
V. S. Naipaul's Exploration of India: A Reading of Land, People and the Self

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Abstract

This paper examines the non-fiction of the novelist, V.S. Naipaul, in particular, his writings on India. The paper argues that Naipaul's repeated exploration of India, over three decades (1964-1990) can be read as his attempts at exploration of the Self. In his *An Area of Darkness*, *India: A Wounded Civilisation*, *India: A Million Mutinies Now* and in his Collection of Journalistic Essays, Naipaul examines the land of his ancestors, its people, its culture, polity, literature. But the most fascinating part of this journey pertains to his exploration of his own inner self. The paper juxtaposes his critique of India to probe an interesting analysis of the entity of a country, through a geographical, cultural and inner exploration of the writer.

Keywords- Inner Journey, Critique, Non-fiction, Scatological, Diaspora, Civilization

V.S. Naipaul is indistinguishable from the West Indian setting of his fiction. Born and brought up in Trinidad, settled in England with ancestral links with India, Naipaul, one would assume, assimilates the ethos of the three varied civilizations. However, his works reflect a cultivated detachment, a conscious striving "to withdraw completely from nationality and loyalties except to persons" and further to "be myself alone, my work, my name." (*An Area of Darkness*: 1964, 188)

Naipaul's works reveal the modern writer's preoccupation to probe and evolve his identity. His links with three civilizations place him in a difficult, even if unique, position. No one grasps this truth better than Naipaul himself: "It is an odd, suspicious situation: an Indian writer writing in English for an English audience about non-English characters who talk their

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own sort of English.” (*An Overcrowded Barracoon*: 1972, 12) His lack of strong affinity to either of the three countries, paradoxically, makes Naipaul at once a homeless, rootless individual on the one hand and a modern consciousness cutting across (inter)national barriers on the other. He confesses. “...I have, without effort achieved the Buddhist ideal of non-attachment” yet inwardly, he craves, “I want to be involved...” (*Barracoon*: 1972, 16).

It is with this dualistic temperament – to maintain detachment yet cherish involvement – that Naipaul undertakes his journey to India. His perspectives and attitudes towards India are recorded in two of his books *An Area of Darkness* (1964) and *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977). Some more of his memorable accounts of India as published in various magazines are collected in *The Overcrowded Barracoon and Other Articles* (1972). His third book on India, was *India: A Thousand Mutinies Now* (1990) These works form the major non-fiction of a popular, prodigious novelist who has churned out a novel almost every year since the late 1950s until the first decade of this century. (b.1932-d.2018) This paper attempts to examine Naipaul’s study of India, the validity of his judgements on Indians/Indian institutions and to assess his attitude towards a country that “had in a special way been the background of my childhood” (*An Area of Darkness*:1964, 27). Apart from examining various aspects of Naipaul’s critique of India, the paper also considers to what extent Naipaul, the novelist, deploys his fictional art in these works that are essentially non-fiction. Do these books reflect an accomplished novelist’s imaginative grasp over social history? How does one account for the readability of Naipaul’s non-fictional works? To what extent does one discern the distinguished novelist’s creative genius in *An Area of Darkness* or in *India: A Wounded Civilization*? Do we see a correlation between exploration of a land, its people and self-exploration by a writer?

Naipaul’s observations on India in *An Area of Darkness* (1964), in *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977), *India: A Thousand Mutinies Now* (1990) and in sections of *The Overcrowded Barracoon* (1972) are in many ways extremely provocative. They deserve serious attention for two other significant reasons also. First, Naipaul is a distinguished novelist whose writings on India are to be assessed in relation to a literary tradition set by novelists like Kipling and Forester. Secondly, Naipaul’s study of India also goes beyond that literary tradition for he is drawn towards India because of his Indian inheritance and in exploring India, he explores his cultural identity. His books on India thus are a revealing

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commentary as much on India as on Naipaul himself. The writer is not cut off from his subject of study. While India becomes a fruitful context for the earlier novelists like Kipling and Forster, writing about India to probe larger issues, (friendship between two races for instance) Naipaul deals specifically with the post-Independence India and one of his serious concerns is to probe his relationship to the country his ancestors hailed from and which was “the background to my childhood” and “an area of the imagination” (Naipaul :1964,41). His assessment of India, thus, is an attempt at self-assessment as well.

