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## Depiction of India in Naipaul's 'An Area of Darkness'

**Satyajeet Jaitly**

Department of English, S.P.S.B.Govt. College, Shahpura

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**Abstract** Naipaul's writing displays an extreme where there are few to no grey areas. And *An Area of Darkness* is the best example of this. The book tells the story of how Naipaul formed a "mythical" perception of India while residing in Trinidad (Naipaul's grandpa was originally from India, and they moved to the West Indies, where they settled in a little British colony named Trinidad), and how his one-year return to India destroyed that perception. The entire event is intensely personal, and Naipaul (who was just around 30 years old) acts like a picky, ungrateful foreigner who criticises the loss of his "imagined world" without attempting to investigate why it happened. This was a nation that had been pillaged and was in need.

**Keywords** Depiction of India, Naipaul's, *An Area of Darkness*

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A classic of modern travel writing, *An Area of Darkness* is Nobel laureate V.S. Naipaul's profound reckoning with his ancestral homeland and an extraordinarily perceptive chronicle of his first encounter with India. V. S. Naipaul has always been a controversial figure. Whether it is for his rude behavior towards fellow writers at conferences or his show of support for India's Hindutva ring Bharatiya Janata Party or his admission in his autobiography that his callousness killed his wife, this Trinidadian author has always been some sort of an enfant terrible of English Literature. For all his genius, he also remains a vilified figure in India and not without reason. *An Area of Darkness*, when it was published in 1964, created an uproar among Indians and was intensely criticized for its unkind, deriding and supercilious view of India.

Naipaul's literature, much like his personality demonstrates a certain extremism-where there are few or no grey areas. And that is most evident in *An Area of Darkness*. The book is about how Naipaul built a 'mythical' image about India staying in Trinidad (Naipaul's grandfather was from India and they re-located to West Indies - in a small British colony called Trinidad) and how his one-year visit to India shattered his childhood image of the country. The entire experience is a deeply personal one and Naipaul himself behaves like a rather fussy, ungenerous foreign-returned guy (he was just about 30 years old) who criticises the loss of his 'imagined world' without bothering to delve into the reasons for it. This was a plundered country that was struggling to fight its colonial past and tackle some enormous problems at hand.

This novel is part autobiography and part travel genre. Naipaul writes about his experiences in India over a span of one year. It is written in the first person narrative voice and Naipaul uses descriptive passages very well to outline his themes. Traveling from the bureaucratic morass of Bombay to the ethereal beauty of Kashmir, from a sacred ice cave in the Himalayas to an abandoned temple near Madras, Naipaul encounters a dizzying cross-section of humanity: browbeaten government workers and imperious servants, a suavely self-serving holy man and a deluded American religious original responses to India's paralyzing caste system, its apparently serene acceptance of poverty and squalor, and the conflict between its desire for self-determination and its nostalgia for the British raj. The result maybe the most elegant and passionate book ever written about the subcontinent V.S. Naipaul first visited India in 1962. The book emerging out of that visit, *An Area of Darkness*, remains a valuable record of an India in transition - an India losing, under a weak and exhausted



Nehru, a war with China, and losing along with it its flush of post-independence idealism and innocence. Many different ideas and expectations prompted Naipaul's first visit to India. He left Trinidad, where he was born in 1932, when he was 18 to study at Oxford. He had wanted to be a writer and had travelled to England, which was then the centre of the world for English-speaking colonials everywhere.

The life in London to which he had looked forward had turned out to be "sterile" and "mean". But what were the alternatives? What were the places he could think of as "home", as the centre of his world? On his first visit, Naipaul took with him the conventional ideas of India- the India people then knew as the land of Gandhi and Nehru, the India of the glittering classical past, which had been meticulously dredged up by European Indologists in the 19th century. He took with him his own childhood memories of an old India, the Brahmanic world of rituals and myths that had been carefully preserved in Trinidad. This past held an emotional charge for Naipaul. His ancestors had come to Trinidad as indentured labourers in the last quarter of the 19th century. The regions of North India they lived in were systematically rendered destitute by the British in the post-mutiny period. Brahmins had been a special target. The long sea voyages to the "Great Unknown"- the Caribbean, Fiji, Mauritius violated caste rules but were made necessary by the surrounding dereliction.

