An Expatriate's perspective of India: A study of India- A Wounded Civilization

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Introduction

Expatriate writing, born out of a paradox between movement and resettlement, a sense of belongingness and alienation, has come to occupy a significant position between cultures and countries. It provides fresh perspectives and raises new theoretical formulations. In the process of trying to understand, or rather unravel, it constructs new identities since such creative expressions involve redefining positions and renegotiating boundaries of the emotional and psychological space one can relate to or which one considers his very own. Cultures travel within the psychological realm with the writers living abroad as they shuttle between the physical and psychological paradigms of two different nations. Cultural theories today are being rewritten by such writers who occupy the "in between' position living on the peripherals of two cultures.

Looking at one's homeland from the outside has certain advantages. The distance provides the sense of detachment that is so essential to make objective observations about one's native land. At the same time there is the privilege of having a cosmopolitan world view, while experiencing diverse cultures and customs. However, it is from these very unique positions that emerge the tensions of living in a bipolar world. Such ambivalence produces discourses which express the lived realities of the expatriate/ immigrant writers and their existential quest to seek roots, get rooted and feel possessed in their complex world.

V.S. Naipaul is one such prolific novelist and a travel writer who is twice removed from the motherland (India). He was born in an Indian Brahmin family at Chaguanas in Trinidad in 1932. But Naipaul was never at home in Trinidad which as he states, was a discouraging place for him: *it was a place where stories were never stories of success but of failure*. It seemed to him as if it was *"a peasant-minded, money minded community, spiritually static because out of from its roots, its religion reduced to rite without philosophy."* In fact even when he moved to London, shortly before attaining the age of 18, he found himself lost in the chaos of urban life. He himself states "London is my metropolitan center; it is my commercial center, 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 the local people." Despite his admiration for his place of residence, Naipaul sensed a fundamental distance from London. In an interview given in 1973 to Ronald Bryden, Naipaul said of London: "it

is not a place where I can flourish completely. It does not feed me." Naipaul is unable to write about London life because it does not provide him inspiration for his creative work. On the contrary, India has always provided a staple context for V.S.NaipauI, and as a novelist he takes a great risk by looking into India with a western outlook. Naipaul himself admits that his magnificent obsession is India when he states,

> *India is for me a difficult country. It isn't my home and cannot be my home, and yet I cannot reject it or be indifferent to it; I cannot travel only for the sights. I am at once too close, too far.*

Naipaul reveals his deep desire to understand India which is a difficult country for him. While on the one hand he accepts that India cannot be his home but he also cannot be yet another tourist visiting the country for sightseeing. His mode of thinking is clearly British which is evident from his writings. This strange sensibility which can be appropriately termed as "expatriate sensibility" haunts Naipaul throughout his fiction and other works, so much so that he becomes spokesman of emigrants. An Indian Brahmin uprooted from the land of his own ancestors, a West Indian by birth and growth, and finally, his self-imposed exile as an expatriate in London determine the complex personality that Naipaul is. It is through this lens of triple identity that he reviews India.

V.S.Naipaul visited India at the time of Indira Gandhi" s Emergency in 1975 and came up with his second travelogue India: A Wounded Civilization (1977). The book marks the second stage in the development of his diasporic concerns. Sudha Rai, writing about Naipaul's two Indian travelogues observes that Naipaul responds both:

> *As an Indian in India and a Westerner in India, Naipaul's joy and exultation comes from his former self; his anger and negativity from the latter self. His flight from India punctuated by his brief returns-the pattern of venture and withdrawal expresses perfectly the dilemma of the expatriate self.*

And as Naipaul returns, he tries to forge an intimate bond with the country, the roots of which go back to his having shared Hindu religious practices with the members of the Indian community in Trinidad. These religious practices have left a deep impact on Naipaul's mind and despite being a rationalist sharing no faith in them; he was unable to dismiss them. While his Indian self would be ready to accommodate certain things with faith, his questioning western mind challenged the same putting him in a unique self contradictory position. As he writes:

> *In India I know I am a stranger, but increasingly I understand that my Indian memories, the memories of that India which lived on into my childhood in Trinidad, are like trapdoors into a bottomless past.*

It is due to this unique position that one finds a hardening of stance of his rationalist self leading to accusations against him of playing to the western critics. In the first book it was romantic image of India which made him travel but in this second book it is actually to develop an understanding of the country. Whatever Naipaul has understood has two perspectives; one is of western outlook and the other is that of an expatriate.