Recounting the cultural ethos of the first generation of emigrant Indians, Naipaul observes that his grandfather, although geographically displaced from India, encompassed the land within himself. He reconstructed the Indian atmosphere in Trinidad and Naipaul as a child was greatly impressed by it: “In its artefacts, India existed whole in Trinidad” (Naipaul: 1964, 29). His acquaintance with India in his early childhood was impressionistic. “India lay about us in things” he observes (Naipaul: 1964, 29). Tattered string beds, straw mats, brass vessels, outmoded wooden printing blocks, oily ink, ruined harmonium or brightly coloured pictures of Hindu deities – it was through these images that Naipaul was introduced to India. These cherished objects, venerated but unserviceable, picturesque, but out of place; revealed to Naipaul, not the spirit of India but its form, utterly divorced from vitality. He could not detect the spiritual wealth of India in “the paraphernalia of the prayer room” that he witnessed at home as a child. The Hindu religious symbols were to him nothing but dainty objects. His description is bereft of religious awe or even nostalgic fondness for objects associated with one’s childhood. He reckons them simply as “smooth pebbles,” “stick of sandalwood,” “camphor-burners like Roman lamps” (Naipaul: 1964, 29). His account of his earliest impressions of India deserves close attention because those impressions adumbrate Naipaul’s later criticism of India in his maturity. There is not much development or significant change in his attitude towards India. His description of India as he found it in his Trinidad home is vivid, enriched by careful observation and embellished by poetic language, yet the muted criticism of India as a land of ceremonial forms is never lost upon the reader. Naipaul’s detached tone and lack of emotional warmth towards the subject at hand conveys his critical reservations even in the early sections of *An Area of Darkness*. The later sections confirm Naipaul’s earlier impressions and attitude towards India in a more extensive, penetrating and critical incisiveness.

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Despite the young sceptic's rejection of the unpragmatic element in his Indian heritage, his fascination towards India, clearly, did not dwindle. After settling down in England and attaining fame as a novelist, Naipaul's decision to visit India indicates his concern to relate himself to an ancient civilization and assess its relevance to his present consciousness. On his arrival, India forces Naipaul to readjust his vision – regarding himself and the land. He is baffled by the truth that “for the first time in my life I was one of the crowd” (Naipaul: 1964, 42). Instead of appreciating the racial bond between Indians and himself, he resents at “being denied part of my reality...I entered a shop or a restaurant and awaited a special quality of response. And there was nothing ...I was faceless” (Naipaul: 1964, 43). While analysing Naipaul's dispassionate examination of the Indian condition, one cannot fail to perceive his loss of equanimity at the fearful prospect of his identity being eroded by the “Indian crowd”.

India's poverty pains him. Its obviousness overwhelms him. His readings on India had not prepared him for the ruthless actualities that he confronts in person. He is rightly vexed at the Indian complacency towards poverty and squalor. Indians deify poverty, they sanctify begging, romanticize the domestic bliss of pavement dwellers. Naipaul's indignation is justified and understandable. Rigid, unimaginative stratification of society on the basis of caste certainly deserves to be denounced. In this context, Naipaul's power of social observation is remarkable. He pictures India vividly when he comments, “And the man who makes the dingy bed in the hotel room will be affronted if he is asked to sweep the gritty floor. The clerk will not bring you a glass of water even if you faint. The architecture student will consider it a degradation to make drawings, to be a mere draftsman” (Naipaul: 1964,47). This curious form of scrupulousness infuriates Naipaul. The dehumanizing isolation of the sweeper class arouses his violent indignation against the caste system. He remembers how the Indian emigrants to Trinidad had quickly learnt to do without sweepers, and the continued presence and degradation of the sweepers in India is revolting to him. However, his tendency to exaggerate caste scruples and his failure to take note of specialization of skills in an over-populated country show up his limitations as well. To prove his point, he distorts norms and beliefs. The liberal Indian reader shares Naipaul's revulsion against casteist degradation of particular communities. But he would not go to the extent of reading casteism in every kind of social interaction.