The history of these Brahmins was one of great poverty and wretchedness, and to the generations that followed the first arrivals in Trinidad those early traumas were fresh in the memory. Naipaul, a third-generation Indian, had just begun to outgrow this painful past when he went to India, but India, poor and abject, was to revive in the most unexpected way all the fears and insecurities he had known as a child.

Naipaul wrote on the penultimate page of *An Area of Darkness* a record of intense fear and anguish. But if this book was only about a lacerated sensibility, similar to books by certain kinds of western travellers to India, it would not be read any more. Remarkably, for a travel book published in 1964, it has outlasted its time; and it has done so because of literary virtues that sound simple but are hardest to achieve: honesty and directness.

Anger and fear made Naipaul see things other travellers miss. Few writers had ever said as many incisive things about the cultural encounter between India and Britain as found in the chapter titled "Fantasy and Ruins". The work abounds in startling new perceptions, and for many writers and intellectuals in India, it became a crucial part of their self-education- Naipaul's radical interpretation of Gandhi, among other things, disturbed.

Serious-minded travellers to India continue to read *Darkness* as a guide to a range of bewildering Indian attitudes. Others cherish it for Naipaul's descriptions of places - particularly of Kashmir - which are precise and lyrical, without ever relying on the heavy vocabulary deployed by, for instance, Jan Morris. And in Naipaul's own intellectual journey, it is an important landmark. The *Middle Passage*, Naipaul's first travel book, is largely conventional in form and content. The unique mingling of social enquiry and autobiography that marks Naipaul's later non-fiction (and indeed his fiction) first occurred in *An Area of Darkness*. It is where you can see him developing his special ways of seeing and working towards new kinds of knowledge about himself, about India, about the "half-made societies" that would become his subject in later books. It is where he began to find that elusive centre of his world - the centre that lay not in any particular place but in the many areas of darkness of his own richly diverse past.

This book becomes an interesting read because of the author's unique background. Born in an Indian family in Trinidad, he spent his childhood listening to the stories about India. Later part of his life, where he established as a writer, he spent in England. So this is a personality, who has lived in two extremes of the world and who is discovering a diverse country like India for the very first time. Naipaul had certain expectations and a faint picture from his childhood memories about his ancestral land. But when the actual encounter began, he could not relate to this country or its people on any level.



Naipaul keeps a certain distance from his subjects and this detachment makes his work authentic and original. How many times we have seen a writer having emotional attachment with its subjects. Making it difficult to get the true account of things? Naipaul succeeds in being the unsentimental observer." His are the original responses to India, Naipaul criticizes almost every aspect of India. When he sees India, he does not see the rich spiritual heritage or the longest lasting ancient civilization. Instead, he sees the country, which has stripped off its resources. He doesn't see the country which had given birth to so many great religions. Instead he points out, how the great ideas and concepts of religions have wrongly ingrained into the society. He thinks that those ideas and traditions are decaying Indian society for generations:

"...' And do thy duty, even if be humble, rather than another's, even if it is great. To die in one's duty is life: to live another's is death' This is the Gita, preaching degree fifteen hundred years before Shakespeare's Ulysses, preaching it today. 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 more draughtsman."

"Caste sanctioned by the Gita with almost propagandist fervour, might be seen as part of the older Indian pragmatism, the life' of classical India. It has decayed and ossified with the society, and its corollary, function, has become all: the sweeper's inefficiency and the merchants' short-sighted ruthlessness are inevitable. Every man is an island, each man to his function, his private contact with God This is the realization of the Gita's selfless action. This is caste..."

