



A Critical Study of V. S. Naipaul's 'Indian Trilogy': A Post-Colonial Discourse

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Abstract

Naipaul remained a globe-trotter throughout who travelled restlessly and wrote relentlessly, documenting his observations and experiences in his rich non-fictional works. Due to his hyphenated identity as a writer of Indo-Caribbean origin, Naipaul remained unmoored and without any sense of belonging all his life. The Nobel Laureate initially had a problem in acknowledging his Indo-Caribbean identity and went back to his ancestral land, India. He was extremely disillusioned to find the chaos in the socio-political milieu of India; the expression of his disillusionment finds expression in his 'Indian Trilogy' containing three travel memoirs and the documentation of life in India viz. *An Area of Darkness* (1964), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977) and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990). In these three landmark works, he has delineated his own perception of India. India which was the land of his ancestors, the land of myths and fairy tales, proved to be an utter disillusionment and shock for him.

Key words: invaded, landscape, bewildered, civilization, administration

The present paper aims at analyzing Naipaul's outlook about India. According to critics, Naipaul holds a colonizer's perspective. As a man of Eurocentric sensibility and education, he views the Indian sub-continent from the British point of view, which is largely reflected in his 'Indian Trilogy'. In this study an attempt will be made to find out the fine nuances of the author's interpretation of India as an upcoming post-colonial country. It has been found that Naipaul's perspective of the Indian sub-continent evolves with his three consecutive journeys to India and how he gradually matures and accepts the underlying beauty and ingenuity of the Indian civilization by going beyond the apparent facade of poverty and squalor.

Sir Naipaul visited India in 1964, and wrote *An Area of Darkness*. This book, although a non-fictional work of the author, bears a subjective

account of the writer's own experience in Trinidad and India. In this work, the author gives a superficial account of the Indian landscape and bureaucratic system through his fleeting observation during his short stay. His visit to India was an act of search for his roots, an anchorage. India was the land of his ancestors who had left the native land sixty-two years ago, after being hired by British colonizers to work in the sugar estates of Trinidad in the Caribbean island. This unique bond and ambivalent relationship with the Indian subcontinent, at once attracted and repelled the author towards India. During his formative days, India remained an area of darkness for him, since he learnt about his ancestral land only through the scattered goods brought from India and the photographs of Gods and Goddesses framed for worshipping occasionally. He grew up watching the elders of his community clinging on to

Indian ways of life, and they were found attempting to conserve Indian language and culture. The first-generation Indian immigrants in Trinidad held on to Indian language and culture; and assiduously tried to abstain from using foreign language and accepting creole culture in Trinidad. Selwyn Cudjoe in his book, *V.S.Naipaul: A Materialistic Reading*, poignantly relates the condition of rustic Indian labourers and forefathers of the people like Naipaul and other people from Indian descent in the Caribbean. He writes:

“Unable to converse with their elders, the children began to see them as “rustic oddities”, exiled forever from the land of their birth.” (Cudjoe 83) The references of the Indian Community carrying and preserving Indian legacy in Trinidad can also be found in Peggy Mohan’s *Jahaji* (2008) in which *Deeda (Parvati)*, becomes the votary of rich ‘aji’ culture in Trinidad and spreads the legacy of *Bhojpuri* dialect through her recital of *Sada-Birji Aur Saranga Ke Kisse*.

In India, Naipaul found that people have already shunned their primitivism and are increasingly using modern gadgets for the traditional acts like lighting lamps in diwali. This transformation, at once, bewildered the author when he compared it with the age-old practices in Trinidad. He elaborates in *An Area of Darkness*: “I heard that in Bombay they use candles and electric bulbs for the diwali festival, and not the rustic clay lamps, of immemorial designs, which in Trinidad we still use... the decay of the old customs and reverences saddened me” (38). Back in India, he was nervous about his two different characteristic features. The first one is his loss of uniqueness which formed the basic characteristic feature of his personality so far in Trinidad and in London. In India, he was apprehensive about the prospect of completely assimilating with his surroundings. Further, his inability to speak and express with ease added to the existing malaise, this made his position a peculiar one and compelled him to view this land of his ancestors from the lens of the colonizer. He, at once, became aware of the dirt and filth of the cities and grew critical about the rigidity of the caste system, even after so many years of freedom. This state of

India saddened him and made him feel disenchanting. He asserts: “three generations and the lost language lay between us.” (AD 150) A famous Indian poet and critic, Nissim Ezekiel in his article, “Naipaul’s India and Mine” commented on the writer’s tainted and prejudiced view about the land of his forefathers, which he had romanticized to a large extent. He writes:

For Mr. Naipaul as a child, the India of such artifacts and of the persons related to them, a few of whom he portrays, was “featureless.” It was an area of darkness. After his journey he found that “something of darkness remains, in those attitudes, those ways of thinking and seeing, which are no longer mine.” His darkness is peopled, packed with a kind of life which is death, a negation, distortion and degradation from which he is glad finally to escape. He says at the end of the book that he is sorry to have had the experience, that it has broken his life in two. (Ezekiel 193)

Naipaul firmly believed that British imperial masters have violated the purity and the sanctity of Indian culture, yet they have enhanced the Indian landscape with their constructive efforts. He presented a different perspective about the act of colonizers, and writes: “It is still through European eyes that India looks at her ruins and her art.” (AD 217)