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While commenting upon the Emergency excesses in his book *India: A Wounded Civilisation*, Naipaul pays singular attention to the issue of casteism. In fact, his interpretation of a political pamphlet listing prison tortures is striking by its ingenuity in reading casteism in it. The pamphlet lists the humiliation heaped on political prisoners. Their moustache had been shaved off, intellectuals were beaten with shoes and made to parade the public streets carrying shoes on their heads. To begin with, Naipaul finds them ‘strange things’ to have been labelled tortures. He fails to notice the loss of basic civil rights or the violation of recognized human rights. He observes sarcastically, “Torture, like poverty, is something about India that Indians have just discovered” (Naipaul: 1977, 110). His argument that the listed tortures are offensive to Indian politicians because they are “caste pollutions” is specious in logic and limited in judgement. His analysis, “Black is a colour horrible to the Indo-Aryan; the moustache is an important caste emblem...shoes are made of leather and tread the polluted earth” (Naipaul: 1977, 115), sounds well-researched but, is, in essence, a clever twisting of facts in order to confirm his own reading of India.

An opposition party’s political pamphlet at the time of National Emergency voicing protest against administrative excesses and absence of rule of law is viewed by Naipaul as a document of confused values obsessed with “caste outrage” (Naipaul:1977,115). This is an instance of willful reading of events and social processes of a country that he simultaneously treats seriously and dismisses off-handedly. Even while recognizing the nation’s crisis when “intellectual advance” has been initiated, he dismisses its populace for possessing an “underdeveloped ego”. Naipaul borrows the epithet from Sudhir Kakkar, a psychoanalyst whose theory that Indian psyche has remained underdeveloped owing to social organization of Indian life, has been neither endorsed nor substantiated by scholars in the field. Naipaul makes extensive use of this theory as it mirrors his own reading of Indian society. His criticism of the perpetuation of casteism is so devoid of objectivity that he reads casteist attitudes in obscure phrases, casual comments or unmotivated stances. While dismissing the prevalence of casteist attitudes in all walks of life, he takes the Press to task. But, in this context, the specific instances that he chooses to analyse hardly reflect casteism. He quotes crime reports from National newspapers which admittedly are bland, stereotyped and indifferent to the victims’ fate. Naipaul’s criticism that the daily should initiate follow-up action is valid and indicates a novelist’s humanitarian concern with social problem. But

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surprisingly Naipaul denounces the Indian Press's lack of feedback reporting as a symptom of casteism. He is indignant that "the police communique is enough; no reporter was sent out to get the story" (Naipaul: 1977, 130). And what does this reflect? To us, the newspaper's choice of priorities. Crime data has to be stated and does not demand serious investigation. (Is it possible to do so, one wonders, keeping the crime rate in mind.) Naipaul sees this as reflecting, "A caste vision; what is remote from me is remote from me. The Indian press has interpreted its function in an Indian way" (Naipaul: 1977, 130). The news items under discussion hardly bear out his reading. Of course, they do not show humane concern for the victims. Yet by what stretch of imagination can its neutral reporting be called a "caste vision"?

Naipaul's illogical generalization and dogmatic verdicts reveal his prejudices rather than the malaise he claims to analyze. The illustrations that he picks up to vindicate his assumptions are grossly misapplied. A young woman commenting upon the costume of the Maharashtrian poor is castigated by Naipaul as being "receptive only to caste signals" (Naipaul: 1977, 118). In both *An Area of Darkness* and *India: A Wounded Civilization*, one finds a recurring pattern in Naipaul's writing. Basing on his personal observation he states his judgements about individuals, institutions or social processes. Later he proceeds to prove his pronouncement right by interpreting newspaper reports or highlighting sections of autobiographies of famous Indian (including Mahatma Gandhi's). The writers he invokes do not share his assumptions or his attitudes. Hence, his attempt to bestow authority on his reading of India is not always successful. The reader gets the impression that Naipaul works out his stand towards issues at hand rather like a student proving a geometrical theorem. There are stated assumptions to begin with, then they are proved to be right by invoking other theorems and the result is arrived at, Q.E.D.!