Poverty is not new to the author, he accepts it passively. He unflinchingly observes the unhygienic life styles, squalor, and diseased human conditions. His is analysis of paralyzed caste system and its effects on the society is very precise:

"An eastern conception of dignity and function, reposing on symbolic action: this is the dangerous, decayed pragmatism of caste Symbolic dress, symbolic food, symbolic worship: India deals in symbols, inaction. Inaction arising out of proclaimed functions, functions out of caste... But at the heart of the system lies the degradation of the latrine-cleaner, and that casual defecation in a veranda which Gandhi observed in 1901."

"But the truth is that Indians do not see these squatters and might even, with complete sincerity, deny that they exist: a collective blindness arising out of Indian fear of pollution and resulting conviction that Indians are the cleanest people in the world. He sees the attitudes of accepting traditions blindly and never questioning ones own belief system. He sees a country whose people have pride of belonging to the oldest lasting tradition, but have a very strong reluctance to grow. Naipaul's criticism extends into every aspect of Indian culture, language, people, and history. No negative attitude escapes his eye, including subtle Indian habit of escaping into the land of imagination to avoid the painful reality of existence:

"It is well that Indians are unable to look at their country directly, for the distress they would see would drive them mad. And it is well that they have no sense of history, for how then would they be able to continue to squat amid their ruins, and which Indian would be able to read the history of his country for the last thousand years without anger and pain? It is better to retreat into fantasy and fatalism, to trust to the stars in which the fortunes of all are written and to regard the progress of the rest of the world with the tired tolerance of one who has been through it all before..."

"Eighteenth-century India was squalid, It invited conquest. But not in Indian eyes: before British came. as every Indian will tell you India was rich, on the brink of an industrial breakthrough;. India interpretations of their history are almost as painful as the as the history itself; and it is especially painful to see the earlier squalor being repeated today,.. A people with a sense of history might have ordered matters differently. But this is precisely the saddening, element in Indian history: this absence of growth and development."



Naipaul notices the effects of quick fix solutions to the caste problem and his advice still holds good. He finds the insights of Nehru and her writers into India as romantic, he admires Gandhi and clearly understands his struggle and failure:

"...He looked at India as no Indian was able to; his vision was direct, In this directness was, and is revolutionary. He sees exactly what the visitor sees; he does not ignore the obvious, He sees the beggars and the shameless pundits and the filth of Banaras; he sees the atrocious sanitary habits of doctors, lawyers and journalists. He sees the Indian callousness, the Indian refusal to see. No Indian attitude escape him, no Indian problem; he looks down to the roots of the static, decayed society. And the picture of India which comes out of his writings and exhortations over more than thirty years still holds: this is the measure of his failure.."

Reserving government jobs for untouchables helps nobody, It places responsibility in the hands of the unqualified. It is the system that as to be regenerated, the psychology of caste that has to be destroyed. So Gandhi comes again and again to the filth and excrement of India, the dignity of latrine-cleaning: the spirit of service."

Naipaul thinks that as with every other great Indian figure, India undid Gandhi. Nation accepted him as Mahatma (the great soul), but forgot his message almost instantly.

From the moment he arrives in the country, he applies his own litmus test on it and decides it's a failed nation on every count. So to Naipaul, the weather is oppressive, the poverty is horrifying. people squat defecating all over the place, they serve food with unclean hands, they overcharge Customers and what more, even their films don't offer a respite! Naipaul has not one good thing to say about the country. but doesn't show the slightest hesitation to indulge in gross Overstatements and ridiculous generalizations with comments like Indians lack in courage... they have been known to go on picnicking on a bank while a stranger drowned' or that 'Indians defecate everywhere'. And this is a bit strange considering half the book is dedicated to his three- - month long stay in a cozy, pampered House Boat in the picturesque Kashmir valley Yet. Naipaul sees no beauty in the land.

