

INDIA IN THE NOVELS OF V.S NAIPAUL

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ABSTRACT

In an article titled “The Writer and India” (The New York Review of Books’, March 9, 1990), V. S. Naipaul speaks of his different perceptions of India. Apart from being “a subject country”, India is to him, the place “from whose. Very great poverty our grandparents had to run away in the late nineteenth century”. His observation, “The two Indians were separate. The political India, of the freedom movement... The other more personal India was quite hidden; it vanished when memory faded.” 1

In an attempt to go beyond in this context, I want to make an analytical study of V. S. Naipaul, who visited India more than once and traveled within it, staying in this country for a considerable period.

KEYWORDS: Colonial, Strains, Identity, Civilization, Caste

INTRODUCTION

His three travel books on India are an attempt to find his “community identity”, belong to a society. His journeys to India have been descents into himself as veil as explorations of the land”.²

Naipaul grew up with two ideas of India. To young Naipaul, the first idea had been to view India as 'a resting place for his imagination', 'a shadow which a man moving onwards cannot catch'. It was about the India of the 1880s when his ancestors had migrated to Trinidad. This India was private and personal, 'a most fearful place', and the anxiety about the country was 'like a neurosis'.³ second India was the 'India of the independence movement, the India of the great names'. 'It was also the India of the great civilization and the classical past It was an aspect of our identity we had developed which in multiracial Trinidad had become more like a racial identity'.⁴

While Bharati Mukherjee's account of India may be described as that of an insider-outsider, Naipaul's descriptions are of an outsider-insider.

Naipaul believes that understanding oneself and others, rational methods, verification, the basis of our knowledge and of all science, as well as the attempt to check intuitive certainties are of cardinal importance. In other words, he has a skeptical and scientific temper and outlook. His modernity consists partly of doing without any tradition. His civilization is formal and individual. He, rather, does not belong to any civilization. It is in this sense that he is a 'nowhere' man. Whereas Bharati Mukherjee talks of uprooting and re-rooting, Naipaul chooses to be rootless.

To return to Naipaul's first view of India, it was a "frightening glimpse" of India's ever-receding degrees of degradation. He interpreted it as the result of "an English endeavor answering the Indian need: definition, distinction. To define is to begin to separate oneself, to assure oneself of one's position, to be withdrawn from the chaos that India always threatens". ⁵ Sounds like an echo of E. M. Forster. But the distinctions in the professions were also curiously in the typical Indian manner analogous to the caste and sub-caste division of India. In his chapter on "Degree" Naipaul could not present so clean a view of India as he could in *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. From 1962 to 1990 his view of India had kept maturing and becoming more objective. The abstraction of the reference there to the Geeta preaching degree "fifteen hundred years before Shakespeare's *Ulysses*" is more literary than to the social life under observation. Bunty's caste is European. He is a blend of East and West. Individual cases like Bunty's illustrate Naipaul's ideas in a characteristic, novelistic manner. The Anglo-Indian "half-breed" is mockingly described as "Indians defecate everywhere". ⁶

Naipaul's first visit to India in 1962 was undertaken as a quest for his roots in the country from where his grandfather had migrated to Trinidad as an indentured laborer at the beginning of this century. Bombay was the first city visited and Naipaul found that it was not what he had expected. He hated being part of a crowd at Churchgate station and craved for preferential treatment, something that he had always got in Trinidad and England:

To be an Indian in England was distinctive; in Egypt it was more so. Now in Bombay I entered a shop or a restaurant and awaited a special quality of response. And there was nothing. It was like being denied part of my reality. Again and again I was caught. I was faceless. I might sink without a trace into that Indian crowd (while) recognition of my difference was necessary to me. I felt the need to impose myself, and did not know how. ⁷

It took him some time to reconcile himself to the vast physicality of India as initially experienced in Bombay and "ten months later I was to revisit Bombay and to wonder at my hysteria" ⁸ He met persons like Ramnath the stenographer, his boss Malhotra who was an Indian from East Africa, and whose years in East Africa and Europe" had made him just enough of colonial to be out of place in India", ⁹ somewhat like Naipaul himself, and Malhotra's friend Malik" bound only by their common bitterness" ¹⁰ of not earning enough, compared to their counterparts in Europe. He also met Jevan, who had left his village to work in Bombay, and Vasant who had grown up in a Bombay slum, both of whom had done well for themselves. He met some neo-Brahmins like Bunty the boxwallah, whose twice-born status was derived from well-paid jobs and social advantages that came thereof.

