

## The Non-fictions of V.S. Naipaul: A Critical Exploration

<sup>1</sup> Amar Nath Prasad\*  
Professor & Head  
Department of English  
Jagdam College (J.P.University)  
Chapra (Bihar)

<sup>2</sup> Daisy Kumari  
Mahaveer Sthan  
Katahari Bag, Chapra (Bihar)

### ABSTRACT

V. S. Naipaul is an eminent literary figure in the field of modern fiction, non-fiction, and travelogue writing in English literature. He earned a number of literary awards and accolades, including the coveted Nobel Prize and Booker Prize. His non-fiction e.g., *An Area of Darkness*, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, *The Loss of El Dorado*, *India: A Million Mutinies Now and Beyond Belief* are a realistic portrayal of the various types of religion, culture, customs, and people of India. As an author, the main purpose of V. S. Naipaul is to deliver the truth; because poets are the unacknowledged legislators of mankind. The fact that V. S. Naipaul has presented in his non-fiction is more authentic and realistic than that of his fiction. Nonetheless, it is fictional work that is elaborately explored, discussed, and analyzed in abundance. On the other hand, his non-fiction, by and far, remains aloof. In the last few decades, non-fictions are also taking the ground strongly. Now non-fiction writings are being analyzed, elucidated, and explored based on various theoretical principles of literary criticism.

V. S. Naipaul carried the new genre to new heights and achievements. He is of Indian descent and known for his pessimistic works set in developing countries. He visited India several times, like Pearl S. Buck and E. M. Forster. So, his presentation of Indian religion, society, culture, and politics are very realistic. His vision and ideas are very close to the modern thoughts and visions of both the east and the west.

**Keywords:** *Non-fiction, An Area of Darkness, India: A Wounded Civilization, India: A Million Mutinies Now, Cultural Growth and Hegemony.*

Our paper is concerned with the brief introduction of the famous non-fictions of V. S. Naipaul. Naipaul wrote three non-fictional works related to India, his ancestral land. He came to India several times, and whatever he had seen, felt, and experienced gave the shape of three important

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\* Authors: Amar Nath Prasad & Daisy Kumari

Email: [amarnathprasad67@gmail.com](mailto:amarnathprasad67@gmail.com)

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books about India. They are:- *An Area of Darkness* (1964), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977) *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. All these books present a very realistic and beautiful portrayal of contemporary society, politics, religion, culture, and people. He has also written two books related to Islamic Society—*Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey*. (1981) and *Beyond Belief: Inslamic Excursion* (1998). Apart from all these things about his ancestral home, Islamic society, and London life, he never forgot his birth, the Carribean island. His books *The Middle Passages*, *Impression of Five Societies-British, French, and the Dutch in the West Indias and South America* (1962) and *Lost of El Dorado: A History* (1980) deal with the theme of Caribbean Island. His two collections of essays—*The Overcrowded Barracoon and Other Articles* (1972) and *The Return of Era Person* (1980), deal with the Caribbean people and their society. His recent works, *Literary Ocasion* (2004) and *A Writer's People: Ways of Looking and Feeling* (2007), show his literary talent and poetic craftsmanship. About V.S.Naipaul and his themes of writing, Prof. R. A. Singh rightly observes:

His recurring themes are clash of cultures, colonial psychosis and the motives within the individual which create a structure of human relationships. He projects an individual struggling with the conditions in which he is placed and the way he overcomes it. With this problem he may succeed or fail or finally survive. Naipaul's fiction thus acquires a three dimensional structure—historical, social and psychological. Therefore, Naipaul is three-in-one, a chronicler, a historian and biographer. (Singh, R.A. 03)

V.S.Naipaul got his early education at Queens' Royal College in Trinidad. During his studies, he succeeded in getting government scholarships for getting higher education in England. Consequently, he went to England for further studies at University College, Oxford. From the very beginning of his life, he has a strong passion for writing. This passion came from his father, who was also associated with writings.