Naipaul makes some very sound points when he talks of India being a country of symbolic, speech making gestures Whether it was the '60s or today, action is by way of symbols rather than concrete measures. He's also right to be irritated about Indians and their stubborn unwillingness to see what is obvious. They turn a blind eye to what is painful or disgusting and go about their business like nothing happened. This is important because not much has changed for an India in this respect. They continue to be escapists Economically of course, the country has progressed by leaps and India is surging forward more confidently than it ever did.

It's difficult to take Naipaul's criticism seriously because most of it seems like. an effort to deconstruct the notion of India. There is a perverse cynicism at work and the author, while criticising the country's present, makes no effort to understand its tumultuous recent past or look into its prospects. Hence, even as a piece of work, it remains a highly personal account which unjustly creates and reinforces colonial prejudices.

Two of his observations in particular are condescending and unjustifiable. Naipaul talks of how incongruous India's premier buildings appear in the face of its squalor and poverty. "It is building for the sake of building, creation for the sake of creation. In the North, the ruins (forts etc) speak of waste and failure and the very grandeur of the Mughal buildings is oppressive. Europe has its monuments of Sun-Kings, its Louvres and Versailles. But they are part of the development of a country's spirits."

In a display of unimaginable bad faith, he even suggests that the Taj Mahal could be transported slab by slab to United States and re- created and it would seem wholly admirable. There, he implies that the edifice would serve a meaning. Here, he says, it is only a despot's monument with poverty around it.



Again, he talks of how the English language is the greatest incongruity of British rule' and has caused 'psychological damage' to the country through its continued official use English. Naipaul should know was never thrust upon Indians Other countries resisted it. Indians were attracted to it Today. India constitutes one of the largest English speaking nations and this has had tremendous impact on its global appeal and economic progress. It's unfortunate that Naipaul chose not to see at all the fascinating side of India- its Splendid diversity, its colour and cuisines, it's incredible warmth and Festivity- which today has made it one of the top most tourist destinations in the world. The only aspect about India Naipaul seems to have really liked is its Railway system which he describes as 'too fine and complex for a country like India.

The book is divided into three parts. Part one is entitled A Resting Place for the Imagination He speaks about his ancestors coming to India as indentured labourers. He also deals with his first experiences on the issue of race, of Muslims and Hindus. Naipaul was born an unbeliever. He grew up in an orthodox Hindu family In India he explains how caste comes to mean the brutal division of labor and this was an unpleasant concept. While he was an unbeliever he was still saddened at the decay of old customs and rituals. Naipaul talks about the poverty in India and how it is one of the poorest countries in the world. When he moves to London he find himself as one more face in the midst of Industrialized England. Naipaul speaks about the Indian English mimicry and how this is just like fantasy. He goes on to speak about the custom of defecating everywhere and how they refuse to acknowledge this fact. The approach to many villages is not a pleasant experience therefore. Naipaul speaks about Mahatma Gandhi and how he was able to look at India squarely and see its problems in a totally objective manner.

Part Two opens with the image of a Doll's House on the Dal Lake. This is in fact a hotel called Hotel Liward, which is situated in Kashmir. He speaks about his relationships with the various people who worked in the hotel and the ensuing conflicts, which occurred. We learn about the function of the Indian Civil Service. He is encouraged to join a pilgrimage to the Cave of Amarnath the Eternal Lord, which is ninety miles north of Srinagar He, speaks about his joy and that of the other pilgrims as they climb the Himalayas and try to get inside a cave. Even though they are on a pilgrimage Naipaul States how as soon as they got inside the cave it was like a typical Indian bazaar. Naipaul recounts many anecdotes among them one about a young couple called Rafiq and Laraine Rafiq is a poor musician. They spend a good deal of time fighting but eventually they get married. They split up however as she is unable to bear the poverty in India, She returns home to America.

Part three deals with how the British possessed the count completely. Their withdrawal was irrevocable. He speaks about the English of the raj how they swaggered and had mannerisms and spoke a jargon. He mentions Kipling and how he is a good chronicler of Anglo-India. He talks about how the Taj Mahal is a great building without a function.