The two underlying themes that run through India: A Wounded Civilization, are firstly, that India is purely Hindu and that Hindu attitudes and mindset are present all about the so called modern India, and secondly, that this purely Hindu India was repeatedly plundered and conquered first by Muslims and then by the British, which has led to the intellectual depletion, and lack of creative endeavor in this essentially Hindu India. Naipaul has given himself the liberty of emotional rather sentimental outbursts with his direct scathing remarks and vehement attacks on Indian culture, its past as well as present state of affairs.

> *I began to wonder about the intellectual depletion that must have come to India with the invasions and conquests of the last thousand years.*

He further elucidates,

> *No civilization was so little equipped to cope with the outside world; no country was so easily raided and plundered, and learned so little from its disasters.*

Naipaul assessed Indian life and culture with the Hindu norms of **Karma, Dharma and Moksha** and the Western norms of individuality and freedom. Naipaul feels that the Hindu religious practices and attitudes have rendered the Indians passive be it in the past when the country faced long periods of foreign rule—Moslem for the first 500 years and British for the last 150 years, about which Naipaul writes: Throughout the narrative Naipaul has been particularly harsh on Hinduism, which he says:

> *Hinduism has exposed us to a thousand years of defeat and stagnation. It has given men no idea of a contract with other men, no idea of state. It has enslaved one quarter of the population and always left the whole fragmented and vulnerable. Its philosophy of withdrawal has diminished men intellectually and not equipped them to respond to challenge; it has stifled growth, so that again and again in India history has repeated itself; vulnerability, defeat withdrawal.*

Naipaul considers the Indian attitudes based on Hindu philosophy and religion responsible for all the mimicry and the disappointment that India was. The attitudes of 'negation' and 'passivity' along with a defeatist outlook have been detrimental to the progress of India and these explain everything that he comes across in India. Even R.K. Narayan's novels which he read, after having visited India and having observed

its diversity and complexity, he felt 'that his comedy and irony were not quite what they appeared to be, they were a part of Hindu response to the world it was a response he could no longer share. Before Naipaul had been to India, he says:

> *Narayan's India, with its colonial apparatus, was oddly like the Trinidad of my childhood and in the Indian life of his novels I found echoes of the life of my own Indian community on the other side of the world.*

But 13 years later in India: A Wounded Civilization he regrets that Narayan's novel did not convey the reality of India which he found so 'cruel' and 'overwhelming'. He could no longer enter into Narayan's world which is again reflective of his expatriate self wherein he says:

> *To get down to Narayan's world to perceive order and continuity he saw in dereliction and smallness of India, to enter into his ironic acceptance and relish his comedy was to ignore too much of what could be seen, to shed too much of myself; my sense of history and even the simplest ideas of human possibility.*

Naipaul analyzed two of R.K. Narayan's novels Mr. Sampath and The Vendor of Sweets to exemplify how the protagonists misinterpret the Hindu philosophy of Nishkama Karma and the Gandhian ideal of Non-Violence. Nishkama Karma degenerated into to the idea of 'non-doing'and non-violence into passivity non-doing, non-interference and social indifference.

Even the crisis of emergency, was viewed by Naipaul as a turbulence generated from within because Indians failed to develop any institutions of their own due to their intellectual inadequacies and functioned on borrowed institutions without realizing the specific socio cultural, political requirements of the country. He observes:

> *The turbulence in India this time hasn't come from foreign invasion or conquest, it has been generated from within. India cannot respond in her old ways, by further retreat into archaism. Her borrowed institutions have worked like borrowed institutions; but archaic India can provide no substitutes for press, parliament and courts. The crisis of India is not only political or economic. The larger crisis is of a wounded civilization that has at last become aware of its inadequacies and is without the intellectual means to move ahead.*

