

## Naipaul's Discovery of India in *An Area of Darkness*

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**Abstract:** V.S. Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness* is a travelogue describing Naipaul's trip through India in the early sixties. It conveys the confusion or the disillusionment of the author on his first visit to his ancestral land. It has all criticism for India--whether its India's National Language, India's Metros, platforms, hotels, the titles of Indian films, Indian tailors, or even the houseboats. Naipaul seems to have a pre-determined conviction of speaking all against India. Even when he appreciates the Indian earth by calling it rich with ancient sculpture, there is a criticism as he says that Indians do not react, do not exclaim on seeing the rich Indian inheritance. He admires Gandhiji's vision, who was critical of India on seeing the beggars and the shameless pundits, and even condemns the insanitary habits of doctors, lawyers, and journalists. On the contrary, he sarcastically ridicules Nehruji by saying that he had a romantic feeling for India, and that is why his writings cannot easily be recognized by others. Naipaul calls India as a country of callousness, inefficiency, and a hopelessly divided country, which weakens to the foreign rule. Naipaul has shared his experiences in three parts: Part I-as a Resting place for the imagination, Part II-As a Doll's House on the Dal Lake, and Part III as Fantasy and Ruins.

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Naipaul agrees with Mohan das Karamchand that, "... India is a country of nonsense," (qtd. in *Area of Darkness*, p.68). In part I-A Resting place for the Imagination in *An Area of Darkness*, V.S. Naipaul condemns the East, reveals the real people which he feels one has read in the books. The writer equates East with filth: "And in the streets there was the East one had expected: the children, the dirt, the disease, the undernourishment, the cries of bakshish, the hawkers, the touts, the glimpses of minarets" (Naipaul, 4).

Naipaul depicts the plight of the Eastern world, not only of India, but of Africa as well. The writer--who saw the beautiful London, finds the Indian scenario unbearable. At the outset, he has a bitter experience at Bombay dock--at the customs. He feels quite perturbed seeing the mismanagement of the officials. For getting the liquor permit, he visits the New Customs office twice. In India, he gets to see the people's perception for work where they gave more importance to their dignity than performing a job. At the Customs office, when he asked a clerk to get him a glass of water he is ignored, for which he feels insulted. He realizes later that, "A clerk was a clerk; a messenger was a messenger" (Naipaul,15). Naipaul criticizes Red Tapism which is a critical problem in India. For getting the liquor permit, the writer gets frustrated going from officers of the custom to the cashier, to the clerk and so on. The author seems to look only into the negative aspects. No other author must have given so horrible description of any country and its people, like the way Naipaul has stated. It seems he has written the book *An Area of Darkness* with a set temperament of criticizing India and its people. It's quite hard to see a positive aspect of India in his book. It depicts a dirty picture of our country-- India with no significance: "More than in people, India lay about us in things: in a string bed or two, grimy, tattered, no longer serving any function, never repaired because there was no one with this caste skill in Trinidad..." (Naipaul, 24).

Naipaul sneers at the Indian customs which he feels are ancient and outdated, and are old and hallowed. He calls it to be an "Indian attitude" who follows the customs inspite of its disintegration. His book *An Area of Darkness* probes into Naipaul's experiences in India which was bitter and horrifying:

To me as a child the India that has produced so many of the persons and things around me was featureless, and I thought of the time when the transference was made as a period of darkness, darkness which also extended to the Land .... And even now, though time has widened, though space has contracted and I have travelled lucidly over that area which was to me the area of darkness, something of darkness remains, in those attitudes, those ways of thinking and seeing, which are no longer mine (Naipaul, 24).

The famous African writer Chinua Achebe, in his fiction, viz., *No longer at Ease, Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, gave a lucid description of the Africans who were at the Crossroads of culture. He depicted the colonial impact which could affect their culture and religion, but could not keep them aloof of their own culture. The force and the magnetism of African culture pulled them to stick to their own beliefs. Likewise, Naipaul gives a description of his father who no doubt had left India, but refused to accept Trinidad. He loved India--its culture, which was same as re-creating an eastern Uttar Pradesh village in Central Trinidad. Naipaul says that his family for quite a long time, followed Indian customs and traditions, and were not tempted by the foreign culture. But admits that gradually, their tastes were changing. They got tempted by the food styles of

others: the Portuguese stew of tomato and onions, and the Negroes' way of yams, plantains, breadfruit, and bananas.