Naturally, V.S.Naipaul worked as a correspondent for British Broadcasting Corporation. He also worked as an editor of the 'Carribean Voices' program from B.B.C. Though he lived in England his heart always longed for this birthplace Trinidad. He was very much connected to his root. During his stay in England he wrote several memorable pieces of literature. His first work was *Mystic Masseur*, published in 1957.

This book won the John Llewellyn Rhys prize in 1958. This book was also adopted as a film in 2001. Naipaul was also interested in short story writing. 'Miguel Street' was published in 1959 as a collection of short stories. This book won the Somerset Mangham Award. His famous novel *A House For Mr. Biswas*, a bit autobiographical, deals with the life of his father in

Trinidad. His other novel *Mr. Stone and the Knight's Companions*, published in 1963 and received the Ha-Thornden Prize. His other novel *The Mimic Men* (1967), which won the W.H.Smith Literary Award, deals with a political theme. His other consequent novel *In A Free State* (1971) *Guerrillas* (1975), and *A Bend in the River*, (1979), are also related to the political theme and the intricacies and complexities of politics. These novels' central themes relate to the African people, their rights, customs, convention, and cultures.

V.S.Naipaul is a prolific writer of fictional and nonfictional work. Through his extraordinary writing style, he continues to provoke, excite and surprise the readers through his literary voyage. What matters most in his writings is the illuminating perspective and exploring this rich, fascinating world. He is more serious, studious, and sympathetic toward India in his travelogue writings. He found a significant difference between the India of his imagination and the India he encountered in reality.

*An Area of Darkness* describes Naipaul's journey to India. He traveled North to Kashmir, East to Calcutta, and South to Madras. In these various places, he saw several people and interacted with them. His observations about India's customs, conventions, rites, and culture were very harsh and critical.

His observations are also very impartial and unbiased. India, about which the traveler writer had dreamt from childhood, was fascinated with his ancestral homeland. But in India, he found a big paradox between the portrayal of his darkness about India and the country that existed in reality. But unfortunately, whatever he had cherished in his mind about the Indian people, culture, and civilization, he did not find in reality the same thing. Naipaul says :

To me as a child the India that had produced so many of the persons and things around me was featureless, and I thought of the time when the transference was made as a period of darkness, darkness which also extended to the land, as darkness surrounds a hut at evening, though for a little way around the hut there is still light. The light was the area of my experience, in time and place. And even now, though time has widened, though space has contracted and I have travelled lucidly over that area which was to me the area of darkness, something and darkness remains, in those attitudes, those ways of thinking and seeing. (*An Area of Darkness*, 30)

In *An Area of Darkness*, he flings irony on several Hindu practices. His attitude seems to be an attitude of an unbeliever or an iconoclast. He flings irony on thread ceremony, which to Naipaul is a 'theatre,' and yet as a brahmin somewhere lurking within him, he can not approve of the changes in a traditional cult.

With such a split personality, he tries to examine India of 1962 and fails to present a complete picture of India of that time. As a matter of fact, his visit to India was passing through the same transition period. So he could not present the correct picture of India or arrive at the real truth about India. Perhaps this is why, at the end of this book, he feels that he can never express the essence of India in a true sense. He says:

It was only now, as my experience of India defined itself properly against my homelessness that saw how close in the past year I had been to the total Indian negation, how much it had become the basis of thought and feeling. And already with this, in a world where illusion could only be a concept and not something felt in the bones, it was slippery never adequately expressed and seized again. (An Area of Darkness, 114)

*In both theme and technique, An Area of Darkness is very near to Joseph Conrad's famous novel Heart of Darkness. In this novel, Conrad presents a realistic picture of the Jungle in Congo Basin, where everything is uncivilized, savage, and dark. It is their darkness that they are always seen as exploited and ruled by colonizers.*