Naipaul did not spend much time in Delhi and met only a few people apart from Mr. Jhabvala referred to as" an architect I had known for a short time", ¹¹ and Mrs. Mahindra (and members of her family), in whose house he had his companion stayed as paying quests, for some time. The heat restricted his sightseeing to a "dawn drive to the ruins of Tughlakabad", ¹² a visit to Rajghat and a few unnamed mosques and temples. Naipaul's account of Delhi is impressionistic. To him, Delhi appeared to be "the city of symbols, first of the British Raj and now of the independent

Indian Republic: a jungle of black-and-white notice boards mushrooming out of feverish administrative activity,... a city ever growing, as it has been for the last forty years, a city of civil servants and contractors. **13** The place made him hysteric with its bureaucratic obsessions and red tape. He realized: "In Lutyen's city I required privacy and protection. Only then was I released from the delirium of seeing certain aspects of myself magnified out of recognition". **14**

Of all places Naipaul visited in India, he enjoyed his stay in Srinagar the most largely because there were no crowds and he received a preferential treatment at Hotel Liward, something he missed in Bombay and Delhi. The weather was pleasant and "Kashmir was coolness and color: the yellow mustard fields, the mountains, snow-capped, the milky blue sky in which we discovered the drama of clouds". **15** Though he felt that, "it was this English presence which seemed hardest to accept in this mountain-locked valley". **16** The English presence made him feel at home in the valley which was insulated from the rest of India. He wrote the novel *Mr. Stone and the Knight's Companion* (1963) here, and his descriptions of his stay at Hotel Liward are relaxed and often tinged with humor, unlike the rest of the books. Naipaul fondly refers to Mr. Butt's c-class houseboat as "A Doll's House on Dal Lake" and has used the phrase as a chapter-heading. The same indulgent as well as romantic note can be discerned in his description of Aziz, Butt's handyman- " a very small man, barefooted, with a dingy grey pullover tight above flapping white cotton trousers gathered in at the waist by a string. A touch of quaintness, something of the Shakespearean mechanic, was given him by his sagging woolen nightcap". **17** The romantic/descriptive tone adopted by Naipaul in his description of Kashmir shows a definite orientalist bias. He does not talk about the writings of early European travelers to Kashmir. To him, the natural beauty of Kashmir was a dream which acquired the dimension of reality and he was not interested in giving his travel impressions a perspective. This difference is noticed when one compares him to other western post-colonial travelers to India writing about Kashmir. In this context, one can cite from the travel impressions of Brigid Keenan, the English freelance writer who was born in India.

*..... we had never even heard of Bernier, not about the other early travelers from Europe, all of whom had fascinating tales to tell. In fact, our ignorance about Kashmir in general, handicapped us throughout our six-week holiday, for while the natural beauty of the valley is spectacularly obvious, its past is complex and not easy to unravel on the spot. To sightsee successfully rather than just admire the scenery, you must know something of the historical background and possess the instinct of a detective. For instance, at the famed Shalimar Garden my husband was browsing round inside the black marble pavilion built by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, when he spotted a small section of the original painting that must once have covered the walls. There is only a small patch of this exquisite, delicate work - in gold leaf and black and yellow and red. The decoration on the rest of the walls is modern and much cruder. We were rather excited by our find and still more so, later on when we came across Francois Bernier's description of the pavilion in 1665, finding it tallied with what we had seen. **18***

The complex past of Kashmir interested Keenan whereas Naipaul was content to experience the natural beauty of the valley.

Naipaul's attitude to the Kashmir problem is marked by a similar superficiality. A reader not familiar with the problem which had started before Naipaul visited the place, is introduced to it casually, "...without newspapers and the radio, it was possible to be in Kashmir for weeks without realizing that there was a Kashmir problem". **19**

The same casual tone can be discerned in his further descriptions of issues related to Kashmir:

Kashmir was being talked about on every side. All-India Radio was carrying detailed reports of the annual United Nations debate; Radio Pakistan tirelessly warned that in Kashmir as in the rest of India Islam was in danger, as Radio Kashmir as tirelessly retaliated. Mr. Nehru came to Srinagar and Radio Pakistan reported that a public meeting he addressed broke up in disorder. **20**

In the sixties, Naipaul was not much interested in the Indian political scene to analyze it or comment on it, as compared to his later books on India. Kashmir was an idyllic place to him and the presence of UN vehicles that watched over the ceasefire line “seemed as anachronistic as the clock in Julius Caesar”. **21** A visit to the Amarnath cave was prompted by Dr. Karan Singh's vivid account of his journey to that cave. Recounting the visit Naipaul says, "I could not share his religious fervor, but I relished his exact description of snowclad mountains, icy green lakes and changing weather. To me, the true mystery of the cave lay in its situation". **22** Yet he has used the word "Pilgrimage" for the trip which he enjoyed as much as his stay in Kashmir.

This was one of the few places where physical India corresponded to the India of Naipaul's dreams and provided a resting place to his imagination by sustaining his dreams. This was where he could identify with India and look condescendingly at the prototype of the westerner, Laraine the impulsive American woman who converted to Islam and married Rafiq, a poor satirist. Naipaul has always been critical of a certain type of western tourist, especially those who come to India in search of instant moksha or liberation. This attitude is part of the agnostic persona of himself that he tries to project, with probably the western readers in mind.