Naipaul observes in the same section, "But to know India, most people look inward. They consult themselves: in their own past, in the nature of their caste or clan life..." (Naipaul: 1977, 130). Does Naipaul too resort to this kind of introspection and find a reflection of his self in the outside world? His recounting of his attitude in the laboratory at school is significant in this context. His aversion to suck the beaker used by others is really casteist in origin. He himself admits as much when a fellow student's approving comment "real Brahmin" arouses in him "a new tenderness for that boy and a sadness for our common

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loss” (Naipaul: 1964,34-35). Can one relate Naipaul’s obsessive criticism of casteism to his own Brahminical scruples regarding purity? Is he denouncing an aspect within himself that is reflected in a magnified form in the country of his ancestors?

Naipaul’s social criticism, interestingly, is complemented by his novelistic method. In *An Area of Darkness* he vitalizes his stated assumptions and sweeping generalisations with representations of character types. With a novelist’s eye for observation and presenting detail, he portrays imaginary characters to sharpen his criticism. The portrayal of Ramnath, a stenographer who refuses to do a typist’s job and is over-scrupulous about ‘Degree’ is an imaginative rendering of Naipaul’s harsh, unrelenting criticism of caste. He presents a lively conversation between two imaginary characters, Ramnath, holding on to Degree and his boss, Malhotra who represents the westernized Indian. In all, it is written in the style of a short story complete with tense drama, characterization, climax, suspense and an impressive resolution. Naipaul’s imaginative rendering of his unmitigated criticism not only enriches it but also makes it acceptable. His fictionalizing of reality makes the truth palatable. Ramnath and Malhotra are more than fictional characters. They embody certain attitudes and ways of thinking that are recognizably real. Truth merges into fiction, journalistic reporting is enriched by creative imagination.

Naipaul’s observations on India’s squalor, filth and lack of hygiene are extremely stringent. He sees the obvious and deeply revolts against it. His revulsion is justified and his criticism cannot be set aside. In chapter 3 of *An Area of Darkness* entitled, *The Colonial*, Naipaul records with fascinated repulsion the prevalent poverty and lack of sanitation. His description of his revulsion is, almost, equally revolting: “this small boy, blind, thin, half-naked, scaly with dirt, whining at a low, steady pitch, tears streaming out of raw red eyes, his arms held aloft in supplication” (Naipaul:1964,68). The novelist’s grasp over details and his power of observation are strained to the utmost to drive home Indians’ blindness to their insanitation. “Indians defecate everywhere,” Naipaul notes with anger (Naipaul: 1964,70). Be it the Shankaracharya Hill or the Marina beach or the riverside at Goa, Indians defecate without embarrassment. At times they defecate in company, it becomes a community activity. Naipaul stresses the unpleasant details (Naipaul:1964,69-70) because he is outraged that “these squatting figures...are never spoken of; they are never written about; they are not mentioned in novels or stories; they do not appear in feature films or documentaries”

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(Naipaul:1964,70). He takes it upon himself to reveal an unpleasant, undeniable reality of India to Indians. He wants to shatter the Indian complacency and puncture their caste superiority that “Indians are the cleanest people in the world” (Naipaul: 1964,70). Despite their codified behaviour and ritualistic purification, Indians are, Naipaul points out, blind to pervasive filth. Their self-complacent denial of the stark reality infuriates him.