In the name of the country's reformation and development, the colonizers rob the ignorant tribals of rich natural resources, making their country more prosperous. Similar to *An Area of Darkness* Naipaul also presents an uncivilized, savage, and dark country like India. In other words, this book also presents his insatiable search for his identity and belongingness. The last paragraph of the book shows the pain and experience which Naipaul has felt during his visit to his land of forefathers :

The world is illusion, the Hindu say. We talk of despair, but true despair lies too deep for formulation. It was only now, as my experience of India itself more properly against my own homelessness that I saw how close in the past year I had been to the total Indian negation, how much it had become the basis of thought and feeling. And already, with this awareness, in a world where illusion could only be a concept and not something felt in the bones, it was slipping away from me. I felt it as something true which I could never adequately express and never seize again. (An Area of Darkness, 266)

*India: A Wounded Civilization* is the other significant travelogue of V.S.Naipaul. The phrase wounded in this title is very suggestive. It suggests the several invasions and infiltration of the tyrants to India. In this book, Naipaul does not find any merit in Gandhian ideology. According to Naipaul, Gandhian political thought and economic policy have some certain serious limitations.

The truth which Naipaul has presented in this travelogue is very honest which India must realize her weakness. This book also shows Naipaul's aversion to the leaders who opposed emergency and challenged Mrs. Indira Gandhi. He was of the opinion that these leaders

opposed Mrs. Gandhi because they wanted to attain power. He also says that India has committed several mistakes in the past, but despite various errors and falls, she remained slave in chains for centuries. Ravi K. Jha rightly observes:

Naipaul considers that 'Emergency' is not an issue for discussion in making of Indian civilization. He has extracted the fundamental weakness of Indian civilization. The borrowed institutions of India like press, democracy and judicial system have become dysfunctional which the nation Indian brought from the West. Most of the issues raised by Naipaul are pertaining to religious, cultural, political, economic and historical matter. All these issues are yet to be addressed amicably. India will have to strive hard to solve these issues honestly. (Jha, R.K., Preface)

When Naipaul paid the second visit to India, he saw a drastic change in India's social and religious life. He saw the deep wound in social and religious life. The civilization of India boasted of its deep and profound moral touch, and spiritualism was found by Naipaul hollow and empty. So, he was very much unhappy to see the grim truth of India, particularly the attitudes of the politicians to the general people. He was also very much distressed to see the miserable plight of the marginalized and the haven't. In other words, he has described every aspects of Indian people, culture and society. Yashoda Bhat rightly observes :

The quest takes another dimension when he visited India in the sixties and seventies and wrote two angry, controversial travelogues—An Area of Darkness and India a Wounded Civilization. His tirade against India in these books sounded imperialistic and called forth a very unpleasant and furious response from Indians. His homelessness was confirmed and returning to London, he continued to be an expatriate. These books are experimental blending of various literary genre. (Bhatt, 161)

Naipaul develops a very poor opinion about the Indian religion and its past glory. He says that the people of India have been fettered in extreme infatuation with their religion. They have been intellectually parasitic on other civilizations.

To him, the people of India depended on others for ideas and institutions that made the country work. He finds that the emergency which comes so seen after independence dramatizes India's creative incapacities, intellectual depletion, defencelessness, and inadequacies of every Indian's ideas.

He also thinks that the religion of India is creative as well as creeping. The religion of Vinoba Bhave can only express the dust and defeat of the Indian village. Though Indians have made some contributions to science in this century, their work has been alone abroad and not in India :

It is a cause of concern to the Indian scientific community—which feels itself vulnerable in India—that many of those men who are so daring and original abroad should, when they are lured back to India,

collapse into ordinariness and yet remain content, become people who seem unaware of their former worth, and seem to have been brilliant by accident. They have been claimed by the lesser civilization, the lesser idea of dharma and self fulfilment. In the civilization reduced to its forms, they no longer have to strive intellectually to gain spiritual merit in their own eyes; that same merit is now to be had by religious right behaviour, correctness. (India : A Wounded Civilization 137)

Between 1988 to 1990, V.S.Naipaul came to India once again, and he came with a new travelogue namely *India A Million Mutinies Now*. After the gap of 13 years, he realized that he had, to some text, wrongly interpreted the great religion, gods and goddesses, culture, conventions, customs, and rites of the Indian people.

