

## Shifts in Subject Position: An Analysis of V. S. Naipaul's Travel Narrative *An Area of Darkness*

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### Abstract:

*The paper attempts to delineate the subject positions assumed by V. S. Naipaul in his travel book *An Area of Darkness* (1964), an account of his maiden visit to India. In it he moves between the two worlds of fantasy and reality, assuming identities that shift from insider to outsider and vice versa. Disquieting encounters in India that fail to match the image of India in his imagination impart in him the sense of an outsider. And on occasions when the India of his fantasy is well answered, he assumes himself an insider. Enraged by the disparaging scenes and experiences, Naipaul lashes out against the socio-political degeneracy in India. Still there are moments when his heart yearns for the long-lost past and bemoans the irretrievability of a cultural patrimony. The outcome of Naipaul's confrontation with the "real" India, unlike the "unreal" one in his imagination, is the unmasking of the duplicity of the romantic image of India he had nurtured in his mind. He had accepted the complete linguistic, social, cultural and psychological alienation from India at an early age itself. And the India of his imagination was the only remnant of his past, the speciousness of which was exposed during his travels in India. However Naipaul is more an outsider than an insider in India, the land of his forefathers.*

**Key words:** Naipaul, fantasy, reality, outsider, insider.

European travel writing has a long history that dates back to the ancient times. The genre, known as “voyages and travels” in the early modern period has undergone significant changes in the narrative mode, style, and tone down the centuries. Homer’s *The Odyssey* is considered as the work that inaugurated the Western travel writing. Though fictive in nature, it influenced travel writings of the later centuries. Nevertheless, accounts of travels in the ancient era never equalled the modern day notion of travel writing. Themed around the motifs of pilgrimages and chivalric quests, there emerged a wealth of travel narratives in Europe in the medieval era. Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (1387) is a brilliant depiction of the medieval pilgrimage. It is during the early modern period that the genre began to take shape. Apart from the pilgrims, the major contributors to the genre during this period were the editors, errant knights, merchants, explorers, colonisers, captives and castaways, ambassadors, pirates, and scientists. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, documentation became an integral part of travel writing with its emphasis on extreme objectivity, verifiability, and empirical truthfulness. Technological developments in Europe in the eighteenth century eased travelling unprecedentedly in terms of cost and convenience. Travel narratives—fictional, non-fictional, and philosophic—found expression in the hands of many writers during this period. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was a major shift in the focus from extreme objectivity to a highly personalised mode of expression in the travel narratives. Before the twentieth century travelling was done for various purposes: trade, missionary activities, colonial expansion, and diplomatic missions. However in the twentieth century there emerged a culture in which the travellers travelled to write. About the twentieth-century travel writers Michel Butor notes: “they travel in order to write, they travel while writing, because for

them, travel *is* writing” (qtd. in Carr 74). Helen Carr observes that in the twentieth century there was a shift “from the detailed, realist text, often with an overtly didactic or at any rate moral purpose, to a more impressionistic style with the interest focused as much on the travellers’ responses or consciousness as their travels” (74).

Thus an important aspect of modern travel books is that they are as good narratives about the writers themselves as they are about the outer world. Holland and Huggan argue that contemporary travel narratives “articulate a poetics of the wandering subject” (14). A survey of the genre reveals the fact that it has served as a platform for the exposition of the writer’s own thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Before eighteenth century the exposition of the narratorial self was less common in travel writing because focus was laid on garnering information and knowledge through objective observation. It is in the latter half of the eighteenth century that a noticeably personalised tone began to appear in the genre. Carl Thomson views it as an outcome of the eighteenth century sentimentalist and romanticist fervour in the literary and cultural manifestations with its renewed focus on human emotions and feelings (110-111). Yet there is a lot of variation in the writers’ deployment of the genre as a medium for expressing their subjective thoughts. Some are wholly narratives of the writer’s personal thoughts alone and some others mediate between the outer and the inner worlds. Commenting on the narrative mode of modern travel books Rob Nixon rightly argues that they vacillate between a “semi-ethnographic, distanced, analytical mode” and “an autobiographical, emotionally tangled mode” (qtd. in Thomson 87). V. S. Naipaul is one among the contemporary writers who has exploited the genre’s potential for the subjective exposition of the writer’s travel experiences.

*An Area of Darkness* (1964) is the first among V. S. Naipaul’s Indian trilogy, others being *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977) and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990). It

is an account of his maiden visit to India, the land of his forefathers. An idea of a non-fiction book on India had been in his mind for quite some time. And when a chance to travel to India came upon, he did not let it go, although he was apprehensive of his success in a genre he has never tried his hands on. This paper seeks to chart the subject positions Naipaul assumes in his travel book *An Area of Darkness*. Discussing Naipaul's Indian trilogy Teltscher notes: "With the writer's subjectivity centrestage, India usually serves as a backdrop . . . to the narrator's travels" (194). In India Naipaul assumes two subject positions: an outsider as well as an insider. During his year-long journey across the nation, Naipaul straddles between these two identities, though he is more an outsider than an insider in the land of his forefathers.

Naipaul's idea of India has always been ambivalent consisting of two diametrically opposite ideas, one evoking fear and terror and the other evoking a sense of pride and comfort, as he admits in the chapter "Bombay Theatre" in *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (8-9). None of the sights in India appealed to his senses during his first visit. He was indeed shocked by the filth and sordidness in India. Moreover, the scorching heat of the sun was many a time exhausting enough to turn him irrational and hysteric. In the preface to *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, Naipaul observes: "I was not an insider, even after many months of travel; nor could I consider myself an outsider: India and the idea of India had always been important to me. So I was always divided about India, and found it hard to say a final word" (vii). Naipaul's own world of experiences is marked by fluidity rendered by transnational migrations and cultural encounters. Debbie Lisle argues that "Naipaul claims the identity of exile – excluded from Trinidad because of his Hindu background, excluded from Britain because of his West Indian background and excluded from the India he documents because of his upbringing overseas" (113).

