is easy to say but difficult to do. Indian boast loudly but when the time comes they act not. There are so many schemes for the welfare of the country but very few are working. Naipaul is disappointed to see the amnesia, the lack of knowledge of Indians about history. India, the treasure house of monuments, of buildings pulls so many visitors. There is not only the beauty that attracts the tourists but they also have curiosity to know about Indian history. But this curiosity has died in the Indians. He is surprised to see that Akbar's late sixteenth century fort near Dal Lake came to be regarded as five thousands year old. He also gives another example of ignorance of Hazrat Bal relic. The Muslim medical student could not give any correct information related to this. Thus amnesia has become so serious that there are no traces of the past in the Indian mind.

**Disillusionment**, thus, remains the central theme of *An Area of Darkness*. Unfortunately, his first encounter with India was a huge let-down, a traumatic **disillusionment**, as he found India another land of **mimic men**. The India, which was the background to Naipaul's childhood, was **an area of imagination** but it became **an area of darkness**. He himself wrote:

"It was a journey that ought not to have been made. It had broken my life into two."

Naipaul even after seeing the ugly condition of India does not seem to be tired of finding his roots. This is in fact a hidden hope of belonging to India that he was going on searching and this search carried his to Amaranth, one of the most famous shrines of Hindus. In Amaranth, Naipaul encounters the **Himalayas of his Trinidad Childhood**. The Himalayas had a special place in Naipaul's childhood memory. He was always desirous of seeing the Himalayas, which seem to be a symbol of India's essential mystery. The encounter with the Himalayas ignites Naipaul's **racial sub-conscious**; he looks at the grand peaks and holy lakes with a sense of awe mingled with pride-a heady blend of **euphoria and nostalgia**.

The following excerpt is a tangible proof of Naipaul's sense of **belonging to India**:

"To be among them was fleetingly, and with a truer sense of their unattainability, to claim them again. To reject the legend of the thousand-headed Sheshnag was easy. But the fact of the legend established the lake as mine. It was mine, **but it was something I had lost**, something on which I would soon have to turn my back again. Was it fanciful to think of these Himalayas, so well charted and perhaps once better known, as the Indian symbol of loss, mountains to which, on their burning plains, they looked back with searching, and to which they could now return only in pilgrimages, legends and pictures. (199)"

Naipaul's knowledge about India may be inadequate; his comments may be hurting but the predicament of India pains him. It is his love that came out in the form of anger and distress. Yet all along Naipaul's words echo with a sense of loss, a feeling of **empathy and compassion** for the forgotten glories of India. As he nears the end of his first sojourn to India, he speaks with a sense of fraternal bondings with the unfortunate people of India:

"It is well that Indians are unable to look at their country directly for the distress they would see would drive them mad. And it is well that they have no sense of history. For how then would they be able to continue to squat amid their ruins and which Indian would be able to read the history of his country for the last thousand years without anger and pain? It is better to retreat into fantasy and fatalism (215)"

Lillian Feder's comments on *An Area of Darkness* hint at the uneasy relationship between Naipaul and his ancestral world of India: but, she says that there are things unsaid that are more important than what he actually says. The umbilical cord bonding is ineffable, beyond the scope of language:

"In *An Area of Darkness* he says he feels like a stranger in India although his memories of Hindu myth, rituals, customs and attitudes remain from his formative years. The ancient past of India is merged with his own past. Yet an unbeliever from birth and at least consciously, having rejected Hindu

ritual, he is unprepared in his first visit for the emotional impact of these memories, which complicate his reactions to the actual life of the society he had envisioned. He refers to the newer and now perhaps truer side of my nature, which is appalled at what he regards as India's ossification in its past. But there is also the older side, which had an answer, remembrances that evoke the aesthetic quality of ritual, ingrained assumptions and values, surprising him with their poignancy as they enlarge his vision. I understood,, he says better than I admitted. Making explicit the subliminal feelings his observations elicit is another means of characterizing himself as narrator, acknowledging a truth beyond his immediate reaction."

In a similar vein, Farrukh Dhondy says Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness* is more important for things that he does not clearly mention. He writes:

"Naipaul does not himself see, in this book, what the matter is, whence the historical discontinuity arises or what it signifies for him as a writer who is exploring a country in order to rediscover the origins and even the shape of his ancestral inheritance."

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