

Synopsis of

V. S. Naipaul's Responses to India In Evolution

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In the introductory chapter my subject under the present title requires a little explanation to keep it from going elusive to views. V. S. Naipaul has written several novels in which his Indian responses are only indirect and allusive. This dissertation does neither purposely include nor exclude it. Naipaul too does not willingly make out the case of India in his novels. He paints a different land which is not actually India in sharp contrast to the vision of Rushdie whose roots are in India. Naipaul has never visited India before 1962, the year of Chinese Aggression. After his first visit to India he repeats it several times. Each visit paid at a crucial point of the present Indian history gives him reason to write an account on a very different impulse. The work done here is to recapture the story of this impulse at each stage. This is the one luminous side of this work. There is of course another side, perhaps no less interesting than the first – the side of objective evolution of his study of India. The India he sees at his first visit which is taken under quite a different urge cannot encourage him much with an intention of writing about the country. But in the other successive visits there are writing motivations, motivations changed under the direct impact of changes in India. The changes are obviously not unlinked. This linkage is evaluated in this work also.

Naipaul is from the beginning a controversial writer as lately Salman Rushdie has been. But Naipaul's controversial element is not basically related to India, but related to religious-ethnic varieties, more acutely to his approach to a major Faith. Salman Rushdie's famous book *Midnight's Children* gives a grave and frustrating picture of India. The country is projected there as a land of "despondency" and "hopelessness". Viney Kirpal has said, "By contrast, the expatriate Rushdie has concentrated on the pessimistic image of his lost motherland" (Kirpal 85). But to Naipaul the traditional Indian culture and faith, though these are age old, are tolerant like Christianity. It is tolerant in the sense,

the traditions in India continue in spite of confrontation in any form. This controversy in his writings has not thoroughly been explored in the Indian perspective.

Naipaul himself says, "...my books stand one on the other, and that I am the sum of my books." (Naipaul, "Two Worlds", Nobel Lecture delivered on 7th December, 2001). Therefore for the study of Naipaul's responses to India, surely we are to depend on his books written on India. He has also stated, "I had to travel to India because there was no one to tell me what the India my grandparents had come from was like" (ibid). But later his frequent visits to the country produce a different result. It is a fact that in the Third World immigrant writings "journey motif" always stands as an important factor. Frequent journeys represent a transition on the part of the author from one state of existence to another. Rather it can be better described - an expatriate writer always journeys from "a state of innocence to a state of experience". Naipaul's frequent visits to India produce three significant travelogues - *An Area of Darkness* (1964), *India : A Wounded Civilization* (1977) and the last one - *India : A Million Mutinies Now* (1990) — which are known as Naipaul's "Indian trilogy". These three books contain Naipaul's direct experiences of India after coming to the land and spending a lot of time among the Indians.

In spite of his close acquaintance with Indian life covered by three purposeful visits, Naipaul's account of India in these works cannot claim exhaustive knowledge of India. Indians living anywhere all over the world become revealed to him either from close reading of old neglected materials or from direct acquaintances with regions outside India covered by tours. This imposes on him a style of approach virtually different from his direct approach to Indian sub-continent. This difference requires to be identified and this is sought to be done in

the present work. Naipaul's responses to India are dispersed over his other writings too. This has been discussed in a separate chapter.

The Muslim World appears to be neglected, when Indian Muslims are not taken into account. Even the ultimate sources of Islam Arabia do not figure in Naipaul's perceptive notice. It has been thoroughly explored by Dr. R. N. Sarkar in his book *Islam Related Naipaul* (2006). Even Patrick French's *The World Is What It Is* (2008), which aims at covering Naipaul's travel-accounts, has ultimately turned into almost a biography. Neither Dr. Sarkar nor Patrick French does take into account Naipaul's responses to the Muslims from the author's Indian viewpoint. India is a major area where Muslims are typically Indians. Naipaul's close acquaintance with those people in India helps him form an idea of Muslim belongingness to the main stream of Indian culture; particularly his visit to Lucknow confirms it.

