

V S Naipaul's Travelogues: A Reassessment



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Abstract

V S Naipaul (1932-2018) was as a popular and prominent writer with a multi- splendours and multi- faceted personality. Apart from novels, letters and social and critical essays, he also wrote travel narratives. The popular three travelogues are related to India; these are: *India: A Wounded Civilization*, *India: A Million Mutinies Now* and *An Area of Darkness*.

In these narratives, Naipaul seems to be sitting on the horns of a dilemma as sometimes he condemns and criticize Indian social system and cultural tradition as well as poverty and illiteracy and at times he appreciates and admires India's high values and subline idea and ideals and enlightened voice and vision. Perhaps he had the British empire in his mind and his rootlessness. He was also in search of his own identity. He was an Indian by blood, a Trinidadian by birth and a resident of England. All this made loss his identity and made him fell a sense of alienation. In this article, a humble effort is made to re-assess the travelogues in the new perspective

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Introduction

V S Naipaul (1932-2018) was one of world's most gifted and glorified writer. Nandita Mannon said about him that he was "Indian by ancestry". Trinidadian by birth and English by education, he remained unable to relate to any one culture. An Indian by blood, Caribbean by birth and an English domicile made Naipaul a writer of international name, fame and honour.

Naipaul wrote some travel narratives on India which need to be reassessed as he viewed India as an imperialist. He was a travelogue writer and his travel narratives gave India a different look and identity. He visited India to search for his own roots; he was dislocated from his ancestral land and became a diasporic writer. In search of his own roots, he travelled thrice to India. He recollected and restored his experience in his travel narratives of his ancestral land. He did not seem sympathetic towards his ancestral land, India which was ruined and looted and booted for several years. Naipaul being a travelogue writer, he needed to be judged how be interpreted particular places, their culture, society, political, social and economic situations; his likes and dislikes. It was not a simple work as Edward Said rightly remarked:

It is more rewarding-and more different-to think concretely, sympathetically and contrapuntally, about others than only about 'us'. But this means not trying to rule others, not trying to classify there or put them in hierarchies, above all, not constantly reiterations how 'our' culture or country is number one. (*Culture and Imperialism*, 62)

In this travelogues, an image of an outsider can be found Indian customs and tradition and socio-culture difficult to digest. He condemned and criticized Indian civilization and found it decayed and dilapidated. He also criticized Indian blindly copying the West, but it was essential to understand that any developing nation tried to follow the developed countries. He criticized the poverty and illiteracy in India and he wanted India to change but he could not think of the idea of Indians following the foreign trends in science and technology.

Naipaul found that the Indians still followed their decayed past as he said;

India is old and India continues, but all the disciplines and skills that India now seeks to exercise are borrowed... India by itself could not have rediscovered or assessed its past... A recently dead tradition, unchanging belief; the creature loss passes unnoticed.

Naipaul observed that India was wounded for more than thousand years by the foreign rule; cultural and historical heritage were destroyed and the nation was still struggling hard for its own theories. He was thrilled at his own findings on India's past. He found something missing in India: Zulfikar Ghosh in "Going Home" (*The Toronto South Asian Review*) commented on the ambivalence of thoughts as he said;

The missing parts of the statue appear to have a vital presence: the starved, absent organs-shrunk, withered, annealed-throb blood fly in the imagination; that which is not there, startles the mind with the certainty of the being; it is an image of amazing contradiction and illustrates the ambiguity of all perception: reality can be composed of absent things, the unseen blazes in our minds with a shocking vividness (*Literary Theory(Re) Reading Culture and Aesthetics*, 75)

Naipaul's firm conviction was that Indians were still in a state of confusions after Independence. They still looked back on their empty civilization of the problems unlike the Europeans as he said:

European renaissance became established when men understood that the past was not living on... India has always sought renewal in the other way, in continuity... While India tries to go back to an idea of its past, it will not possess that past or be enriched by it. The past can now be possessed only by enquiry and scholarship, by intellectual rather than spiritual discipline. The past has to be seen to be deed; or the past will kill (*India: A Wounded Civilization*, 160-161)

In 1967, he concluded at the end in *India: A Wounded Civilization* that the crisis of India was not only political or economic but it was due to the future spoiled and chequered by its decaying civilization as he said, "The Crisis of India is not political: this is only the view from Delhi, Dictatorship or the rule by the army will change nothing, over is the crisis only economics. There are only aspects of the larger crisis, which is that of a decaying civilization, where the only hope lies in further swift decay. I wrote that in 1967, and that seemed to me a blacker time." (221)

From this, we gather an idea that Naipaul viewed India as an outsider. He had in his mind

certain amendments to be incorporated in India. His views on India were imperialistic as he condemned and criticized Indian civilization for having faults and flaws. It can be said that in a way he wanted India to change for betterment and advancement and at the same time he also condemned it of India took ideas from the developed nations. Perhaps, here he seemed to show some confusion with himself.

After Independence, Naipaul visited India and found several drawbacks in India. The people were no longer concerned with and cared for the values of their ancestors. The corruption and crime in the cities were increasing fast with the turmoil and a state of commotion among the people because of their sense of turning away themselves from their own cultural and social values and getting into the mud and mire of materialism and their getting into newness and westernization was difficult.