Naipaul accepts to have been influenced by the foreign culture. Neither he admires the house, the dress, the food, and the rituals of the Muslim, nor he found any pleasure in Hindus' religious ceremonies. He asserts that the Indian rituals seemed ridiculous to him. He mocks at the *janaywa*, or thread ceremony of the newborn, he sneers at the custom of shaving the head, and taking up his staff and bundle, and announcing his intention of going to Kasi-Banaras to study. Naipaul recollects this drama which did not end up here, which was followed by his mothers' weeping and begging him not to go. And then a senior member of family initiated and requested, which made him lay down his staff and bundle.

Naipaul shares his feelings which he experiences in London. He could not feel the city to be exciting, rather felt it to be dull and drab. Even though the city dazzled with light, he looks at the sea whose margin littered which one could continue to see until one departed the land. He depicts the isolation and seclusion which he experiences in London. He talks of the materialistic world which could not tempt him. He could not think of the world beyond the brick and asphalt, and the chaos of the railway lines. He says that, "...I was confined to a smaller world than I had ever known. I became my flat, my desk, my name (Naipaul, 38).

Naipaul is horrified to see the plight of India's poverty. He feels that in this country, poverty does not create an urge to anger or improving action, but is an inexhaustible source of tears. He says that as India is the poorest country in the world, every fresh visitor going to Bombay, would be frustrated and annoyed to see the state of India where poor sweep the pavement and spread the mat, and lay down exhausted and malnourished. The author is astonished to see the inequality in India. He contrasts the Indian villages which have narrow, broken lanes with green slime in the gutters, the choked back-to-back mud houses, the jumble of filth and food, and animals and people, with the metro Indian cities especially Bombay. In cities, the prosperity can be seen--the Christmas decorations, illuminated stars hanging out of the windows against the black sky. But, on the other hand, he does not conceive Bombay only as the Marine Drive, Malabar Hill, Kamala Nehru Park, and the Parsi Towers of Silence, but as a city which was intolerable -- the broad, choked, and endless main roads of suburbs, a chaos of shops, decaying balconies, and the 'gay girls' of the Indian newspapers.

Naipaul cites few examples of Indians to ridicule the Indian mentality and conservative ways. He probes into life of Jivan, a thirteen year old boy, who left his village and came to Mumbai for work. He slept on the pavement when he earned fifty rupees a month, and continued to sleep there even when bought a taxi, and earned twenty rupees a day. Naipaul then quotes Vasant who grew up in Bombay slum. He never ate during the day, and this habit remained with him even when he became rich. Naipaul also narrates about two Brahmin brothers in South who began by making envelopes, but became rich by manufacturing leather goods. The author feels strange that in spite of possessing seventy thousand pounds, they continued to make envelopes. Thus Naipaul draws the conclusion that Indians cannot get uprooted from their origins. He expresses the dilemma of the people like Bunty who are at the crossroads of culture. Neither could they adopt the Indian culture, nor could they be a European. In his drawing room, hung the Indian art beside the Picasso lithograph or the Sisley reproduction. He enjoyed both Indian and European food.

Naipaul strongly condemns beggary which he feels has degraded India, and encouraged laziness, idleness, and even crime. He feels that beggary has become an institution, and the beggar, like the priest, has his own function. He is astonished to see the poor children who are especially made blind to seek beggary. Naipaul admits that to have an institution which can provide them honest work, before giving them the meals, is a difficult job.

Naipaul depicts Srinagar--a paradise on earth, as a hell. Sankaracharya Hill, overlooking the Dal Lake which is the most beautiful spots of Srinagar, has been shown as the most horrid place by him. He ridicules the Indian sense of the people who use the lower slopes for defecating without any shame. He ever condemns the bus station in Madras, which is near the High Court, for being one of the most popular latrines. Even he talks of the people walking past the University on the Marina, who without embarrassment, raise their dhoti, piss on the pavement, and then let the dhoti fall. Naipaul sarcastically says that Indians are considered to be the cleanest people in the world--they defecate everywhere--beside the railway track; on the beaches; on the hills; on the river banks; on the streets, and even deny that it exists. The author gives a moral lesson by saying that: By our bad habits we spoil our sacred river banks and furnish excellent breeding grounds for flies....A small spade is the means of salvation from a great nuisance....The man who does not cover his waste deserves a heavy penalty even if he lives in a forest (Naipaul, 72).