Landeg White admires *An Area of Darkness* as a “polished and calculated” work, and praises the “tact with which it channels its strongest criticism through quotations from Gandhi” (Landeg:1975,21). Yes, Naipaul quotes Gandhi to support his impressions and lend greater authority to his comments. Naipaul’s observations on insanitation are reinforced by his quotations from Gandhi on the same subject. But he quotes Gandhi not merely to strengthen his assessment but to draw a flattering parallel between Gandhi’s vision and that of his own. He comments, Gandhi is “the least Indian of Indian leaders. He looked at India as no Indian was able to; his vision was direct...He sees exactly what the visitor sees; he does not ignore the obvious” (Naipaul: 1964,73). Naipaul too has a visitor’s clarity of perception and never ignores the obvious. He credits Gandhi’s clarity as an acquirement from his colonial experiences: “He saw India so clearly because he was in part a colonial” (Naipaul:1964,73). Naipaul, a colonial, he implies, has a comparable assessing ability. He suggests that his impressions and comments on India are as valid and authoritative as Gandhi’s for both had been colonials. Once again, the assertions are questionable. Despite spending twenty years in South Africa, Gandhi remained deeply patriotic. (India too was a British colony though more unwieldy than South Africa.) Gandhi’s observations on India’s poverty, insanitation, beggary or caste always reflected the pain and the agony of a nationalist, proud of his country’s cultural heritage, witnessing its failings, its apathy and self-oblivion. His concern for the degradation of the sweeper class was emotional (not an acquired western sensibility as in Naipaul). His obsession with sanitation, about conversion of night soil into manure were not mere fanciful theories. They emerged out of a deep sympathy for the Indian peasantry and the down trodden. His tone is not detached or harshly critical but conveys his empathy for the ignorant poor. The difference between Naipaul’s attitude or style of criticism and that of Gandhi’s is striking. Here, cited by Naipaul, is Gandhi on defecation and insanitation: “Instead of having graceful hamlets dotting the land, we have dung-heaps. The approach to many villages is not a refreshing experience. Often one would like to shut

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one's eyes and stuff one's nose; such is the surrounding dirt and offending smell...By our bad habits we spoil our sacred river banks and furnish excellent breeding grounds for flies" (Naipaul:1964,71). Contrast Naipaul's own reactions on the same subject in the following passage: "Indians...defecate on the hills; they defecate on the river banks; they defecate on the streets; they never look for cover...The strand is littered with excrement; amid this excrement fish is being haggled over as it is landed from the boats" (Ibid.:70)

Gandhi aimed at reform, Naipaul aims at demolition, at striking down complacency and at stating the unpleasant truths that are obvious but never noticed. His writing reveals his own obsession with defecation, a fascination for revulsion. This naturally mars the aesthetic quality of the book. Despite this obsession with excrement and filth, Swift, for instance, never lost control over his aesthetics. Jonathan Swift showed an obsessive interest in the scatological. However, he turned details into symbols. His works never lost their literary merit. For instance, Gulliver's aversion to Yahoos as described in the fourth book of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is scatological. His description of the Yahoos is coarse and repulsive: "They had no tails, nor any Hair at all on their Buttocks, except about the Anus...Several of this cursed Brood getting hold of the Branches behind, leaped up into the Tree, from whence they began to discharge their Excrements on my Head...I was almost stifled with the Filth, which fell about me on every side."(Swift:1953, 242-43) In his portrayal of Yahoos, Swift is analyzing the distortions of mankind. The repulsiveness of Yahoos symbolizes the grossly reprehensible traits in man. Swift's focus, gradually shifts from the particular to the general, from the factual to the symbolic. But in Naipaul, the starkness and single dimensional criticism of public defecation in India deprives his writing of vitality and charm.

In *India: A Wounded Civilization* and *The Overcrowded Barracoon and Other Articles*, Naipaul concentrates on the political corruption of post-independent India, the lack of 'Indianess' in Indian institutions and the prevalent intellectual confusion. He delineates how political bodies, the national press, the judiciary and the legal system are caught up in a general chaos; how they are steeped in archaic concepts, in borrowed traditions and remain unresponsive to Indian needs. His perspectives on Indian politics are illuminating. He comments as an onlooker and consciously distances himself from the Indian set-up.

