



Response to India in V. S. Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness*

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Abstract

V.S.Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness* is a cogent account of how Naipaul's imaginary about India jostles with reality subsequent to coming to this country. Corruption, nepotism, general apathy to perform duties which Naipaul sees strewn at every part of the country is sufficient enough to ruin his fantasy. The horror awakened in the mind of Naipaul is that of Kurtz and Marlow in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The problem of Naipaul at his first visit to India is that he tries to attach himself too much to India, but cannot. All the time India appears before him a distant reality. It is he who feels the difficulty at heart to separate him from the observed. Ultimately he is totally lost in delusion. India leftovers a mystery to him as it did to Mrs. Moore and Adela in Forster's *A Passage to India*. India is left to him as 'an area of darkness' as it has been since the days of his boyhood in Trinidad. Naipaul's writings dealt with the cultural bewilderment of the Third World and the problem of an outsider, a feature of his own knowledge as an Indian in the West Indies, a West Indian in England and a itinerant intellectual in a post-colonial world.

Key Words: Corruption, nepotism, general apathy, cultural confusion, post-colonial world

The greatest expatriate writer of the world at modern times V. S. Naipaul out of his 'fear of extinction' which he actually inherited from his father produces a good number of fictions and travelogues which are the straight outcomes of his world wide tours and travels. Tormented by an expatriate's quandary, a search without end for some certainties, Naipaul a Trinidadian born of Indian

origin, makes a journey to India, his unique mother country in 1962. He spends here nearly about a year. The product of this sojourn is *An Area of Darkness* (1964), 'less chronological and documentary, and more concerned with locating metaphors for Naipaul's individual odyssey as a writer than with unraveling the country's mysteries.

The textual echo of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* within Naipaul's first Indian descriptive resonates beyond the title's reference. It also serves as Naipaul's search into the textual unconscious writing's illegal postcolonial potentialities. The theme of darkness is recurring in British writings on India. In this context David Rubin's *The Greater Darkness* and Nirad C. Chaudhuri's piece '*Universal Darkness*' may be referred to. But Naipaul's 'darkness' is a bit alien, alien in the sense when he makes his first visit to this country, he not interest in him an Indian which was clearly a Trinidad-born one.

During his stay in Trinidad with the transplanted Indian communities at his boyhood days, he shaped an imaginary thought of India and he carried it all along within him as his 'el dorado'. But coming to this country in 1962 for the first time his imaginary mother country clashes with the realism here frustrating his hope of the extinction of his sense of rootlessness. His visit to India hammers down the last nail to the coffin of his search for roots. He has no hope but to think that India cannot be his country.

Naipaul's experiences of his first sojourn in India which are noted in *An Area of Darkness* burn up countless controversies and contradictory opinions among the critics living all over the world. Naipaul comes to India with a prearranged set of ideas about imaginary India shaped by the experience of casual contribution in Hindu ceremonies and memories of artifacts' and other things of his grandfather's relocation.

These thoughts gathered from community-life led in Trinidad make in Naipaul a dialectic form which eventually makes him a new figure of cosmopolitanism entrenched in the cultural mixture of a post-colonial metropole. The boiling heat of Bombay and Delhi during his first visit to India creates approximately a 'hysteria' in Naipaul and all his pre-set ideas of the land become flattened to a mere vision. Indian realities by no way appear before him as healthy and unblemished.

India is to him is the India he dreamt to see after coming here. His very first landing on India's soil shatters his preset ideas and he is wake to an utter dismay that reflects the colonial self still dominating over his mind.

But Naipaul's reconstruction of his imaginary India cannot be pitied alongside his observations of his first visit to the country. His experience gives him an imaginative shock which urges him to adapt his mission of self-definition as a writer. *An Area of Darkness* is a convincing account of how Naipaul's imaginary about India jostles with reality after coming to this country. Corruption, nepotism, general apathy to perform duties which Naipaul sees strewn at every part of the country is sufficient enough to ruin his fantasy. The dismay awakened in the mind of Naipaul is that of Kurtz and Marlow in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The difficulty of Naipaul at his first visit to India is that he tries to attach himself too much to India, but cannot. All the time India appears before him a far-away realism. It is he who feels the difficulty at heart to separate him from the experiential. Finally he is totally lost in illusion. India remains secrecy to him as it did to Mrs. Moore and Adela in Forster's *A Passage to India*. India is left to him as 'an area of darkness' as it has been since the days of his boyhood in Trinidad.

An Area of Darkness is one of Naipaul's hardest attempts to come to terms with the problem of identity. The book is a detailed investigation of one part of Naipaul by the other, the Indian acts as data, the Western the microscope. Naipaul's writings dealt with the cultural confusion of the Third World and the problem of an outsider, a feature of his own experience as an Indian in the West Indies, a West Indian in England and a nomadic intellectual in a post-colonial world.

Naipaul in his own life suffers from the experiences of 'a double exile'. His grandfather long ago had to leave India and went to Trinidad as indentured labourer. There he became settled within Indian communities and led a life in banish. By the time Naipaul visits India he can still well recollect his Trinidadian experiences. Again he had to go to London at the age of eighteen leaving their Trinidadian exile. In Trinidad the indentured labourers were exposed to cultural patterns imported from England. So when Naipaul came to England the difference he felt was not in culture, other than in his adaptation to it. For in Trinidad he was fostered in imported colonialism, but in England he is

located in the very home of colonialism. Therefore the first thing subsequent to coming to England he had to do was to learn to be blinded of his legacy. His arrival in London makes him emotion a rootless. His chartered journey to London cut off his link with Hindu inheritance. Now the real quandary appears –his past collapsing before him and the opportunity of a new set of culture appearing a far-away reality. It is first mystery of arrival in his life. A Caribbean by birth, an Indian by heritage, a down-right colonial by culture, Naipaul, when visits India in search of his latent place, it is very natural India appears to him a void, a unimaginative area of darkness.

