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A PEOPLE'S WRITER AND HIS MARGINALITY: STUDY IN MARGINALIZED SELF IN NAIPAUL'S TRAVELOGUES

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Abstract

V.S. Naipaul has always been a traveller. His forefathers were from India, he was born and brought up in Trinidad and he has spent the major part of his professional career in England. His global liaisons and experiences make him a truly cosmopolitan writer. His Indian connections make him an insider as well as outsider at the same time. Romanticizing a people's lay of the land has never been Naipaul's style of writing. He sees with microscopic view and expresses exactly what he sees or feels. He has visited India many a times to explore his roots and has written three valuable travelogues on the predicament of the country of his ancestors. The paper attempts to explore the marginality of a noble laureate's existence and how his marginalized self reflects in his travelogues.

Key words: Travelogue, postcolonial, expatriate sensibility, marginalized self, Hinduism, disappointment.

Introduction

I would like to start off my observations with some considerations that might seem both painfully obvious and annoyingly obtuse, or at least twisted. Instead of taking up the specific details of Naipaul's argument of cultural diversity, I would like to isolate one of its presumptions. Actually, something even more basic than a presumption, and something almost universally accepted in literary studies. It is my belief, though, that remembering basic facts, and pointing out what goes without saying, can help keep our pursuits oriented.

I was quite attracted by Naipaul's incisive and arresting work "India a wounded civilisation". This speaks of a reversal of E. M. Foster's *Howards End* and Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*. Foster and Zadie romanticise the contemporary England of their age whereas Naipaul takes an obtuse turn. I like to put Naipuls's idiom as differentia specifica that is a rhetoric of drift and lost nimbus. I find Atwood's quote of Adriene Rich in *Negotiating with the Dead* akin to Naipaul's visitation and recording of India. Adriene says,

I came to explore the wreck.

The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail…
…the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth.
Adrienne Rich, "Diving Into the Wreck"
(qtd. in Atwood's *Negotiating with the Dead*, 2003, 158–159)

This paper endeavours to bring the wreck of the self and its sympathies in the light that confession of one's own personality are made in one's writing without any deliberate attempt. It needs sensitivity and attention to highly particular and quite idiosyncratic rifts and tensions in one man's philosophical personality. It seems to me this tends to determine which pieces combine together in transforming the circumstantial visitations in fundamental variations. It might be considered as a means for ascertaining what degree the medium of thought (experience both transferred as mythical structures and imaginary homelands) determines the kind of thought. This experiment would be in text and self affiliations, not just describing the features of literary form, but attempting to ascertain personal against the form's function.

Discussion

The idea of marginality can very well be understood in Ludwig Wittgenstein's idea of public criterion and private languages. Wittgenstein asserts that "An 'inner process' stands in need of outward criteria and this criterion causes the margins both manifest and subtle. We might apply this idea to the concept of authorial intent. We simply cannot take a peep in another's mind to demonstrate or show what is that person's intent. The inner process, "meaning" is in need of the public criteria of text. In Naipaul's travelogues this observed public criteria is the coaxial textual reality. I firmly believe this can help us draw the interpretative assembly of selves and its margins. Naipaul's trilogy expresses his shattered speculations dominated by the principle of simulation that has transformed our universe into a hyper-reality – a realm of codes and signs around which we organise our experiences of the real.

An Area of Darkness begins by identifying Naipaul's position as an observer, through an exploration of the autobiographical dimensions of his relation to India. It traces the progress of his grandfather's migration from India to Trinidad, where he recreated a simulacrum in miniature of his lost Indian world. His was a family circle enclosed in a community based on a denial of the adopted country. It goes on to describe the gradual contraction and disruption of the seemingly complete world of Trinidad's Little India. India functioned for Naipaul as a "resting-place for the imagination". "It was the country from which my grandfather came, a country never physically described and therefore never real, a

country out in the void beyond the dot of Trinidad "(AD, p. 29). India's unknown character is symbolized by a similar image to that which Naipaul uses in *A House for Mr. Biswas* to evoke abandonment and desolation, as if to suggest Naipaul's sense that, cut off from the land of his ancestors, he is, figuratively speaking, an orphan. India was imagined by him as shrouded in darkness, "as darkness surrounds a hut at evening, though for a little way around the there is still light" (AD, p. 32). In contrast to the notion that he can find India by looking within himself, and in an admission that his journey to India has been a disappointment, he asserts:

> And even now, though time has widened, though space has contracted and I have traveled 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 (AD, p. 32).

Naipaul discovers that his conception of an Indian identity has no echo in the minds of those he meets, whose identity is defined in terms of region or caste.

> A colonial, in the double sense of one who had grown up in a Crown colony and one who had been cut off from the metropolis, be it either England or India, I came to India expecting to find metropolitan attitudes. I had imagined that in some ways the largeness of the land would be reflected in the attitudes of the people. I have found, as I have said, the psychology of the cell and the hive. And I have been surprised by similarities. In India, as in tiny Trinidad, I have found the feeling that the metropolis is elsewhere, in Europe or America. Where I had expected largeness, rootedness and confidence, I have found all the colonial attitudes of self-distrust (OB, p. 44).

Some of the bitterness of Naipaul's account of Indian society can be ascribed to this disappointment.