He visited India for the second time during the Emergency of 1975. By this time, although analytical, still his stand became more sympathetic in delving deeper into the malaise of this agonized sub-continent. In his wonderfully written non-fiction, *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977), Naipaul vividly discusses the recurring invasions of India by the foreign rulers and its indelible impact on the civilization that he addresses as ‘wounded’. While discussing the writer’s approach in writing this work, Cudjoe rightly points out, “...*India: A Wounded Civilization* is the frantic and frenetic outpouring of a man who is primarily concerned with dealing with the problem of his own identity by confronting with his ancestral home, a man undecided about his own subjectivity and about those with whom he comes

into contact" (182). In this work, Naipaul tries to comprehend the historical past of India and tries to relate it with the contemporary social conditions. In his earlier non-fiction about India, *An Area of Darkness*, he used a lacerating style for the description of India in the post-independence period and employed his pungent humour and biting satire at many places. In *India: A Wounded Civilization*, his attitude underwent a change and gradually mellowed down with the development of insight into the history of the sub-continent, profuse with multiple invasions and wars. In the beginning of this work, he acknowledges the folly of holding a judgmental stand in the earlier work and writes:

"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." (40)

Naipaul targets the fanaticism prevalent in the attitude of the Indian populace and considers it as the root cause of all the problems that India was apparently facing despite achieving independence for nearly three decades. He considers the state of emergency as "A situation reflecting India's deeper moral crisis." (as qtd. in Cudjoe, p. 180). He calls 'Hindu ideals' as 'Indian violence' which even the indoctrination of Mahatma Gandhi and numerous other foreign invasions couldn't eradicate. Naipaul equates the anarchy and disorder in India with the persisting chaos in the African sub-continent. He strongly suggests that English colonial disciplining, Muslim invasions and brutal communal violence in India failed to bring back the order in the lives of Indians, who inevitable chose to resort to cruelty and violence. The 'age-old disorder' always lies hidden behind the apparent facade of stability and disorder. In addition to this, he considers 'Hinduism' as the root cause or the primal problem behind the anarchy existing in Indian society. He points out that "the feudal economic arrangement supported by a religious system keeps millions of Indians tied to their masters." (*India: A Wounded Civilization* 98)

Naipaul holds the concept of 'Karma' and 'Dharma' as responsible factors behind the apparent social disorder. He asserts that India is so absorbed in its old ways that it is impossible for Indian minds to dislodge the unnecessary baggage of customs and traditions. He is extremely critical about the servile adherence to the old ways which he was sure to bring more "darkness" as its ultimate outcome. He writes: "...that of a decaying civilization where the only hope lies in further swift decay." (191)

Naipaul's last link to this 'Indian Trilogy' is *India: A Million Mutinies, Now*. This book, too, carries the mark of British imperial ideology, clearly evident in his earlier non-fiction on India. Here, we find the testimony of Naipaulian self-conscious style and his idiosyncratic attitude about the land of his ancestors. In this work, the author seems to be more critical and clinical in his analysis of Indian history, especially the military uprising of 1857, which he refers to as a "mutiny", not a revolution or a war. Similar strand of thoughts continues in his writing throughout where we read him belittling all the path-breaking historical events in India. He avers that Indian people are caught in the nation's history and their traditional social order. Naipaul opens this work with a vivid description of mud and squalor present in the North Indian town. He, further, appreciates the economic development of the overcrowded city of Bombay. Naipaul lashes out at the evils of Naxalite movements in India under the leadership of a Bengali Naxal activist, Charu Muzumdar. He opines that Dalit activists like Namdeo Dasal do not have any ideological base for their Black Panther Foundation and they only copy the philosophy of anti-racial movements in the U.S.A. He believes that the development of this country is always threatened by decaying ideologies followed by the myopic fundamentalists in the country. Through his rich linguistic resources and the application of a vision trained to locate the lacunae of any civilization, Naipaul develops a satirical work on India for his western readers. A good number of his western admirers were already expecting to read about the failure of this ancient civilization. Like Naipaul, they too liked to believe that the Indian-subcontinent was best suited to be governed and

ruled as per western ideologies rather than left to be developed by the native government.

Throughout the book, and even till the last chapter which he names "The House on the Lake: Return to India", the author remains skeptical about the achievement of his ancestral land from the time it gained its independent status. The description of a corrupt boatsman extracting exorbitant fees from a foreign traveler reasserts the same theme of tainted machinery, as has been delineated in the opening section of *An Area of Darkness*, where he describes the embittered experience of greasing the palms of a corrupt custom officer at Bombay airport. Naipaul also harps on his favourite theme of people from colonized countries, mimicking their former masters, in terms of the customs and practices. He acts as the spokesperson of the Western dogmas and talks against the third world countries and their ideologies in an extremely nonchalant way.

The literary contents of all the works included in "Indian Trilogy" are dazzling pieces of prose by a literary giant, yet they seem to be unfinished and open-ended. Although Sir Naipaul exposes the follies of Indian civilization and magnifies the loop-holes of the present administrative and bureaucratic system, he does not offer any solution to rectify the follies of the system. In spite of being fine literary works, they sound like the anguished cry of an idiosyncratic idealist who is bewildered to find the reality of his ancestral land far removed from his imagination. C.D. Narasimhaiah, Professor of English at the University of Mysore writes about Sir Vidya's depiction of India in the following manner: "Naipaul is largely correct in his observation of life on the surface, yet he has not shown any conspicuous ability to penetrate the deeper layers of the Indian minds...It is a picture of India as Naipaul sees it....caricatures of societies depicted as "half-made" in comparison with Europe." (as qtd. in Iyer, p.93)

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