DIASPORIC SENSIBILITY IN V.S NAIPAUL’S AN AREA OF DARKNESS

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INTRODUCTION

Diaspora is to be trapped within complex personal circumstance; to be a write in addition is to have one’s imagination shackled to the collective forces of history, culture and tradition. This complexity emerges as a marked pattern in the creative forces at work in diasporic writers. However, any attempt to define this pattern falters and fails because the same circumstance can evoke varied responses in different writers; it can even evoke varied responses in the same writers with the passage of time.

RUINED DREAMS

Hysteria had been my reaction, and a brutality dictated by a new awareness of myself as a whole human being and a determination, touched with fear, to remain what I was. V.S Naipaul, An Area of Darkness.

India shocked Naipaul because it challenged his idea of himself. The contradiction between the imagined India of Trinidad and the actual country was too overwhelming to be confronted. The only immediate solution available was that of escape. That is why An Area of Darkness begins with ‘A Resting Place for the Imagination’ and ends in ‘Flight’-a metaphoric fleeing away from his reality. But the experience of India does not end with the crossing over of its geo-political boundaries. In far off Madrid, with India twenty-four hours behind him, Naipaul reflects: “It was a journey that ought not to have been made; it had broken my life in two” (AD 265). This chapter focuses on the latter half of the statement and sees in it an explanation for the first half. It attempts to read An Area of Darkness as the first phase of a diasporic writer’s engagement with the land of his origin; a phase that must essentially begin with an ‘imagined’ idea of the land. Although the chapter discusses the body of criticism that followed the publication of An Area of Darkness, especially in India, the stress is not on the truth/bias of Naipaul’s vision. The chapter presents an exposition of the first phase in a diasporic writer’s
imagination and an assimilation and explanation of the process of his coming to terms with his diasporic status.

Naipaul’s idea of India found its way to him through the very fact of his birth into a Hindu joint family in Trinidad. India lay around him “in people” and “in things” ever since he gained consciousness. One of his earliest memories is of Gold Teeth Nanee and her grave dignified husband whose fierce loyalty to their language (they spoke only Hindi) and to the Indian way of life made them look like foreigners in Trinidadian. They carried their India within them. It was not fragmented by their Trinidadian reality, which they “denied” by their refusal to recognize it. India also existed around Naipaul in the various domestic articles that his grandfather had brought from India:

These stories celebrated Indian village life, and the Hindu rituals that gave grace and completeness to that life… to me they gave a beauty… to the Indian village life I had never known. And when we went to the country to visit my father’s own relations… it was like a fairytale come to life (FC 36).

Following the same analogy, Naipaul expected India to be a land of his fairytale. His communication with his sister Kamala (who studied in India) ought to have prepared him for disillusionment but strangely, it did not. In the first chapter of An area of Darkness, ‘A Resting-place for the imagination,’ two distinct personas of Naipaul emerge. One is the persona of a totally self-aware-non-believer with an actual distance for rituals. The other is the one who is outraged to hear that candles and electric bulbs had replaced clay lamps for diwali in Bombay; who quietly backs out of a science experiment at school that required him to suck from a common siphon; who could be angered by Beverly Nicholas’s Verdict on India. These two separate selves had stayed together as long as Naipaul was in Trinidad or in England. There was a public life and a private family life. The direct experience of India tore these two selves apart; his life was broken into two. An Area of Darkness is a portrayal of the friction between the two selves. To say that An Area of Darkness is about India, is too miss the point altogether. It is a desperate attempt to preserve the unity of a sensibility shattered beyond repair. The method
employed is one of dismissal, rejection and flight. The realization of the inefficacy of this method produced India: *A Million mutinies now*. The ‘Flight’ marked the beginnings of a series of journeys to India.

And it was because it was without a sense of history that it was capable of so complete a conversion. Many Kashmiri clan names-like that of Mr. Butt himself-were often still purely Hindu; but of their Hindu past the Kashmir’s retained memory (129).

Naipaul finds the valley suffering from the selective amnesia. The engineer who was showing the valley to Naipaul, drove past the eight century Awantipur ruins and showed no interest in them. Naipaul observed that the history of the people in the valley began with the history of their conquerors. Amidst the common populace, sheikh Abdullah had already passed into legend. Their accounts of 1947 “ignored Congress, Gandhi, British, the Pakistan invasion” (131).

Naipaul was battling to break out of the visitor mode and a chance encounter with a family on his way back from Awantipur helped him to connect:

It is Mr. Naipaul’s unique achievement to have passed that amount of time in India without meeting a single worthwhile human being. He finds fault in almost everything he sees; the people’s habits and their manners, the cities, villages, bureaucracy, railways, army. Even the Taj Mahal is not spared.4

Naipaul’s proposal to transport the TajMahal to the United States is interpreted as his hatred of the squalor of India. What Natwar Singh missed out in his first impassioned is that Naipaul sought to delink the architectural beauty of the TajMahal from its corresponding history, which is painful and cruel. Its beauty can fully appreciated only when it is cut off from its history.