In *An Area of Darkness* he is deliberately provocative and shocks his readers. Nonetheless the book also reveals his fascination for and longing to accept India. At places, he turns

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lyrical and abandons himself to the landscape he is watching. This mood becomes dominant during his stay in Kashmir and his trip to Amarnath. *An Area of Darkness* is, on this account, a more complex work than *India: A Wounded Civilization* or the essays on India in *The Overcrowded Barracoon*. In the later works his reading of India is not wholly free from prejudices or limitations of both knowledge and understanding. But his criticism is less personalized, and he is not looking inward as much as he did earlier in *An Area of Darkness*. Naipaul's account of Indian electioneering in *The Election in Ajmer* (Naipaul:1972,107-50) evokes brilliantly the typical election scene in India. When juxtaposed to his account of the election scene in New York in his essay *New York with Normal Mailer* (Naipaul:1972,183-205), one realizes that Naipaul's analysis is not mere political journalism. His comments are valuable not for their political insights (which are never wanting) but for his critical study of the respective cultures and for his engaging narrative. His account of the election scene in Ajmer is lucid, interspersed with lively conversation and cryptic comments. He makes efforts to understand Indian electioneering, talks to election agents, watches the drama from close quarters. It is as a spectator that he writes and makes observations. He is appalled by a lack of ideological confrontation between the contesting political parties, by caste manipulation of voters and by murder of political allies that is passed off as personal revenge against the victim's love-life. There is not much to choose between the main contestants on grounds of political convictions and policies. In the particular constituency under scrutiny the contest becomes a family tussle. A nephew belonging to Indira Congress is contesting against his uncle -- a successful legislator in the past, old, blind and at present a member of the Old Congress. The main issue in the contest seemed to be, "who was morally in the wrong? The uncle, for fighting the nephew? Or the nephew, for fighting the uncle?" (Naipaul:1972,108). Basic economic, political issues are set aside, organization is poor and archaic concepts are involved to sway the ignorant masses. Personality squabbles undermine democratic norms. Naipaul is critical of the uncle's repeated invocation of dharma and Gandhi and the idea of sacrifice -- quasi-religious, deified terminology with no political content. The candidates appeal to voters in the name of caste, religious notions. Gandhi is mythified and appropriated as a tool for gaining public sympathy. Naipaul brings out these appalling truths with a liveliness that screens the sordidness of the situation. His attitude towards the scene in Ajmer is varied -- he takes a keen interest, critically observes the election machinery of a democracy

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that gained independence after a historic struggle. At times he writes with amused detachment, is bored, resents distortions of Gandhian thinking. In fine, he wonders at the fate of the country. His narrative confirms his reading of India presented in *India: A Wounded Civilisation*. There are striking repetitions and verbal echoes in Naipaul's works under consideration. His style is thoroughly journalistic – reporting events, collecting information, narrating the developments, conveying the excitement and fluidity of the situation. Yet one also gets glimpses of Naipaul, the novelist's characteristic touches. Naipaul's character assessment (of Mr. Mukut, of Mr. Bishweshwar, and Mr. Kudal) reveals a novelist's perceptive imagination that conveys at one stroke the essence of a personality. As a journalist he reports with accuracy and liveliness. But he does not merely report; he offers judgements. His leisurely narrative, his ability to dramatize and portray characters who despite their reality attain a stature that is larger than life indicate that Naipaul's experience at novel writing enriches his journalistic writing. His style makes the reader respond to the article almost as a piece of fiction and not as an election analysis of a leading news magazine. His concerns are more profound than those of a journalist.

India: A Wounded Civilization exemplifies this better. His book written during the 1975-76 Emergency analyses the crisis-ridden India but goes beyond the political crisis. He looks at “the larger crisis of a wounded old civilization that has at last become aware of its inadequacies and is without the intellectual means to move ahead” (Naipaul:1977, 18). In a way he has judged India before he begins his inquiry. The book abounds with Naipaul's hasty judgements, dogmatic assertions and easy dismissals. This mars the quality of his criticism which cannot be, always, easily contradicted.