He revised his thoughts and visions and presented them in a new way in this voluminous book *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. This book is a continuation as well as a revision of his earlier views. It shares some features with his fictional work and some of the new features of novels of his time. This book is a conglomeration of several approaches. This book contains wide coverage of India as well as his changing attitude towards this country. Yashoda Bhat rightly holds the view:

It is a revision as well as an introspective deliberation realizing his own earlier inadequacies. The positive factor about this book is his own increased knowledge about India after writing two books. The scenario in India also had changed for it is now post-independence India and Naipaul's observant eye very perceptibly catches these changes as though with a very sensitive lens. Naipaul's advantage in this book is that he meets a large number of Indians from various regions representing numerous cross sections of society. He realizes his earlier inadequacies and writes about it: (Bhatt, 130)

In this book, Naipaul says that India is recuperative and least affected by its wound. He strongly believes that the day is not far when India recovers soon. He feels that the real problem with India is that it is coping with a number of contradictions and paradoxes. Naipaul found decay and darkness in his earlier travelogue, but he found a ray of hope in this book. During this gap of 27 years, he finds that India has changed abundantly.

It has changed from the confusion that accompanied independence to the many voices and perspectives of the post-colonial. In the book's nine chapters, Naipaul finds India is coping with vast discrepancies between the professed ideologies and practiced reality. He also found the Dalit movement raising its head high in the changing scenario.

He wrote several lines about B.R.Ambedkar, who is supposed to be a great god of the Dalits. He thinks no leaders of comparable authority or esteem had risen among the caste for whom

Dr. Ambedkar spoke. He had remained their leader, and he was almost their deity. Naipaul rightly observes:

Men honoured only money now. The great investment in development over three or four decades had led only to this: to corruppon, to the criminalisation of politics. In seeking to rise India had undone itself....Policemen, chief politician; the roles had become Interchangeable. And with money many long buried particularities had been released. These distructive, lesser loyalties of region, caste and clan now played on the surface of Indian life. (A Million Mutinies Now, 37)

It is interesting to note that Naipaul has shown the great obsession of the people of India for their past glory. He says that the people of India mostly live in their past. They do not want to confront the miserable situation and drab realities of the present. The views are very much conservative. They never want to change with the changing world of modern times.

Extreme infatuation with culture and religion has become part and parcel of their lives. This has become their sickness which resists Indians from moving forward toward global programs and development. In other words, their cultural and religious values are more than their life. They live and die for their culture and glorious past. Naipaul finds that the culture and the religion of the hindus are the insepanable organism of their life. Without culture and religion the Indians would be nothing.

Naipaul's other famous work *A Mimic Men* combines both autobiography and politics. It presents a realistic picture of the predicament of the decolonized country of developing and independent existence. It consists of three parts (a) Life in London (b) Childhood and student days, and (c) Back to London life.

These various discourses make the novel a complex unit. The autobiographical portion shows the writer's early days in England, and his meeting with Sandra Marriage. His adventures with politics, encouraged by his friend Browne is a new opening. Naipaul's attitude to the politics of the post-colonial third world is cynical. The impoverished and barren de-colonized men are called the mimic men, and now it has become a proverbial phrase.

His other novel, *A Flag on the Island*, was published in 1968. It is comparatively a minor work in which Naipaul combines several pieces of fiction at different times. This book portrays :

...the cultural confusion arising out of a mining of various hybrid groups. The cultural mimicry arising out of such an encounter between two unequal cultures is effectively narrated. Naipaul, the novelist, is steeped in historicism, like other Third world writers. History works out pressure on the consciousness of the writer. History is not a series of the few privileged moments and a long series of achievements of



the imperial reforms. The writer of the post colonial world shows past history as receding and new history dawning on the horizon. It is the working out of a new History which the writer of the New World projects. Naipaul's novels of Trinidad are an illustration of this principle. (Bhatt, 86)

Naipaul's famous novel *A Bend in the River* is based on the theme of the African subcontinent. The title of the novel refers to the town situated on a bend in a river in Africa. Salim is the protagonist in the novel. He travels a long way to the continent accompanied by Metty, a son of one of the family slaves. Later, we see this protagonist becoming a trader in the town on the river's bend. It is a town built by the Europeans.