Naipaul's response to India was confined to his Trinidad experience of Indian people, a transplanted Indian community before 1962. In 1962 he comes to be in close touch with India, the original homeland of the Trinidad Indians. Therefore the line of evolution of Naipaul's responses to India starts from Trinidad experience, but cannot remain confined to that area alone. His personal contact with Indian people in India marks out a further evolution in his ideas and impressions, yet still further gets qualified by two more successive visits. Again the elusive impact of Indians outside India upon his mind and some of the very interesting Indian characters belonging to his novels dealing with other areas extend his response to a further developed direction. This is the linear evolution of Naipaul's responses to India. There is a further psychological evolution in his mind. The reflection of India from time to time saves itself into some sort of sympathetic vision, though very subtle in kind, but

its existence is unquestionable. This point more or less may be abstract and psychological. The probe into this aspect in this work, though not neglected, permeates the writing pattern itself.

The second chapter of the thesis is on the theoretical background of Naipaul's travel – narratives in respect of his Indian travelogues in particular. Travel – narrative with its axiomatic change in role of narration in post-colonial set- up has challenged the older concepts of “home” and fixed positionality as something “stable and discrete”. It is seen that in Naipaul's Indian travelogues his responses to the land change from the country's monocultural version of identity to its trans-cultural and trans-positional identity in varied strata of evolution. A tension of attraction and repulsion always works in the mind of a post-colonial traveler. It also acts in Naipaul while travelling India which is a land of his forefathers. James Clifford in his “Notes on Travel and Theory” puts stress on the pleasure of the traveller's orientation, of knowing where one is while travelling. In the light of Clifford's view, it is to be stated that Naipaul's Indian travels bring forth a lot of orientation in his views towards the country and ultimately leave him as a changed man regarding his attitude to India. The chapter also takes into account a comparative study between Naipaul's responses to India and those of a few major Indian writers.

The third chapter of my thesis under the present title is on one of the author's major India related works *An Area of Darkness*. Naipaul's response to India in this book is very significant in this respect as it is his first reactions to India after coming to the land itself. Naipaul comes to pay his first visit to India in 1962 and it is a period of crisis in Indian history due to the Chinese aggression. He comes to the country with the idea that he should for once at least see the place where his forefathers once lived. He at first cannot decide

whether to write anything on his tour to India. Several months later he almost impulsively tries to recollect the memories and to see whether they can be arranged into order. This attempt of writing about India just in the context of India is reflected in his first India related book *An Area of Darkness*. Less chronological and documentary, the book is far more concerned with locating metaphors for Naipaul's personal odyssey as a writer than with explicating the subcontinent's "mysteries". The textual echo of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* within Naipaul's first Indian narrative resonates beyond the title's allusion.

His first sojourn in this sub-continent provides him a creative shock. His experiences in this first visit to India are not pleasant enough, yet the pains he suffers here, the unpleasant problems he faces here, the unhappy experiences he bags here – may it be in Delhi or in Simla or in Kashmir or in any other part of this country, are no doubt strong incentives for a creative writer like Naipaul to vent his ideas about India in this travel-book, though it is merely an early stage of his thinking about India. Naipaul's reconstruction of his imaginary India cannot be pitied against the observations of his 1962- sojourn until the narrative has negotiated yet another category that can potentially intrude upon his mission of self-definition as a writer. Naipaul has a clear sense of the difference between travel writing and writing novels, but in *An Area of Darkness* the distinction gets increasingly blurred. His very first landing on India's soil shatters his pre-set ideas about the land and he is awakened to an utter horror: "...It was like being denied part of my reality.....recognition of my difference was necessary to me" (Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness* 45-46). Naipaul feels a revulsion towards India. Corruption, nepotism, general apathy to perform duties Naipaul sees strewn at every part of India. These are sufficient enough to ruin the fantasy of the author carefully preserved in him from his early childhood in Trinidad.

