

The Domain of Darkness in V.S. Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness*

P. Nagachander Rao

Research Scholar Department of English

Kakatiya University, Warangal

Abstract

An Area of Darkness, V.S. Naipaul's first travelogue about India, will be examined in-depth in this essay. The author's major claims will be evaluated in light of the criticisms leveled at them by a number of well-known critics, with the aim of eschewing nationalist prejudice to the fullest extent possible. If any or all of Naipaul's claims are found to be true, an effort will be made to pinpoint the problem's root cause; if the author made an error in observation, it will be noted without delay. The literary merit of the work will also be evaluated, and any sentences that exhibit literary tendencies will be called out for the readers' attention.

Keywords: Travel Writing, Post-Colonialism, Identity

Introduction

Naipaul attempts to investigate his own psychological inclinations as a young writer in this work of fiction, which also creates his first direct contact to India. The release of *An Area of Darkness* in 1964 was a watershed moment in post-British India. The realistic appraisal of India's oneness, which has a population of nearly five billion people, jolted nationalists out of their stupor. It brought to light parts of Indian culture that had hitherto been disregarded by both Indian and non-Indian writers because no one had the words or the confidence to investigate them.

The travelogue resurrected Gandhi's topic of cleanliness and sanitation in many aspects of life, while also allowing many Indian detractors to reaffirm their nationalism. The dirt that no one had observed was made known to the Indian elite. Both good and negative comments are made about the subject, but the criticism is so harsh that it overshadows the author's sympathy; critics of the book believe the negative opinions are biased and colonial. Both a poet and an analyst feature in the travelogue, and it is worth noting that we know less about the poet; the voice we are familiar with is that of the critic.

To avoid copying previous India journalism, the author must develop a wholly fresh storytelling approach. In writing in haste, Naipaul brilliantly combines the poetic language of a poet with the sarcastic schizophrenic critic's style. His style may not be the finest, but it is certainly one of a kind. But his beliefs are so extreme that even I. K. Masih, a Christian residing in India, disagrees with him on the country "even I, Christian, an alien in many ways, feel at home and a chip of the same block in India. The reason for this is of course, that 'The cosmopolitan Hindu society of modern India has its roots in the soil'" (Masih, 152)

The Domain of Darkness

It may be observed that in *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul despises India out of his desire to feel like an Englishman; he wishes to rival a white skin fellow with his mentality and dress code, if he is unable to do that by changing the colour of his skin. A person who cannot associate himself with his own community cannot associate him with any other community. To be born in a particular community is a binding fact, one cannot choose to be born in England or America by his own will. Once when he discards the ethnicity to which he belongs, he is left alone in the world with a lot of alternative groups, but the freedom that he has chosen prevents him from permanently associating with one particular community.

Naipaul's attachment is not and could never be innate; it is due to his thinking that the other community that he had chosen suits more to his needs. The selection becomes a business deal, and in business, the dealer always chooses better options for more profit. Moving further in his observation, Naipaul claims that in India, the basic function of the sweepers is to suffer degradation and not keeping the steps of a Bombay hotel clean:

After they have passed the steps are dirty as before you cannot complain that the hotel is dirty. No Indian will agree with you. Four sweepers are in daily attendance and it is enough in India that the sweepers attend. They are not required to clean. That is subsiding part of their existence which is to be sweepers, degraded beings, to go through the motion of degradation. (79)

Whom does Naipaul blame for the carelessness of the sweepers? It is not certain that the sweepers are from the lower castes and therefore the caste system is responsible for their degradation. A person of any caste might become a sweeper if he is suffering continuously from poverty and starvation. If the person who is appointed to the job of a sweeper does not do it properly, it means that it is a public work for which nobody cares. If it is a private from then it implies that the sweeper is given such a minimal wage that nobody expects him to really clear the steps.

Generally, The British who came to India were members of the elite class, so the mimicry of the British in India actually meant the mimicry of the upper class. The diasporic British officials got a chance to imitate those in the aristocracy who were above them as here they got a chance to overcome the boundaries of the British decorum with the power and money they accumulated in India. Thus, the British Raj in India was an imitation of the monarchy in England, which perhaps in its own turn imitated the customs and traditions of other fashionable nations of Europe. Naipaul was totally annoyed to see this imitation that was several times removed from reality.

Naipaul compares the old and new type of Indian art and finds that the traditional Indian art has deceased and the British were responsible for its death. The British government was indifferent towards Indian art and made no efforts for the conservation of it as its predecessors did by patronizing the artists. He believes that a biscuit factory cannot be a substitute for pearl trade and gold embroidery. The British conquerors were different from the

other numerous conquerors of the past in that they never took India as their own country, and always treated the country as only a thing that has to be exploited:

The British refused to be absorbed into India, they did not proclaim like the Mughals, that if there was a paradise on earth, it was this, and it was this, and it was this. While dominating India, they expressed their contempt for it, and projected England; and Indian were forced into a nationalism.... It was an immense self-violation; ... a flattering self-assessment could only be achieved with the help of Europeans like the Max Muller.... (211)

The pride that the British took in their own race created a feeling of contempt for the Indians. The treatment that all Indians met at the hands of the Britons irrespective of their caste and religion forced them to unite as fellow nationals. They forgot all their barriers and began to recognize that they were Indians who along with the dogs were not allowed inside the British Bars.