Significantly, Simla was an important destination on Naipaul's itinerary. It made him think of Kipling, one of his favorite authors. “A response to Kipling cannot but be personal and on this level. He is too honest and generous; he is too simple; he is too gifted. His vulnerability is an embarrassment: the criticism he invites can only seem a type of brutality”. **23** His admiration for Kipling as well as his response to Simla can be seen in the almost lyrical outburst that the former imperial citadel evoked:

No city or landscape is truly real unless it has been given the quality of myth by writer, painter or by its association with great events. Simla will never cease to be Kipling's city: a child's vision of Home, doubly a fairyland. India distorts and enlarges; with the Raj it enlarged upon what was already a fantasy. This is what Kipling caught; this is his uniqueness. **24**

A significant aim of Naipaul's first visit to India was to trace his antecedents in this country, which calls for a historical perspective. A visit to his grandfather's village in eastern Uttar Pradesh was undertaken perhaps with some expectations of finding an Indian identity. The name and location of his grandfather's village, close to "... this town in eastern Uttar Pradesh, not even graced by a ruin, celebrated only for its connections with the Buddha and its backwardness", **25** is not mentioned. The town referred to is possibly Gorakhpur, a town in eastern Uttar Pradesh near Kapilvastu, Buddha's birthplace.

A visit to this village of Dubes and Tiwaris with an IAS officer was not a satisfying experience for Naipaul. The first thing he noticed was that there was no "communal living" **26** in the village though all the Brahmin inhabitants were related, closely or distantly, perhaps because there were so many of them. It was a fairly prosperous village but Ramchandra, "the present head of my grandfather's branch of the Dubes" **27** lived, in a small thatched hut.

Naipaul confessed that he was disappointed and one feels this is one of the reasons why he rejected Ramchandra. Naipaul was brought up mostly in the affluent household of his mother's family in chaguanas, "a well known local big house" while his father... did odd jobs here and there, attached to my mother's family, now going back to the protection of an uncle by marriage, a rich man, founder and part owner of the biggest bus company in the island. Poor himself, with close relatives who were still agricultural laborers, my father dangled all his life in a half-dependence and half-esteem between these two powerful families. **28**

Two things about his childhood influenced his reaction to the village of the Dubes in general and Ramchandra in particular. The absence of community living of the sort he had experienced in chaguanas and later in Port of Spain as part of an extended family on his mother's side, which he had hoped to find in his ancestral village, was one. The second was more complex. He had possibly expected his grandfather's branch of the family to be prosperous like others in the village. The poverty that he saw, along with Ranchandra Dube's tendency to cling to him, and make use of him, wiped off his wish to be identified with this family, in any way. Possibly he was reminded of his father Sreepasad Naipaul who never succeeded professionally.

Naipaul's hysteric reaction to certain aspects of India, his visit to the village with an IAS Officer as an escort, were calculated moves to distance himself from his roots. Naipaul could cut off his connection with the village but he was not able to sever his Indian connections altogether as his later visits to this country, followed by books that present a semi-fictional account of his experiences, signify. However, he could never establish an Indian identity in spite of his upbringing and ancestry. An early indication in *An Area of Darkness* is Naipaul's horror of being part of a crowd:

There was nothing in my appearance or dress to distinguish me

from the crowd eternally hurrying into church gate stationn. In

Trinidad to be an Indian was to be distinctive. 29

So Naipaul resisted being part of a faceless crowd. That was the beginning of an anxiety which developed into hysteria after his encounter with the customs officials. In the sixties, Bombay was a dry city and the liquor laws were stringent. A tourist needed a permit from the government tourist office. The two bottles of liquor that Naipaul was carrying were seized by the customs officials, and he was asked to get a liquor permit.

The procedure was lengthy, and by the time Naipaul got his permit, his companion Patricia fainted. Naipaul's first visit to India thus did not start on an auspicious note and any reader could tell that it was going to be problematic.

Naipaul's quest for India had started much earlier in his childhood. As a boy, he associated the old lady in Trinidad who spoke only Hindi and whom everyone called Gold Teeth Nanee, with India. She once drank a glass full of Bianco fluid, mistaking it for coconut water and fell serious by ill. "So one India crashed; and as we got older, living now in the town, Gold Teeth dwindled to a rustic oddity with whom there could be no converse". **30**

Another aspect of India that Naipaul encountered early in life was the caste system, especially as manifest in professional skills. As a child, he noticed it "... 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, yet still permitted to take up room; (and)... wooden printing blocks, never used because printed cotton was abundant and cheap and because the secret of the days had been forgotten, no dyer being at hand". **31** From the sociological point of view such situations are common in societies undergoing rapid sociopolitical changes. To quote the celebrated sociologist, Andre Beteille, in this context:

In these changing conditions, small and gradual reductions in disparities are periodically met with sudden and violent reprisals which bring established patterns into sharp relief. It is difficult, when this is happening, to demonstrate or even discern any clear direction of change. **32**

So articles like wooden printing blocks and string beds which had lost their utility, were cherished in the diasporic Indian society of Trinidad of the fifties as they established a link with the mother country, though the caste skills associated with them had long become irrelevant.

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