Naipaul's account of India in *An Area of Darkness* is his hardest attempt to come to terms with the problem of identity. One can say this book is a detailed investigation of one side of Naipaul's nature by another, the Indian supplying the data, the Western the microscope. In the present book Naipaul appears sceptical of Indian Art and Culture. Everywhere he finds the mimicry of the British. Naipaul puts stress on the fact that India is traditionally a culturally blind country. Actually Naipaul has lost his own identity. He arrives in India with an attitude that he is visiting another British Colony expecting it to be similar to his own island of adoption. His Trinidadian upbringing and Western education have made him a colonial without a country, an international personality and a product of an empire that has withdrawn already. That is why India hides itself in darkness to Naipaul. Actually the travelogue brings forth a clear division of experience into broad categories of what is comprehensible and what is not. The area of darkness suggests Indian sensibility which is impenetrable for him.

The fourth chapter of my thesis takes into account Naipaul's another important India related book *India: A Wounded Civilization*. Though the travelogue was published in 1977, Naipaul began to write this narrative during 1975 when he took his second visit to India. Accidentally the time of his second visit is also an Emergency period. What is very significant to note that from one Emergency in 1962 to another different type of Emergency in 1975 Naipaul's experience of India marks a qualitative change. In his second book on India Naipaul is neither too soft nor too bitter in his response, though in *An Area of Darkness* he appears as an undaunted critic of India with all its defects and loopholes. From one journey to another to India Naipaul's attitude to the land passes through an evolutionary change. To support this view I quote two different passages from two different texts – one from *An Area of Darkness* and another from *India: A Wounded Civilization*:

It was a journey that ought not to have been made; it had broken my life in two.

(Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness* 289)

India is for me a different country. It isn't my home and cannot be my home; and yet I cannot reject it or be indifferent to it; I cannot travel only for the sights. I am at once too close and too far. (Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization* Foreword)

While scrutinizing the several suppressed Third World histories, in the present travelogue Naipaul has been rediscovering his own ancestral Indian civilization. Keeping aside his earlier horrified obsession with "Public defecation" and total "Indian negation", in his second book on India, Naipaul's interest rests on ancient Indian civilization, its culture, art and literature. Actually Naipaul thus tries "to arrive at a kind of self-therapy by forging a new relationship with a violently rejected past" (Devi 41).

Naipaul's Indian odyssey is actually a journey from darkness to light. Naipaul differs from his earlier method of study of India in *An Area of Darkness* by a major shift from the people to the minds of the people. Naipaul thinks Mahatma Gandhi as an icon in his *Area of Darkness*. There he uses Gandhi's observations about India to bolster his own initial perspective upon the sub-continent. But in his second book Naipaul finds a defect in Gandhi's zeal for bringing reformation in India. He criticizes Gandhi for his stand against untouchability but not against the caste system. To him Gandhi brings forth political movement in India, but he can never rise above his Hindu sentiment. His movement is also semi-religious. In *India : A Wounded Civilization* the wound recognized by the author is not so much caused by foreign intervention as by the nation's adherence to Hinduism. It prohibits the Indians to have an objective view of the world. So, Indians cannot detach themselves from the Hindu past. In his first visit to India Naipaul has gained no idea about

India's civilization, neither was he in a mood to find it out. After taking next few trips to India, he becomes able to detect that India has a very old civilization that has become diseased or wounded for becoming an easy prey to foreign invaders. Naipaul's attitude to India's art definitely undergoes an evolution during his repeated visits to this land. His first visit to Vijayanagar as recorded in *An Area of Darkness* is "a mournful contemplation of Hinduism's last stand against the Moghuls" (Chaudhary 105). Even he ignores the Taj Mahal as irrelevant. But Vijayanagar revisited in *India : A Wounded Civilization* bears a different response from the author: "... And its ruins today, in that unfriendly landscape of rock and boulders of strange shapes, look older than they are, like the ruins of a long superseded civilization" (Naipaul, *India : A Wounded Civilization* 06).