Like any other escapist Indian, in order to avoid the pain of his situation, Naipaul was ready to flee and reject his roots. He declined the demand of Ramchandra, the head of the family who requested financial help to pay for a litigation to preserve the nineteen acres of his grandfather's land. Perhaps this was the most prominent reason for Naipaul to sever all connection from India and his family. "So it ended, in futility and impatience a gratuitous act of cruelty, self-reproach and flight". In the epilogue chapter entitled 'Flight,' Naipaul flies away leaving the mystery unraveled. He knew that the clues to solve the mystery existed but he could not find them the mystery remained unraveled.

An Area of Darkness was always taken as an attack on the idea of India and a ban was imposed on it immediately after its publication. While the book should be read as a meeting ground for the homeland and a diasporan, the reactions that came from the Indian critics have to be reviewed to assess the impact that the work created in the mind of the India intelligentsia. C.D. Narsimhaiah in his essay 'Somewhere Something has snapped' attacked the ideas in the book, though at the beginning of the essay, he accepts that Naipaul's assessment that has depicted India's failings cannot be disowned:

Our failings are so many and so varied that the most patriotic of us cannot defend them. Our love of symbols...rather than of action...our neglect of our great art...unless...approved by European scholars...our endless mimicry....
(Narsimhaiah 95)

Narsimhaiah further states that the essay is not the advocacy of India, that it is "a sign of maturity in individuals as well as notions to see ourselves as others see us..." Naipaul is credited for correct observation of all that is evident but accuses him of being unable to explore the depth of the Indian mind.

Conclusion

Finally, it may be noted that the present book by Naipaul has to be valued because it is the only book of its kind. It has to be accepted that no India born person has the courage or the ignorance to write such a kind of book. Indians have to make the most out of it and show that rest of the world that they are a living race that has the power to transform itself in a quick period of time. While other writers like Kipling and Forster also have written about India, Naipaul is too close yet too far in his description of India. He has not read much Indian literature of the ancient times like Forster; neither does he delight in the description of the native just as Kipling does. He is nearly a postmodern writer, because of this it is necessary for his literary survival that he remains ahead of these writers in his thoughts. Kipling and Forster were modernists and they were British, their contempt for India stood thwarted by the fact that they belonged to a colonizing nation and they were not able to express that contempt in their writing.

Naipaul does not talk of the merits and demerits of the British rule in India, the Gandhi and Nehru that he describes are just social reformers, and not freedom fighters, Naipaul has shown terrible neglect of history in his writing and his knowledge of history feeds upon the ruins of the ancient monuments that he visits. He is skeptical enough not to believe in things he cannot see, that renders his philosophic vision weak and useless. The book that he has written is almost nothing when it is compared to books like Jawaharlal Nehru's *Discovery of India*. Unlike Nehru, he has come to India not to discover it, but it seems he is on a paid visit, waiting for the period of stay to be over. He has no interest in the question whether the Aryans came from outside, or they were the native race of India.

Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness* is a valuable book not because it tells the readers about India, but because it narrates the story of a person who is inflicted with the western thoughts as a person whose body is taken by some evil spirit. When the person is brought before the conjurer, he babbles. But slowly as the spirit is exorcised, he starts speaking in a normal way. *An Area of Darkness* is just the beginning of the writer's Indian Odyssey, it is a landmark (in its original sense) that allows the critic to measure the distance that Naipaul has travelled, since he first wrote this piece in 1962. Naipaul's skeptical nature does not allow him to believe in something he sees at once, but one can take for granted that in his forthcoming books, he is going to contradict many of his opinions and be more sympathetic towards the Indian people. It is just the first act of the Naipaulean drama of life, in his next book the readers shall find him moving towards acceptance. He is likely to understand the philosophy of the Indian culture and distinguish between outward and inward advancement.

References

- Feder, Lilian. *The Making of a Writer*. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2001.
- Hayward, Helen. *The Enigma of V.S. Naipaul*. New Delhi: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.
- Joshi, Chandra B. *The Voice of Exile*. New Delhi: Sterling Publications, 1994.

Macave, Prabhakara. *Reminiscences of a Writer, From Self to Self*. Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1977.

Mahanta, Namrata Rathore. *V.S Naipaul: The Indian Trilogy*. Delhi: Atlantic, 2004.

Mustafa, Fawzia. *V.S. Naipaul*. Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1999.

Naipaul, V.S. *A Writer's People*. London: Picador, 2011.

---. "An Area of Awakening." *The Sunday Times* 18 July 1993.

---. *India: An Area of Darkness*. London: Picador, 2011.

Narsimhaiah, C.D. "Somewhere Something has Snapped." *The Literary Criterion* (1965): 95.

Patel, Vasant. *V.S. Naipaul's India: A Reflection*. New Delhi: 2005.

Ray, Mohit K. *Critical Essays*. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2005.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon, 1978.

White, Landeg. *V.S. Naipaul: A Critical Introduction*. Delhi: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1975.