The Europeans had come there for gold and silver and had left status built in their honour. The central theme of Naipaul's life, homelessness, is also there in this novel. Homeless expatriates travel frequently. The world outside is changing; at the same time, the individual is also seen in constant movement.

*A House for Mr. Biswas* contains a multilayer complex. It is a blending of autobiography, social history, and documentary. He deals with a saga of the East Indian Hindu community in the West Indies and his doctrine of historicism which gives him a precise and accurate vision of the rise of a tiny individual against the backdrop of historical forces. In the 'Foreword' of the novel, Naipaul says that of all his books, this was the closest to me.

This novel shows the story of a man's search for his house. *A House for Mr. Biswas* emerged out of the creative effusion and delight and became a classic. This novel also contains the autobiographical element that is his father's life, his own life, and the world of the immigrant Hindus. Yashoda Bhat rightly observes :

The early life of Biswas, and the description of the life of his parents is modelled on the life of Naipaul's parents. The experience of Biswas in the Tulse house old is also modelled upon his own life in a joint family, which had left a deep impact upon him. Biswas's mental breakdown in the middle of the novel has a factual basis in his father's nervous breakdown and a bout of his own depression at Oxford. Naipaul's father was a journalist and Biswas's work with *The Guardian* as a journalist, is a reproduction of his father's experience. Naipaul's observations of the women in his joint family get transformed into the women characters in the novel. (Bhatt, Yashoda, 120)

One of the important things in *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a clash of cultures. In this novel, the 'Tulsi House' is always confronted with the interaction and contact with alien cultures. The Tulsi Family is the symbol of the old Hindu culture imported into Trinidad by Pundit Tulsi. On the other hand, Mr. Tulsi considers herself the custodian of this culture. She performs daily puja and rituals. The old values and beliefs vanish in contact with the alien western culture.



Mr. Tulsi sends her two sons to Roman Catholic institutions. Consequently, they wear crucifixes, and Shekhar even marries a Christian girl. Similarly, Owadh goes to England to study surgery. This shows an apparent deviation from the Hindu religious code. Some of the in-laws also break away into separate homes. In other words, the joint family of Tulsi house disintegrates due to cultural clashes and their influences. Raghawacharyulu writes :

In a wider third world context, Naipauls' attitude to the situation of individuals in a post colonial societies represents a meticulously substantiated analysis of human failure in different from-in the pursuit of careers, in the establishment of societies, in the exercise of political power and in the pursuit of human values. For, the post, colonial world represents a shift from one colonialism to another. The new born freedom results in no recovery of confidence, no possibility of healthy self-differentiation it rather becomes a liability and a deterrent to the creative formation of personlity. (D.V.K, Raghawacharyulu, 60)

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Thus, Naipaul is an intuitive writer. He believes in his innermost self. He thinks there is a great difference between the writer's personal life and the description he presents in his books. Though he traveled to many places in many countries and saw many people, he often believes in his meditation and contemplation. He is often seen confronted with memories and experiences. In other words, he is often motivated by his inner voice.

His books are the journey of his self-discoveries. His vision is very wide and pervasive. He always remains a detached observer and puts forth his analysis in an impartial manner. He takes Europe as the model of modernity and development and examines other nations in the Third World. He puts more serious contemplation of India in his three travelogues, and his trilogies on India is his endless quest for his identity and belongingness. It also shows his atheistic taste and temperament towards the Indian culture, people, and religion.

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