The fifth chapter of the thesis moves to a further step in the evolution of Naipaul's responses to India. It is set to examine India as presented by the author in his third travelogue *India : A Million Mutinies Now*. Naipaul's travelogues follow a pattern of development in thoughts and ideas. Each of his writings is closely related to others, but each has its free standing-strength as a genuinely independent exploration. When Naipaul comes to visit India in 1988, he is altogether a changed man. His study of India is now more encouraging. The third book of Naipaul's Indian travels is written with his earlier books on India in mind and is therefore another re-seeing of what had been wrongly judged in the past. In his earlier travels to India in 1962 and in 1975 he sought here a tradition, but found only decay and chaos. By the time of his third visit to this country Naipaul's attitude and mindset have changed to accept that life cannot be without changes. *India : A Million Mutinies Now*, the most voluminous travelogue of Naipaul is vastly populated with people from various walks of life, with all their ideas, attitudes and thinkings as reflected in their interviews with the author. The author explicitly builds up in the structure of the book the point that in the late 1980s

he has returned in a different spirit to the places he wrote about twenty-seven years before in his controversial piece *An Area of Darkness* and then again in 1970s, in *India: A Wounded Civilization*. The interfering artistic ego found in the narrative of 1964 becomes mellowed when Naipaul appears as an innocuous and generous observer of the truths in *India : A Million Mutinies Now*. Quite naturally in Naipaul's voice it is heard, "the idea of freedom has gone everywhere in India" (Naipaul, *India : A Million Mutinies Now* 517).

The third book about India bears a special significance as there Naipaul has written something more than India which he has neither thought of nor intended to write about in his earlier two books. *India : A Million Mutinies Now* is a book in which Naipaul has created a pattern out of his double vision. The book maintains a wonderful balance between the interiority of Naipaul's experience and the external experiences that he comes to face in this country. While the earlier two books about India take into account the sweeping generalizations, the dazzling macro-judgement, *India : A Million Mutinies Now* settles for the cozy, macro view in which India appears as broad as it is. He states that the socio-political disturbances and the failed attempts of revolution are actually part of India's growth. The "million mutinies" raising head at different parts of the country are not examples of its failures. These are rather an evidence of how the spirit of freedom and self-consciousness has been engulfing the countrymen gradually. Naipaul has no hesitation to confess: "What was hidden in 1962, or not easy to see, what perhaps was only in a state of becoming, has become clearer" (Naipaul, *India : A Million Mutinies Now* 517). Naipaul's third book on India marks his final stage of the unraveling of the problematic relation between himself and India. While *An Area of Darkness* ends in "Flight", the present book under discussion declares at the end "Return to India". Therefore Naipaul ends the narrative of

India: A Million Mutinies Now with a final, optimistic interpretation of India which is actually rooted in his childhood conception of the country. In the present book Naipaul becomes finally able to say that, 27 years later he has eradicated “the darkness” so far stored in him about India and has shed his “old nerves” in his approach to the Indian history.

The sixth chapter of the dissertation takes into account Naipaul’s response to the Muslim population in India. This chapter takes into account Naipaul’s responses to the Indian Muslims in his three different travelogues in three different ways, though these also record an evolutionary process of change. The chapter cannot take into consideration Prof. Said’s cryptic observation on Naipaul’s reactions to Muslims outside India. It holds a close view of Naipaul’s reorientation of the Muslim population, their roles in the Indian perspective. In Naipaul’s India related books it is seen that Indian Muslims are Indians and have some common Indian characteristics – such as their unrealistic emotional bias in everything, their spiritual overtone beyond matter and their acute community sense. Naipaul has not overlooked such features of Indian Muslims. In India or any other land Naipaul is more a verifier than visionary. He visits Muslim converted areas twice at an interval of more than sixteen years and India thrice. His treatment of Muslims in India is not of vision, but of verification and of patient studies.