What emerges from his usage of the word wounded is not a feeling of contempt for India but a deep sense of pain and anguish at the state of affairs. The 'insider' in Naipaul was disturbed at the plight and predicament of the Indians but it was the 'outsider', the rationalist Naipaul which looked for causes and explanations to the impending crisis and once again it was the Hindu ideals which came under scathing attack from him. Tracing the roots for the political crisis which was symptomatic of breakdown of the old world Naipaul writes about emergency:

It established no new moral frame for the society; it held out no promise for a better-regulated future. It reinforced, if anything, the always desperate Hindu sense of the self, the sense of encircling threat, the need to hide and hoard. In the high Hindu ideal of self-realization-which could take so many forms, even that of worldly corruption-there was no idea of a contract between man and man. It was Hinduism's great flaw, after a thousand years of defeat and withdrawal. And now the society had broken down.

The only ideal he felt Indians were aware of was the Hindu self-realization which could be distorted in many ways and the eternal belief that 'India will go on'. It was this, according to Naipaul, that led to the breakdown of the old equilibrium which for once he feels has positive aspect when he writes:

With independence and growth, chaos and loss of faith, India was awakening to its distress and the cruelties that had always lain below its apparent stability, its capacity simply for going on. Not everyone now was content simply to have his being. The old equilibrium had gone, and at the moment all was chaos. But out of this chaos, out of the crumbling of the old Hindu system, and the spirit of rejection, India was learning new ways of seeing and feeling.

Naipaul's observations about Gandhi only project him a self-absorbed Hindu and although Gandhi's self-absorption was a part of his strength, there was "always a kind of blindness" accompanying it. Naipaul believed that Gandhian ideals lacked objectivity and were only for his personal enhancements. Naipaul writes that with Gandhi's mass appeal, he should have focused on developing the sense of Indianness among the Indians. Had he done so, India would have escaped the trauma of partition and also the numerous communal riots that have occurred in pre and post-independence India.

However there is optimism in the book as Naipaul rests his hopes on the millions of people who move from villages to cities. He refers to them many times as "millions on the move".

Among them there are those who have become part of the Indian industrial revolution, which offers more than just a job. Men handling new machines, exercising technical skills that to them are new, can also discover themselves as men, as individuals. It is in this opportunity as yet offered only to a few, that Naipaul sees a true transformation.

Naipaul also sees hope in the movements of the oppressed, which are protests against the status quo and positive action for their future and India's. He writes of "unknown India on the move" entering the cities, seeking and finding work, experiencing pride in the achievement of a new sense of self.

> *India is learning new ways of seeing and feeling. The millions are on the move. The poor have ceased to be background. Another way of looking was felt to be needed, some profounder acknowledgement of the people of the streets.*

On the superficial level it does seem that Naipaul is a stern critic of India and he looks for flaws in everything he comes across in India. He looks at India with a western eye and evaluates with western standard and notions. It is also a criticism against him that he writes for the western critics, which is his target readership. But deeper probe shows an undercurrent of genuine concern. His analysis is exhortation. His effort in this book is not to resolve the dilemma of whether to accept or reject India but to gain a better understanding of it. Naipaul came to India with the very ideas of India he was familiar with Gandhi, R.K. Narayan, Hinduism its notions of Karma and Dharma. Once in India he analyses them, observes them in Indian context and also relates them to his experience of the Indian society in Trinidad. Thus India: A Wounded Civilization marks the second stage in diasporic writer's engagement with the land of his origin.

Dr. Suman Gupta comments:

> *To find for India a discrete and essential Hindu identity lingering in a continuous fashion from ancient times, put upon and savaged by permanently eternal religious like Islam, but retaining through everything its marred but still essential Indian character — that is briefly, the problematic and disturbing cultural existentialist project of India: A Wounded Civilization.*

Conclusion

Naipaul`s perspective of India as a purely Hindu nation and the entire civilization as being 'wounded' is novel and the astonishing insight and candid opinions expressed in the book speak clearly of an expatriate's vision as well as an 'insider's' concerns. However it is this role of social deconstructionist that Naipaul adopts that one finds irksome. He fails to see beyond his frames of reference, diversity for instance. Naipaul believes that Hinduism and Gandhism are the only ideological systems that Indians have and uses the two as frames of reference to explain the fatalism, passivity and the defeatist attitude and the complete failure of India.

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