

## **Immigrants' Sensibilities in V. S. Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness***

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V. S. Naipaul has emerged as an impressive writer with a luminous mode of expression and a powerful skill of exposition, he has been attempting at fiction, on various subjects drawn from history, colonialism, civilization and socio-political scenarios of the modern world. But in his fictional writing, among various other countries like the Caribbean, West Indies, Africa, and the one and only country that have seized his imagination is certainly India, the homeland of his ancestors. This, of course, reveals his fascination for and his deep interest in India and this becomes all the more significant when we find that after his first visit in 1962, he returns again and again to India. It is also significant to note that after each long visit he writes a novel on India which certainly creates a stir among his readers. Each short novel that he wrote on India like *An Area of Darkness* (1964), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977), and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990) was based on his successive visits to India in 1962, 1975 and 1988 respectively. In each of these novels he appears to give a dismal passion and fascination for India. This, what may be called the love-hate relationship that has been displayed in his novels on India, appears all the more interesting and complicated in his latest novel.

The novel *An Area of Darkness* is based on the visit of Naipaul to India in 1988 repeatedly records his first visit to India in 1962 and as such it shows the progress that India has made during this intervening years as well as the regress and losses India has sustained during two scores of years since it attained Independence.

Naipaul looks into himself and wonders why the “detachment” he had cultivated during the prolonged isolations of his stay in England, deserted him in India. He sees in India's acceptance of England, the typical Indian ability “to retreat, the ability genuinely not to see what was obvious” (188).

He compares and contrasts the British Empires in the West Indies and in India also he attempts to make the difference in his response to the England that he saw in India. He sees India living with the Raj that was long dead. India thus becomes for Naipaul a country that lived

amongst incongruous, “alien ruins” (190) because in India “everything is inherited, nothing is abolished” (194).

From here he moves on to a detailed analysis of literature and its chronicling of the societies of its times. He finds that ‘British’ is very different from the imperial Indian usage of the term (195-201). The latter is a creation of fantasy. It is a concept of “Englishness” that has outlived the Empire. In India, it exists in unending mimicry of the Raj. The Raj itself being classical case of imitation of all that was thought to be “English”, the inheritors of the Raj followed the same pattern. India goes on living with the ruins of the Empire. There are other kinds of ruins that lie across the length and breadth of the country: the ruins of Vijayanagar, the ravages of Muslim rule in the North, and the disjointed idea of history in the minds of the people. The creation in India is built on destruction. There is no continuity and plunder is the main predecessor of creation. With the coming of the British, this discontinuity became most prominent.

The point that calls for an explanation is the difference in Naipaul’s India and the India of his Indian critics. Numerous writers had written about India before Naipaul did, and not always sympathetically. A Beverly Nicholas or a Catherine Mayo could be dismissed for being incapable of understanding India. Their vision could be ignored because they were, after all, *foreigners*. They were not able to know much about India. But with Naipaul, Indians felt betrayed. He was expected to know and to understand. The division of experience had occurred three generations ago. Naipaul was an outsider in India. His critics were outsiders to his experience. Naipaul’s perception and portrayal of India, if seen in this light, is a unique record of the division of sensibility that has become a permanent paradigm of our times.

*An Area of Darkness* is divided into three parts and eleven sub-parts. It also has a prologue – *Traveller’s Prelude A Little Paperwork* and an epilogue *Flight*. The sub-parts are closely linked patterns of his experiences and their examinations. ‘A Resting Place for the Imagination’ provides the background for Naipaul understands of India. ‘Degree,’ ‘The Romancers’ and ‘The Colonial’ are three major aspects of India that he encounters. ‘Degree’ for Naipaul stands as an Indian understanding of himself. String-cots and wooden blocks had lain unused in his Trinidad home for the lack of people of that “caste skill” (AD 29). But that was not so in India. People had accepted work outside the realm of their “caste-skill” and in doing so; they had not forgotten their “degree.” This double realization, instead of protecting the unity of his world, worked in a paradoxical manner and led to a split at a very interior level in his Indian psyche. This “knowledge of degree” which Naipaul finds “in the bones of Indians” make it difficult for them to combat the social confusion and disorder of castes (55). Naipaul finds the incongruities of the “imported mechanics of the new world” being “incorporated into the rule of degree” (56). With this painful realization the first part of *An Area of Darkness* comes to an end.

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The first part is the body from which Naipaul's responses in the second part and the third part of the novel are derived. It marks the first phase in Naipaul's search for a response to India. The result of this search was the discovery of his being an outsider to the realm of responses that could only be either English or Indian.

The second part, which comprises of three chapters, is an exploration. Naipaul offered himself to the experience of India. This part is filled with conversations through which Naipaul attempts to carve out a picture of India. 'A Doll's House on Dal Lake' is the make-believe world of Mr. Butt, Aziz and the khansamah: "Snow White's own men" trying to survive long after 'Snow White' had left (140). These men have no idea of themselves. They continually seek to make commercial benefits. Their concern, hospitality and friendliness have theatrical dimensions. They all want written certificates from Naipaul because they think that these would add to their credibility. Aziz is an expert in the art of pleasing. His foil is the khansamah who has never learnt the art and as a result remains a tormented man. Naipaul's interactions with the khansamah bring out a fine analysis of anger. Naipaul studies the "medieval mind" which could "casually" assess a building as five thousand years old (129). This same capacity facilitated other amnesias. The medieval mind could easily forget the last three to four hundred years of its past: And it was because it was without a sense of history that it was capable of so complete a conversion. Many Kashmiri clan names-like that of Mr. Butt himself-were often still purely Hindu; but of their Hindu past the Kashmiris retained no memory (129).

Naipaul finds the Valley suffering from selective amnesia. The engineer who was showing the valley to Naipaul, drove past the eighth century Awantipur ruins and showed no interest in them. Naipaul observed that the history of the people in the valley began with the history of their conquerors. Amidst the common populace his encounter with the family, its observance of food related rules, the power patterns in the family all at once evoked a Port of Spain memory and Naipaul found that the gap of three generations and of a lost language had been bridged. For a fleeting second he was able to relate to his experience of India.

The third part begins with 'Fantasy and Ruins.' It is Naipaul's direct confrontation with his imagination. He digs up the roots of his imagination and dissects his past experiences: his experiences as a colonial in Trinidad, his experience of England as it existed in Trinidad; his experience of Kipling and other writers on India; and of his idea of India that he had formed in Trinidad. The value of *An Area of Darkness* is that the novel and its critique have documented the confusion and alienation that are the legacies of the Empire. Never before was India presented through a Diasporic vision. Never before had the Indians in India been exposed to the pain and agony of such a vision, so much so, that within India even the veracity of Naipaul's experience was very often questioned.

Naipaul looks into himself and wonders why the “detachment” he had cultivated during the prolonged isolations of his stay in England, deserted him in India. He sees in India’s acceptance of England, the typical Indian ability “to retreat, the ability genuinely not to see what was obvious” (188). He compares and contrasts the British Empires in the West Indies and in India in an attempt to account for the difference in his response to the England that he saw in India. He sees India living with the Raj that was long dead. India thus becomes for Naipaul a country that lived amongst incongruous, “alien ruins” (190) because in India “everything is inherited, nothing is abolished” (194).

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*An Area of Darkness* stands today as the first stage of a Diasporic writer’s problematic relation with the country of his origin: it abounds in confusions and contradictions; there is no potent thesis about India. There are recurrent notes of the writer’s identification with India at a personal level. He did not want India “to sink.” And so, the writer returns with more novels on India attempting an analysis of its problems and pens the growth of his experience in India and with other countries.

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