In his three India-related books Naipaul’s study of the Muslims has three different areas — Bombay, Lucknow and Kashmir. These three geographical locations appear to project Naipaul’s three redefined responses to Muslim population. Nowhere has he studied it from a communal angle, even not in Bombay, though the Muslims are found there in rage against the Shiv Sena’s anti-Muslim adventurism. Lucknow, Nawab’s capital is the seat of Shia-La Martiniere culture. But Kashmir seems to retain for Naipaul a soft Muslim touch

even in spite of its being ever a controversial conflict-zone with its one part being controlled by India and the other by Pakistan. Occasionally Naipaul appears harsh to the Muslims because of his essential nature – intolerant to any kind of sham or willful rejection of truth in any form — may it be history or science or reason. Kashmir myth seems to him one such trick to sidetrack truth or history. So Naipaul harshly comments:

Yet religion as practiced in the valley was not pure. Islam is iconoclastic. ...should another conversion now occur, should another Law as complete be imposed, in a hundred years there would be no memory of Islam. (Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness* 136-137)

Naipaul's study of Kashmir acquaints him with the emergence of a new generation. Aziz is interesting in his personal capacity. But Nazir must be a different kind of study. Nazir is not merely a person of love for the author; he is also a chain in evolution. Therefore Naipaul's love for Nazir is as good as love for beauty, beauty not confined to the body, but extended to lively human qualities which mark out a stage in evolution.

From his own position in Trinidad as a member of a minority community Naipaul can appreciate another Indian Muslim Youth Anwar who represents an endemic hostility and fighting spirit in the extremely congested, thoroughly unhealthy, generally Muslim dominated areas in Bombay. Anwar thinks that lack of education is the main cause behind young Muslims slipping into crime and violence. The scene changes when Naipaul visits another major Muslim-dominated area in North-India. Naipaul's Lucknow guide Rashid represents Muslim national outlook. His rage is not a communal kind. His rage is for Muslim defeat. Naipaul in his third book on India is more avid in his presentation of the Muslims of Lucknow aristocratic class, because it directly forms part of Indian history. Naipaul's responses to India can be best summed up in the words of Rashid:

I'm an Indian, but the temple is not for me. I'm a Muslim, but in its details my faith cannot be the same faith as the one in Afghanistan or Iran or Pakistan. ... I derive my sustenance from Lucknow. It gives me my sense of identity — the buildings, the monuments, the culture, the relationship. (Naipaul, *India: A Million Mutinies Now* 386)

The seventh chapter is entirely devoted to make a close searching on some of Naipaul's writings which are not directly India-related books, but bear reference to India. India has become so permanent a feature in Naipaul's consciousness that whenever he writes anything, India makes her disguised appearance. Though often denied by the author himself, this is a persistent element undergoing different types of subtlety with the variation of the lines of approach in different fictional or non-fictional works. Naipaul's interest in India explains his interest in other parts of the world and other people. Before Naipaul makes a visit to India, his India was either documentary or reconstructed from the migrated Indians with their customs, characters and struggles. His three successive visits to India in 1962, 1975 and 1988 are occasions to unravel new areas of interests which as a visitor he may have developed in the process of inquiry and acquaintance. Naipaul's acquaintance with India begins from his grandmother's family in Trinidad. Such an acquaintance begets a strong nostalgia in him for India. Therefore whatever love he may have for India, it is only extended from Trinidad.

Naipaul's India outside the country is first Trinidad. It supplies him with materials for all his early novels and then scappily for many other late novels and travel accounts. In his first written novel, though not first published *Miguel Street* (1959) the narrator boy's family represents India backed by some characters. The first published novel