According to Naipaul, lack of original thinking and innovative technology capable of meeting the peculiar demands of India is the root cause of the political crisis and the general fall in standards. He is critical of Indians' failure to evolve indigenous institutions and their refusal to grow out of archaic, unpragmatic way of thinking. Commenting about lack of cohesiveness and absence of an integrated nation, he rightly observes, “the racial sense is alien to Indians... they know, only the subcaste or caste, the clan,... the language group. Beyond that they cannot go; they do not see themselves as belonging to an Indian race” (Naipaul:1977,154). He relates his insight with the history of India:“Historically, this absence of cohesiveness has been the calamity of India” (Naipaul:1977,154). The present-day

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politicians, he notes, do not, for their own self-interest, go beyond narrow loyalists. They seek political asylum in Gandhian rhetoric, in the image of Gandhi, that they have deliberately cultivated over a period. Gandhi himself, Naipaul notes with irritation, got absorbed in “religious self-searching”. His simplicity had the effect of making poverty holy and he was quickly deified into a *Mahatma*. Naipaul’s most penetrative comment about Indian political history is in the context of politicizing of Gandhism- “Gandhi swept through India, but he has left it without an ideology. He awakened the holy land; his mahatmahood returned it to archaism; he made his worshippers vain” (Naipaul:1977,159). Indians have lost “knowledge of the man as a man” (ibid., 153). As a consequence, Gandhi/Gandhian thought has been reduced into politically useful symbols—Charka, khadi, *padyatra*, *satyagraha* or zeal for the protection of cows.

Naipaul can think of no positive resolution to the Indian political crisis. He does not grant leadership qualities to any of the contemporary political leaders. Indian sages and philosophers are dismissed as sterile and archaic. Vinoba Bhave is treated rather uncharitably as a “mascot” playing out the role of “the old age” but possessing no wisdom (Naipaul:1977, 159-60). Opposition leaders, including Jaya Prakash Narayan, Naipaul notes with dismay, are speech makers and unsuited to modern times. They fondly invoke *Ramrajya* and *Dharma*. They thus offer no positive political alternative to the people. Naipaul’s reading of the political feature of India is extremely pessimistic. He sees the absence of an indigenous political infrastructure as the real bane of the country. Obsessed with mimicry Indians borrow indiscriminately and “with no foreign conqueror now to impose a new order” India, Naipaul observes, is “left alone with the blankness of its decayed civilization” (Naipaul:1977,167). He is right in criticizing India’s excessive reliance on western thinking and institutions but he fails to appreciate that India at the time of Independence (torn apart by the Partition) could not have scrapped the existing political framework and embarked on indigenization of the political process. The nearly 200-year rule of the British could not have been violently overthrown.

It would have been political naivete if India had decided to dismantle the British institutions. What was needed at that time was political stability not experimentation or jingoistic institutionalization. What was worth adapting, India chose to retain. Naipaul fails to appreciate this. He is quick to read in the current crisis “aspects of the larger crisis, which is

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that of a decaying civilisation” (Naipaul:1977, 174). He sees India’s future as bleak. His observations are not always wrong but his conclusions often are. He sardonically concludes, “the only hope (for the “decaying civilization”) lies in further swift decay” (1977: 174). This is his last word on India.

In this foreword to *India: A Wounded Civilisation*, Naipaul comments, “An inquiry about India has to be an inquiry about Indian attitudes; it has to be an inquiry about the civilization itself, as it is. And though in India I am a stranger, the starting point of this inquiry- more than might appear in these pages—has been myself” (1977:9). In *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul’s relationship with Aziz reflects a power equation, his emotional insecurities. His confrontation with the Khansamah reveals his ruthless brutality while his companionship with the Sikh passenger in a train discomfits him. Naipaul comments, “he became my irrational self.” Such startling self-revelations, notwithstanding, Naipaul’s writing merits a careful reading for the strength of its literary merit.

How imaginatively does the novelist writing as critic convey his criticism? Does his literary imagination mitigate, in any appreciable amount, his harsh criticism? Naipaul’s mode of writing reflects his imaginative treatment of his visits to India. His books are not mere travelogues. They are, in fact, imaginatively written accounts of his experiences in India. *An Area of Darkness* in this context cannot be compared with R.K. Narayan’s *My Dateless Diary*. Naipaul’s work incorporates straight forward reports, landscape descriptions, philosophical contemplations, social criticism, political observations, fictionalization of socially realistic situations, historical perspectives and surprisingly even book reviews and literary criticism. His narrative art abounds with the vitality and earthiness of a comic novelist.