He goes on to speak about writers and how Indian attempts at the novel reveal the Indian confusion further. Naipaul moves on to speak about Indian railways and how he befriended a Sikh while traveling by train in the south of India.

He comes to the conclusion however that India for him remains An Area of Darkness. He has learned over the years his separateness his contentment with being a colonial without a past and without ancestors. At the conclusion of the novel he tells us about his encounter with an emaciated man called Ramachandra. This man wants help to start litigation and get some land, which formerly belonged to. Naipaul's grandfather Naipaul is disgusted at this incident and leaves in a mood of self-reproach. He talks about his flight home and how it was made up of anxiety and frustration. He admits that the journey to India should not have been made as it broke his life in two.

The general vision given in this novel of India is somber and dark. The title An Area of Darkness refers to India. Many of the negative aspects of Indian culture are highlighted and Naipaul seems to see the whole





bleakness of the culture at every stage. Colonialism is an important issue in the story and again this is treated with a good deal of ironic, detachment. Towards the conclusion of the story Naipaul acknowledges that he should never really have returned to the country.

Colonial India in the twentieth century forms the cultural context of this novel Naipaul gives the reader a vivid insight into the various sects and cultural systems dominating this country. In Part Two of the novel Naipaul analyses the whole colonial process. There are copious references to Hinduism and Muslims and Buddhism and he paints some vivid pictures of the various customs, which these people engage in. Poverty is a key aspect of this culture and contributes a good deal, to the reason why he chose such a title for the novel.

The story abounds with descriptions of the extreme poverty of India Naipaul describes India as the poorest country in the world" He analyses in a very logical way the reasons why he thinks Poverty exists in such a real way in India. He mentions at one stage how divorce of the intellect from body labour has made of us the most resource less and most exploited nation on earth." The concluding section abounds in grim and rather depressing images of poverty. When Naipaul pays a trip to the village and meets the emaciated Ramachandra who is surrounded in dire poverty he is appalled and simply wants to leave the country at once. Poverty is seen as a self-defeating and destructive reality in this country.

Naipaul speaks a good deal about the caste system in India. He describes it as the 'brutal division of labour' and something, which is unpleasant. He mentions how the cast system only imprisons a man in his function' and makes so many people anonymous and faceless. Indians who are born overseas are not accepted by the system and have no identity.

One section of the novel is devoted to the theme of colonialism. He mentions at one stage how the country only pretends to be colonial, yesterday the country's mimicry was Mogul, tomorrow it could be Russian or American. He concludes by stating that the Indian English mimicry is like fantasy. When the British withdrew Completely from India something of fantasy remained attached to their presence there. He draws a comparison between colonial India and colonial Trinidad, Trinidad is a British colony but in size it is only a dot on the map and therefore it is important to be British. Naipaul states that the England of India was different 'an incongruous imposition in his words. He goes on to state the negativity of colonialism and how he felt the coming together of India and England as a violation, buildings were too grand, too big for the puniness, poverty and defeat in which they were set. He mention how these buildings strove to impose attitudes on people from both within and without. Overall the impression given in this book of colonialism in India is extremely negative.

Despite making some strong valid points, Naipaul almost never touches optimistic side of India. As if he has decided to turn a blind eye towards the positive side of things. For the most part, the book remains a descriptive travelogue. His insights into his subjects are limited. He scores well on critical analysis of his subjects. But, throughout the book author's first impressions remain with him. Many times prose sounds repetitive and banal with petty details. He fails to see the nation, which has just been given freedom, nation which is still trying to find its identity. He points out the problem, but is unable to identify the root causes. He fails to capture the survival struggle, dreams, and aspirations of a common man. He fails to see the history and the effects of earlier Islamic and British invasions. Author attributes earlier invasions to the static and decayed Indian society.

Naipaul's description of India is impulsive and anecdotal. His failure is evident in the overall gloomy picture that comes out of his writing But again this is the beauty of a travelogue, as it captures the true responses of visitors.



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