The Mystic Masseur (1957) deals with India in Trinidad. The Hindu Community of Trinidad is recast in this novel. The Elvira-suffrage scene in Naipaul's next published Trinidad novel *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958) is not an unmixed Trinidad-India product, but here India is prominent. All such novels, long or short, which select Trinidad as setting are bound and conditioned by Naipaul's response to colonized Indians. Back to Naipaul's childhood experiences in Trinidad, life reveals primarily a world of Hindu household – a world within home and a world around home. *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) is no doubt a very significant title. In this novel Indians captured abroad suffer piecemeal representation and Naipaul's response to their life is one of a consolidated interest. Even the Muslims painted in the novel represent an Indian community abroad. Naipaul seems to note down in the novel the history of a Hindu household in its evolution from colonial to post-colonial stage. Naipaul's next works *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), *A Way in the World* (1994) and *The Middle Passage* (1962) represent Trinidad which is basically India abroad reconstructed in so many ways and in so many places. These are sometimes fictional and sometimes factual. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* (1967) is more a subtle reaction to Indians settled abroad in the Island of Isabella. Indians settled there are more or less of the nature of those settled in Trinidad and Tobago. Abundant references to Indian elements are found in Naipaul's another novel *A Bend in the River* (1979). *In a Free State* (1969 – 1970) takes into account the state freedom involving behavioral pattern of different people from different areas and people of India as well. Naipaul's study of the Indians in the freedom-areas of Europe and America is quite interesting as noted in this fiction. In Naipaul's two late novels *Half a Life* (2001) and *Magic Seeds* (2004) Indians are mainly captured in Indian settings with a slightly different tone compared to India he visited and Indians he either met or painted in alien perspective.

Naipaul's Indian roots always prompt him to bear in his mind a picture of India while visiting other lands and thereby writing his texts on his experiences of such visits. Every time whenever he starts writing something, his Indian experiences haunt him. Naipaul himself makes a very significant comment about his attachment to India in his writings, "I am at once too close and too far". (Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, Foreword)

The eighth chapter is the concluding chapter of the thesis. Here the style in which Naipaul's responses to India are set forth in an evolutionary process is to be the subject of analysis for the foundation of further discernment and consolidation of ideas. Naipaul's art is his use of language which can quite comfortably carry the thematic load of all his works. Naipaul requires a distance for his artistic feat, for distance lends enchantment to the view. Had he not been all along in Trinidad, he could have missed that India which he painted in *Miguel Street*. It is a fact that Naipaul's responses to India and Indians continue to change in a manner of evolution which I have tried to show in the third and the fourth and the fifth chapters of this dissertation. A frustrated narrator of Indian reality as seen in *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul turns into a close scrutinizer of India's past glory and her present sorry state due to innumerable inner struggles as detected in his last two travelogues on India. India abroad whether in South America, West Indies, Africa or England forms for Naipaul a magic island. His pattern of response also changes. For example, the character of Willie in East Africa in *Half a Life*, Willie in India in *Half a Life* and Willie back in England in *Magic Seeds* — appear to be three different persons. But when all the persons are taken together, a picture can immediately evoke his essential Indianness. Here Naipaul's manner of treatment obviously differs from other major Indian writers - Salman Rushdie, N.C.Chaudhuri and R.K.Narayan. If Rushdie turns towards satire, Naipaul obviously towards humour.

The chapter also takes into account the problem of writing anything about living writers and Naipaul's present stand against writing anything further on India. But whatever Naipaul says of his root, his personal response is ever to self-truth. In India or anywhere his contact is "man to man" — man of any cult, of any community and faith. Naipaul knows better that truth cannot satisfy all, yet truth is truth. In fine I am to state that, though according to a section of critics, Naipaul's is a Hindu response to Hindu India, but basically it is a writer's response to his prospective areas. His visits to India are a personal initiative, yet his response is seldom personal save only his visit to his grandfather's village. His visits are calculatedly disinterested, but not at all indifferent. His visits bear such a keen insight which provides an artistic control over materials. Finally the chapter also leaves a view regarding a separate field of investigation for prospective studies on Naipaul. I draw my conclusion with what Timothy Weiss says:

To Naipaul's credit, even though his sociocultural commentaries have often been criticized for their methodology and insensitive tone, his works have tended to view the world from a consistent position that implies universal human values. (Weiss 74)

His Indian responses are also a part of this implication.

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