Naipaul condemns Indians for their laziness. He feels that for them Labour is a degradation. They would prefer sitting idle for two hours rather than working oneself. He says that, "Divorce of the intellect from body-labour has made of us the shortest-lived, most resourceless and most exploited nation on earth"(Naipaul, 73). Naipaul even quotes Gandhiji who had observed the casual defecation in a veranda at a Congress gathering.

Naipaul has a long list of criticism which seems to be endless. He ridicules the caste system which imprisons Indians. He mocks the rich who are usually fat and healthy, and the poor who are thin and in rags. He

condemns the tailors, the holy men, the politicians, the cadet of the Indian Administrative services, and the businessmen. He considers Indians as coward who cannot risk their lives to save others. He criticizes all symbolic action: the tree-planting week, the smallpox eradication week, the anti-fly week, the children's day, the malaria eradication week, which he feels is worthless and has no significance. He speaks against untouchability and caste system which places the responsibility in the hands of the unqualified, which in turn degenerates the society. He has all contempt for the Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting for the department of Tourism, and Ministry of Transport and Communications. Naipaul condemns inconsistency of Indians. He comments on the formless spirituality and decayed pragmatism of India. He says that the legends in India have become fixed. Mahatma--the revolutionary became a god, and then within twelve months he was forgotten:

For some he was tiny; for one man in Madras he was six feet tall. For some he was dark; for some he was exceedingly fair. Yet all remembered him; many even had personal photographs.... But in India he has already receded; he might have lived in the days when scribes wrote on leaves and strips of brass and people travelled on foot (Naipaul, 84).

In part-II---'A Doll's House on the Dal Lake', Naipaul depicts a hotel called Hotel Liward, which is situated in Kashmir. He shows the conflict which takes place among Butt--the owner of the Hotel Liward, Aziz--the mechanic, Ali--the sweeper boy and the Khansamah--the cook. The author could feel that the market-place had shifted, was in front of the hotel, beyond the lotus patch, beside the old boat that was the pettiest of petty lake shops. When the *shikaras* passed, he could feel as if the buyer and seller would come to blows. The Dal Lake seems to be horrifying by the raised voices, abuses which could be heard over the shoulders. But Naipaul felt that though the lake was full of people, it was rich and met various needs of the people. It provided weeds and mud for vegetable plots, fodder for animals, reeds for thatching, and fish for food. At night he could hear Kashmiri devotional songs to keep their spirits high.

In part-III, Fantasy and Ruins, Naipaul deals with how the British possessed the country completely. The author was disturbed to see English names on the cranes of the Bombay docks. He feels strange to think of the humiliation which Colonial India could face--how easily they could accept the philosophy of despair, leading to passivity, detachment, and acceptance. Naipaul ridicules that we owe the buildings in India to the Britishers--whether its Victoria Memorial in Calcutta or the Taj Mahal in Agra. He mocks at the city Simla which has turned out to be narrow and winding. He feels that:

.... in India everything is inherited, nothing is abolished, everything grows out of something else, and now the Mall was given over to the offices, of the Himachal Pradesh Administration, whose officers drove about the narrow lanes in green Chevrolets of the late nineteen forties: decay upon decay (Naipaul, 206-207).

Naipaul even mourns Calcutta's death--for its thin glitter, its filth and overpopulation, its tainted money, and the terrible British failure, "Calcutta, even to Indians, was a word of terror, conveying crowds, cholera and corruption" (Naipaul, 265). Naipaul at the end of his journey, encounters a feeble man called Ramachandra, who wanted his help to start litigation and get some land, which formerly belonged to Naipaul's grandfather. He then regrets his journey to India which left him scarred and wounded.

### References

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