It is important to remember that one reads and often re-reads *An Area of Darkness* or *India: A Wounded Civilization* for their powerful narrative, imaginative presentation of sordid truths and for their literary merit. The prevalence of caste, the degradations of the sweeper class, the rigid stratification of society are some of the most unpleasant truths of our society and Naipaul is highly critical of them. But his imaginative, fictionalized accounts of class types numb our resentment towards the critic in him. His presentation of Bunty, Andy, Jimmy—westernized Indians who consciously construct class values that are new yet are not revolutionary enough to abolish class hierarchy; his portrayals of men from the various walks

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of life carving their private destinies—Malik, Malhotra, Jivan or Vasant, are extremely readable. For a moment, one cannot distinguish Naipaul's non-fictional works from his fiction.

We detect a happy blend of the novelist and the critic in the sections dealing with novels of Indian writers. He gives detailed account of the plots and themes of the novels. He writes about the novels of R. K. Narayan, Manohar Malgonkar, U. R. Ananthamurthy and the plays of Vijay Tendulkar in this book. We see a novelist analyzing his fellow-novelists' works and placing them in a larger perspective. Yet as a critic on India, Naipaul studies them in relation to the Indian social fabric. His analysis of R.K. Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets* or Malgonkar's *The Princes* reveals how Naipaul is studying India through a reading of these novels. He views them as reflections of Indian society. Thus, his commentary on the literary works is also his commentary on India. He explores the social, philosophical aspects of India through a study of Indian novels. He also takes into account Foster's and Kipling's novels on India. The striking difference between the other novelists' works on India and those of Naipaul's lies in the latter's personalized perspectives. His vision of India is personal, and hence more self-revelatory in nature.

In *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990), Naipaul makes an effort to assess India in the post-Independence era. Moving away from modes of defecation and caste rigidity, he takes stock of the progress made by the country. He concedes that India's economic development is considerable and as a nation, it is more stable than before. But Naipaul's basic premise suggests that this has been made possible through sudden outbursts; what he terms, "MUTINIES". His analysis, once again, reveals a cursory awareness of sectarian chauvinism, growing fundamentalism, cult politics. He does not grapple with the complexities of Indian polity. It appears that he has concluded even before he had begun his investigation. His verdict that India has progressed through unplanned revolts of rage sounds strained and far-fetched.

It can be argued that Naipaul's exploration of India, in his non-fiction, uses some of the novelist's creative imagination and generic experimentation. In exploring India, the land of his ancestors, Naipaul discovers the process to be an exploration of the Self as well. His critique of caste structure, open defecation, complacency, poverty in this land takes him through an inner journey as well. In that inner journey, he learns, to his own dismay, that he

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is unable to forge bonds with the residents of his ancestral village or go beyond a feudalistic, master-servant relationship with Indian hosts/ care-givers. Confronting India enables Naipaul to confront his own bigotry, biases, inadequacies, his irrational self, buried deep within.

This irrational self asserts itself most forcefully, to Naipaul's own exasperation, in the town of eastern U. P., the town of his ancestors. Rebuffing the warm hospitality of the villagers, reading greed in their affection, Naipaul seems to have lost control over himself completely. Unable to trust the people he had come looking-for, Naipaul is forced to confront the meanness within him. His self-loathing becomes unavoidable. "I had expected little and I had been afraid. The ugliness was all mine...My colonial prudence prevented me from emptying my pocket" or even from drinking a glass of water (Naipaul:1964,261-62).His lack of courtesy to those who look after his grandfather's fields cannot be rationalized. Stripped of his cultivated elegance, Naipaul strikes out vehemently: India is not the land for him. It "had not worked his magic on me...it remained... an area of darkness." He craves for deliverance, for release from this suffocating atmosphere. Like Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Naipaul had tried to explore the unknown, the unfamiliar, a mythified land. In the process of such an exploration, Naipaul reckons with his own vulnerabilities, his inability to stay away or forge bonds with the Dubey, Jasodas, Aziz, Butts and such others. Exploration of a land re-configures itself as an exploration of its people and more significantly, of the writer's own inner self. This process is witnessed in Naipaul's non-fiction on India, in all the three books and Collection of journalistic essays discussed above.

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