Another extreme is Helen Tiffin’s criticism of C.D.Narasimhaiah in which she accuses him of being “intolerant” of any criticism of his country.5 William Walsh holds that *An Area of
Darkness is “a kind of metaphysical diary of the effort to shine a Western novelist’s light into an interior area of darkness.”

The main point, which critics on both sides have missed out is the perspective of vision. Visions cannot be divided into airtight compartments of truths and half-truths. Ezekiel’s India can never be the India that Naipaul sees. Gail Minault sees Naipaul as a novelist “who has also developed the travel account into a finely honed instrument of personal expression. His attitude sceptical, his vision of human nature sardonic, he cultivates detachment. He is the perpetual, the professional outsider.” Sara Suleri found An Area of Darkness to be a “fascinating record of delusion.”

Naipaul’s engagement with India is not a one-way process. It is a complicated case of action and reaction being recorded against a background that is equally complicated. Naipaul has written of his idea of his Hindu-Brahmin self that survived as a small area of “self-deception.” He has also recorded that he had been brought up in a double world. Both these worlds were separate and secret from each other. In India, Naipaul’s two selves separated and each self reacted differently to situations at hand. C.D.Narasimhaiah has recorded instance of this fracture in sensibility but has dismissed these as being willful constructions on the part of the author:

Attitudes like these have no meaning in the light of the dominant mood of the book. By the time the reader rubs his eyes to take a good look at a flash and say to his neighbor ‘behold!’ the jaws of darkness do devour it. It’s almost a recurring pattern of the book.

The fact that is alternation in flashes of darkness and light falls into a pattern has more to it than mere posturing. Had Naipaul contrived to block out one side of his response, he would have either ended up as a perfect insider overflowing with warmth or the perfect Catherin Mayo whom he has been so often wrongly compared with. But he did neither. He must be credited for his honesty to his vision, however complicated, however blurred. Naipaul writes of his visit to India to work on An Area of Darkness:
This time I left from England. India was special to England; for two hundred years there had been any number of traveler’s accounts and, latterly, novels. I could not be that kind of traveler. In travelling to India I was travelling to an un-English fantasy, and a fantasy unknown to Indians of India: I was travelling to the peasant India that my Indian grandfathers had sought to re-create in Trinidad, the ‘India’ I had partly grown up in, the India that was like a loose end in my mind, where our past suddenly stopped. There was no model for me… To get anywhere in the writing, I had first of all to define myself very clearly to myself (EOA 140-41).

For Naipaul, _An Area of Darkness_ was double struggle. It was a struggle to establish a perspective to look at the meaning of India; it was also a struggle to discover the process through which the meaning could be unraveled. The metaphor of an oblong piece of cloth, which was a gift from an Indian friend, explains his inability to find an end to his double struggle. The book is dappled all over but the areas of darkness and light cannot be interpreted as belonging to a Western or Eastern sensibility. The area of darkness, as Naipaul has defined at the onset, is that aspect of Indian sensibility which remains impenetrable for him. The area of light is the area of his “experience, in time and place” (AD 30). It is clearly a division of experience into broad categories of what is comprehensible and what is not. Naipaul, in his own words has accepted that he has been unable to express his briefly grasped understanding of the philosophy that is at the heart of India: “I feel it as something true which I could never adequately express and never seize again” (266-67).

The point that calls for an explanation is the difference Naipaul’s India and the India of his Indian critics. Numerous writers had written about India before Naipaul did, and not always sympathetically. A Beverly Nicholas or a Catherine Mayo could be dismissed for being _incapable_ of understanding India. Their vision could be ignored because they were, after all, _foreigners_. What did they know of India? But with Naipaul, Indians felt betrayed. He was expected to know and to understand. The division of experience had occurred three generations ago. Naipaul was an outsider in India. His critics were outsiders to his experience. Naipaul’s perception and portrayal of India, if seen in this light, is a unique record of the division of sensibility that has become a permanent paradigm of our times.

The value of _An Area of Darkness_ is that the book and its critique have documented the confusion and alienation that are the legacies of the Empire. Never before was Indian presented...
through a diasporic vision. Never before had the Indians in India been exposed to the pain and agony of such a vision, so much so, that within India even the veracity of Naipaul’s experience was very often questioned. *An Area of Darkness* stands today as the first stage of a diasporic writer’s problematic relation with the country of his origin: it abounds in confusion and contradictions; there is no potent thesis about India. There are recurrent notes of the writer’s identification with India at a personal level. He did not want India “to sink.” And so, the writer returns with more books on India attempting an analysis of its problem and pens the growth of his experience.

**CONCLUSION**

Naipaul’s opinions are his own but they arise out of a sense of commitment. It is a pity that intellectual commitment has been sidelined and no academic debates emerge out of the ideas generated by those few intellectuals who still choose to voice them. Naipaul’s opinions and comments are a Hindu nationalism show a progression in the development of his understanding of the use of Hinduism in national politics. Naipaul is a chronicler of our present times. He accepts ideas and ideologies in the form of the present connotations that these have acquired. His books on India should be accepted as diasporic chronicles that attempt to link the past to the present in ways that lead to a progression in his diasporic concerns for India.

**WORKS CITED**