But the darkness Naipaul sees in India is not the darkness in India itself. It is the darkness having frozen in Naipaul since the days of his Trinidad life. The darkness of India is the long-preserved darkness of Naipaul's mind. Naipaul as an emigrant carries his source of darkness within him. His India is not the India he visits. For his India was an el dorado born out of some imported ideas of indentured labourers living far away from India.

An Area of Darkness is a travelogue which narrates a vision for a traveler who is constantly haunted by a sense of rootlessness. Unable to become close with his Trinidadian origin, indifferent to his foster culture Naipaul makes his visit to India with a hope to find out his resting place at last. But when the hope of such a writer shatters, it is quite natural for him to create some harsh comments next to those who cannot fulfill his hope. There are a lot of critics who have duly tried to judge the mind-set of the author behind making such harsh commentary against India and its realities. N. Sharada Iyer has stated his reason for Naipaul's nauseous attitude towards Indian reality-“Naipaul repeatedly tries to impose his personalized, romanticized picture of India on the reality, and when the reality militates against his pre-conceived notion he allows his description to slip into an exercise in banter, unwarranted moralizing and misplaced criticism” (Iyer 88).

Naipaul's visit to India only confirms what he had been thinking so far of his land of childhood as an area of darkness. He cannot bridge up his separateness from India. Therefore before taking the flight from India he feels no hesitation to express his approval of being a colonial with no a past. That a colonial forever lives within Naipaul becomes true even in Naipaul's own rude reaction in the seminar held in Jaipur in 2002, which was the first ever festival of letters on such a large scale

on At Home in the World. “At Neemrana, where the invites ‘retreated’ for a literary exchange, Sir Vidya was rude to Nayantara Sehgal, called her concern with colonization banal and was, in turn, called obnoxious by Ruchir Joshi” (web). Removedness from the country of origin and adaptation to the cultures of the adopted country begets a distinctive perspective of colonization in the Third World emigrant writer. Such novelists often treat colonization as a significant subject in their works. Wherever they visit, their dangerous eyes always are in search of the impacts of ex-colonies on the natives there. Born and brought up in colonies Naipaul can by no means tremble off his colonial nerves altogether.

The colonial courage is so strengthened in Naipaul that he questions the relevance of the eternal art and culture of India. According to Naipaul “the Taj Mahal is beautiful. Transported slab by slab to the United States and re-erected, it might be completely admirable. But in India it is a building wastefully without a function” (An Area of Darkness²²⁰). Even he goes so far to call India’s civilization as “Indian schizophrenia” (An Area of Darkness²²⁹). Naipaul’s basic mistake is that he takes the shrub for the woods. In fact he arrives in India with an attitude that he travels another British colony. He does not as a result like the Indian tendency of evaluating the material from a moral point of view, the outer with an inner scale of measurement. The difficulty of Naipaul is that he tries live within his experiences in the new land on one hand, other than he survives on a reminiscence of old experiences. As a result the assessment of the first experiences is intensely aggravated by that of the latter.

His explanation of Indian ‘Varna’ is an example of such a challenging experience. According to Naipaul categorization of ‘Varna’ in the Gita is unfashionable today. But Naipaul cannot catch the point behind Lord Krishna’s categorization which is based upon the inner truth the ‘Guna’ intensifying the excellence of ‘Karma’ (activity). That is why India hides itself in darkness to Naipaul. Naipaul bangs the Indians for living on the past, but none can deny the fact that only those who have a past, can live on it.

Naipaul belongs to Indian ancestry; he is fundamentally a foreigner in his visits to this country. He lacks the prophet power to read India in its right spirit. Even Naipaul himself expresses

his doubt at a crucial point of his first visit to India: Was it my colonial, Trinidad American, English-speaking prejudice which could not quite accept as real this imposition, without apparent competition, of one culture on another (*An Area of Darkness* 203).

Naipaul's position is very similar to that of a colonial foundling who is forever in search of a confidence which is nothing but a distant reality. His reactions to India's realities are exasperating to many a critic, specially the Indian ones. From Trinidad he comes to India via England in search of a kind of 'metropolitan largeness'. Failure to find it in India, he thinks it may live elsewhere, in Europe or America.

Even Naipaul himself has confessed it in one of his interviews with Andrew Robinson - "Yes, it's (*An Area of Darkness*) about me really, being an Indian immigrant in Trinidad" (Robinson 10). It is clearly true that anybody who is not in Naipaul's position can understand his problem fully. But when an author who is himself not aware of something properly, yet he reacts, it is obviously that his reactions must make some counter reactions. His Indian responses in his first visit to the country as recorded in his first travelogue are such reactions producing so many counter-reactions.

Naipaul should have consideration for once that in spite of the beating and exploitations done to India by the British for hundreds of years, Indians have not broken down. Naipaul's accusation of India's mimicry of the west is nothing but his 'fantasy'. "We have a tradition; an inheritance to keep us going even the west has tried to annihilate us economically" (Masih 147). Sometimes Naipaul is criticized for his detailed accounts on Indian realities as a orator of the Ministry of Information of the Union Government of India. Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness*, the problem of Naipaul remains where it had been even after his visit to India. His desperate attempt to come out of the cocoon of colonialism ends in smoke when he has to take a flight from this country with a repentance in mind, "It was a journey that ought not to have been made; it had broken my life in two" (*An Area of Darkness* 289). Therefore his search for his roots in Trinidad as well as in India come to an end with a realization there can be no going back and he cannot 'be what he had ceased to be'.

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