Naipaul found the amalgamation of the Indian and the Western trends as futile and meaningless. Prakash said to Naipaul, "Because of industrialization and the Green Revolution in the rural areas, a new class of nouveau-riche persons are emerging, and these people are being exposed for the first time to university education, comfortable urban life, stylish living and western influences- materialistic comfort. During this transition period, we are slowly cutting from the moral ethos of our grandfather and at the same time we do not have the westerner's idea of discipline and social justice. At the moment things are chaotic here." (*India: A Million Mutinies Now*, 221) The foreign invasions on the country were responsible for the decaying cultural practices. The problems that Naipaul found during the transitional period in India made him feel that it was a confusing stage for the Indians. On the basis of that situation he tended to express his own views on the cultural decay and downfall in his travel narratives like *An Area of Darkness*, *India, A Wounded Civilization* and *India*, and *A Million Mutinies Now*. In this context, Bruce King rightly remarks on Naipaul's view in his book, *Modern Novelists: V S Naipaul*:

He (Naipaul) can be seen as having projected much of his personal experience on his analysis of the contemporary world: yet while unique his experience is representative of the major social, psychological, political and cultural changes of our time. His views often have the effect of paradox and surprise forcing a re-examination of received opinions. (*Modern Novelists: V S Naipaul*, 201)

The above-mentioned comments of Bruce King make us go through the opinions and views of Naipaul before accepting it as he was of a dual identity. His observation gave India a different identity. Naipaul found that the Indians after Independence realized and recognized the importance of education in English language. He found that Indian's belief that the use of science was not unknown to them. Indians were always after learning and grasping knowledge. He found that there was an Indian scientist, named

Bhasakara who was well acquainted with science. In this connection, Subramaniam told Naipaul, "I personally feel that the scientific tradition is not alien to India. I think that science comes naturally to Indians...I must make it clear that I don't for a moment believe all these other people who run around saying that everything –atom bombs, rockets, aeroplane– was invented by ancient Indians.

(*India: A Million Mutinies Now*, 86)

He also believed that Indians had the false belief of special knowledge of mathematics in ancient days that was something shocking and surprising to the Europeans. Even he found that the knowledge of science was not up to date. Subramaniam further said to Naipaul, "But Indian knowledge became out of date. The measure of that is what Newton wrote in 1660 was not understood or appreciated in India until the middle of the nineteenth century." Raja Ram Mohan Roy accepted for the first time that Indians were still lagging behind and had to struggle for science and education.

In our view, it could be said that Naipaul reflected contradictory ideas in his mind as he was well aware of the changes that had taken place according to the passage of time. He was an outsider to India in his view as he did not understand the country which was invaded for several years and need some time to overcome from its ruins and dilapidations. He condemned India for borrowing the foreign trends and technologies. Somewhat similar to V S Naipaul are Bruce King's views on India's blindly borrowing and following foreign trends and technologies as he said in *Modern Novelist: V.S. Naipaul*:

The world has always consisted of change: it is necessary for people and culture to adapt. This must, however be done creatively, making use of local resources and with planning and hard work rather than by mimicry of the formal colonial powers. (92)

This comment of Bruce King made it crystal clear that the continuous effort over a period of time helped in creating a culture and not an unconscious parody of anyone which would seem rather incoherent. Naipaul also found some confusion about languages in India. He criticized the Indians for blindly carrying on the burden of foreign language. He said that every other ruler in India left his language in the country. He found the national language, Hindi which was known and spoken in most parts of the country was devalued by showing undue importance to the alien languages. He found the English language incongruous for India as he said:

It makes for inefficiency; it separates administration from the village; it is a barrier to self-knowledge. The clerk using English in a government office is immediately stultified. For him the language is made up of certain imperfectly understood incantations, which limit his responses and make him inflexible. So, he passes his

working life in sub-world of imperceptions; yet in his own language he might be quick and inventive. Hindi has been decreed the national language. It is understood by half the country; it can take you from Srinagar to Goa and Bombay to Calcutta. (*An Area of Darkness*, 229)

Naipaul felt (though wrongly) that Indians lagged behind in intellectual capacity; he condemned us for absence of growth and development. He found people in India following the decayed civilization which could not lead them to progress and prosperity. He gave a negative identity to the Indians. He found that Gandhi made people aware of their shortcomings but he failed to give them ideas for facing the challenges individually. He hated poverty prevailing in India and due to his perception of India's backwardness, he said:

The poverty of the land is reflected in the poverty of the mind: it would be calamitous if it were otherwise. The civilization of conquest was also the civilization of defeat; it enabled men, their land. Gandhi awakened India; but the India he awakened was only the India of defeat. (*An Area of Darkness*, 32)

Naipaul's visit to India was also in search of his roots. He made three visits to India and during each of his visits, he wrote travelogues based on his experiences in India. His first travelogue narrative on India was *An Area of Darkness* (2006). In this, he criticized India because of its poverty and illiteracy, he left India calling it unfit for his comfortable stay and sojourn. His second book was *India: A Wounded Civilization* which was written about the Emergency (1975) in India. This time he found India incapable of facing upcoming challenges. In his third book, *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, he found several revolutions with revolutions in the country. He finally found Indians disgusted with their past and wanted changes. To bring about change, people would naturally adapt to modern technologies, education, inventions and share the ideas of developed nations to overcome from its ruins, corruption and exploitation. He had no respect for India's ancient civilization. But Naipaul felt that people adopting such changes were doing mimicry and imitation of others, which limited to his imperialistic view on India. The Indian English poet, Nissim Ezekiel rightly remarked in his article, "Naipaul's India and Mine"; "I am not in fact doubting his veracity, only his approach towards the discovery of the truth. He makes the truth about India seem simple. I don't believe it is simple". (*"Naipaul's India and Mine"*, 3)

The fact is that Naipaul wanted to see the Indian nation modern but he could not absorb the concept of Indians sharing modern views and technologies. He employed contradictory ideas because of his dual identity.

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