All the three travelogues depict Naipaul's growing perception of India. On his first visit, Naipaul took with him the conventional ideas of India –the land of Gandhi and Nehru, the India of the classical past, which had been meticulously dredged up by European Indologists in the 19th century. He had his own childhood memories of an old India, the Brahmnic world of rituals and myths that has been carefully preserved in Trinidad. This past held an emotional charge for Naipaul. In fact, this visit for him was a quest for his roots. He was very optimistic about this journey of the land of his ancestors. But for his distress, he was quite disappointed with this visit. He had lived in India for nearly a year. But he could not understand it. He could find nothing except "Darkness" and horror. He writes:

> It was a journey that ought not have been made, it has broken my life in two. The journey was, in fact, a futile one. It did not succeed in exorcising anything. (*AD*, 27)

He revisited India in 1975, and emerged with a new book, India: A wounded Civilization, in 1977. This time his approach seems to be that of a critic or a serious analyst rather than of a tourist. Drawing on novels, news reports, political memoirs, and his own

encounters with ordinary Indians–from a supercilious prince to an engineer constructing housing for Bombay's homeless–Naipaul captures a vast, mysterious, and agonized continent inaccessible to foreigners and barely visible to its own people. He sees both the burgeoning space program and the 5,000 volunteers chanting mantras to purify a defiled temple; the feudal village autocrat and the Naxalite revolutionaries who combined Maoist rhetoric with ritual murder. This became a book of reflection and analysis, questioning the conventional wisdom of the developing world and did not bear even a remote resemblance to the previous one.

This collection of essays continues Naipaul's diagnosis of a "devitalized" Indian mentality. The book's titular metaphor refers to a psychic, not a physical wound; its argument runs as follows: because of its particular religious and philosophic attitudes and its lack of a historical sense, India is unequipped to complete in the twentieth century, Indians prefer to withdraw into the self and into a myth of the "Old India."

In "An Old Equilibrium" the author focuses on a contradiction symbolized by India's alliance to the sacred cow on the one hand and its acquisition of a nuclear arsenal on the other. The country's attempts to move forward economically and socially clash with its religion and philosophy and post independence identity; that identity, tied to the ideas of Gandhi, involves looking backward to the village past rather than forward to the urban future. "In the British time... Indian nationalism proclaimed the Indian past; and religion was inextricably mixed with political awakening. But independent India, with its five-year plans, its industrialization, its practice of democracy, has invested in change. There always was a contradiction between the archaism of national pride and the promise of the new; and the contradiction has at last cracked the civilization open." The larger source of the crisis, however, lies in India's fatalism and focus on the self; the "old equilibrium" refers to the response of retreat and quietism in the face of distress and failure: from the quietist's viewpoint, because life and the world are "passing," because "the perfect and the imperfect are all the same," there is no reason to "bother about anything".

India: A Million Mutinies Now (1990) was a result of his third successive visit of India. This time Naipaul is reborn into a new persona: accepting and tolerant, he listens to characters as they recount the narrative of their own lives, and he refrains from offering overt authorial judgments. In this kaleidoscopic, layered travelogue, he portrays "a country of a million little mutinies," as percolating ideas of freedom which shake loose the old moral ethos rooted in caste and class. It elicits pity, anger, disgust, a sense of betrayal at India's development since independence. It tells of an India gone wrong, filled with political and economic corruption. But despite what he terms regional, religious and sectarian excesses, Naipaul sees possibilities for regenerations in the new freedoms. In this book he correctly intuited, and made his theme, the rise of long-suppressed identities that radically altered Indian society in this decade.

Naipaul moves between the stance of insider and that of outsider with regard to the societies he portrays, and blends, in an unsettling manner, sympathy with irony, cruelty with compassion, in the treatment of certain characters. These ambivalences are interpreted as the product of his situation of cultural dislocation.

He has always considered it important for a writer to establish a distinct identity, especially when he or she is an outsider or wants to be considered one. This leaves a mark on his writings. To quote from his Acceptance Speech at the first David Cohen Literature Prize awarding ceremony:

> I have always felt the need… to establish the identity of the writer, the narrator, the gatherer of impressions: to make the point that, whatever associations came with the language, this English-language traveler in the world was not English but colonial, and carried different pictures in his head.

Naipaul's feeling of alienation stems however from a spiritual crisis- basically the result of the twin problems of an aversion to the Trinidadian society in which he was born and an infractuous diaspora to London where he sought to launch his publishing career but felt isolated and alienated. Ever after living in London for three decades he feels himself distanced from the cultural spatial milieu of London. "London is my metropolitan centre; it is my commercial centre; and yet I know that it is a kind of limbo and that I am a refugee in the sense that I am always peripheral. One's concerns are not the concerns of local people." (V. S. Naipaul interviewed by Ian Hamilton, Joshi 10).His isolated life in his Wiltshire cottage bred in him a kind of alienation which is a characteristic of self-imposed exile.

His discussions of and writing about his life tend to dwell on his feelings of non-alignment and alienation. Writing with increasing irony and pessimism, he has often bleakly detailed the dual problems of the Third World: the oppressions of colonialism and the chaos of post-colonialism He portrays his life as distinguished by "homelessness and drift and longing". He describes himself as having been born into obscurity and poverty. His childhood, he states, was characterized by disorder. As a child, he says, he felt that he "was in the wrong place", and that he was "a kind of helpless unit in this large family organization".

Conclusion:

The exploration suggests that Naipaul's marginalized existence affects his expatriate sensibility directly and his acute sense of alienation and homelessness reflects in his encounters with the world and effect his writings. The rhetoric of his displacement can be found in all his compositions. Naipaul considered England as his steady home and he came to term with his exile status forever. Although, Naipaul later considered England as his steady home and he came to term with his exile status gradually, yet he can never be completely free from the deep impressionistic experiences of his marginalized self as a citizen of nowhere.

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