Shocked by the confrontation with the “real” India unlike the “unreal” one in his imagination during his first visit to India, Naipaul finds himself disillusioned. His very first step in the Indian soil unsettles him. He is downcast by the loss of uniqueness and discreteness in the ocean of sameness in India. He struggles for distinctiveness, a privilege he enjoyed and taken for granted in Trinidad as well as in England. He observes: “I had been made by Trinidad and England; recognition of my difference was necessary to me, I felt the need to impose myself, and didn't know how” (*Area* 39). There are also other occasions when his indistinctiveness in India made him retreat in indignation and humiliation. Until the moment he sets foot in India the speciousness of his fantasy is not exposed. In his imagination he had held India in “a special way” (*Area* 21). His idea of India, purely a product of his fancy, was untainted by anything he had heard or read about the nation. He nurtured a picture of India in one of the remotest corners of his mind to which he retreated daily, for hours on end. It remained an integral part of his grandmother's house, together constituting an alienation separate from the outer world. The British manifested itself in unoppressive ways in Trinidad and hence its presence was not easily discernible. Growing up among the multiracial population in Trinidad, young Naipaul vacillated between the two mutually exclusive worlds of the private and the public lives: the private world of the family life with its characteristic social, cultural, and religious practices and the entirely different public world outside. India, a place not even visited until he reached the age of thirty and least discussed in the family circle, was just a mythical land of his imagination. And Naipaul, having failed to identify himself with anything “Indian” around him in Trinidad, felt distanced. Yet a sense of loss always haunted him. Psychological distancing from India rendered through linguistic alienation, and a distaste for social, cultural and, religious practices, made his private world of family life dwindle gradually. His interest

for India slowly faded until it died out except for the India in his imagination characterized by obscure fantasy and child-like innocence. His own private world in his family house in Trinidad began to shrink at a very early age itself and thus “one whole side of India was closed” to him (*Area* 37). Yet India, the backdrop of his childhood, lived in his imagination revolving around a perpetual sense of gain and loss. Unique in its indistinctiveness, it lay shrouded in the shadowiness of his ignorance of the land, which unfortunately the light of knowledge he acquired later in “time and place” had not been able to illumine properly (*Area* 24). Commenting on Naipaul's travel writings Dennis Porter observes that “the recurring motifs and obsessions . . . offer peculiarly disturbing testimony to the . . . tensions and contradictions in which the private and the public spheres intersect” (308).

Signs betokening oppressive impositions of the English in India distress him. This unsettles his imaginings of the land of his ancestors. Contrary to the unoppressive English in Trinidad, signs of oppressive imposition in India invite embarrassment of the kind he had never experienced before. He censures the “incongruous imposition” of the English over India (*Area* 202). He condemns the blind imitation of English manners and customs to the extent of exposing one's lack of proper discernment and judgment. He observes that inappropriateness has rendered every European adaptation farcical and ridiculous. India and its people, incapacitated in every sense by the centuries of foreign rule, still lack a sense of the past and a will to learn from their own mistakes. Actions are often symbolic with no worthwhile result. India abounds in signposts and labels that are least worth the message they convey. Huge plaques displaying long list of names often belittle the monuments and statues erected in the fond memory of eminent people. Politicians are noted for their mesmerising speeches and inaction.

Naipaul is obviously distressed at the disparaging sights of filthy villages and towns, malnourished people, dreadful poverty, congested streets, dingy shops, loud-mouthed hawkers, whining and pestering beggars, deafeningly honking vehicles, dilapidated buildings, and unkempt hotels and other public places in India. Nowhere in the world is poverty looked upon with such callousness and insensitivity. Caste system is deemed a blessing in disguise. Switching of caste-assigned roles and functions is always uncalled for. Caste thus turns out to be the binding force that keeps the society perfect. Naipaul mocks the way in which Indians justify beggary on the grounds of charity, and open defecation as an expression of poetic minds. People relieving themselves in broad daylight in open places feel neither awkward nor self-conscious. But the irony is that if a foreigner accidentally chances upon a scene of open defecation, he/she retreats inadvertently out of embarrassment and shame for having exposed himself or herself to it. Indians conveniently feign blindness towards what is happening around. In Naipaul's words, they "ignore" the "obvious" (*Area* 43). Naipaul who has social, cultural and, religious roots in India, could not relate himself with anything in India. He is irritated by the general dispassion and insouciance towards disintegration and, the passive forbearance of the Indian community. Indications of impulsive actions and lack of farsightedness enrage him. He disapproves of the Indian habit of taking refuge in past glory to make up for the present failures. Naipaul jeers at the Indian's disrespect for physical labour and his peculiar sense of duty which deters him from doing anything else, even if the situation demands. The new preface added in the 2010 edition of *An Area of Darkness* comes as an afterthought in which Naipaul admits that he had overstated his sentiments of the nation.

Naipaul disapproves caste, yet endorses it secretly. He turns his back on conventions, but welcomes it occasionally. Naipaul observes:

I had rejected tradition; yet how can I explain my feeling of outrage when I heard that in Bombay they used candles and electric bulbs for the Diwali festival, and not the rustic clay lamps, of immemorial design, which in Trinidad we still used? I had been born an unbeliever. Yet the thought of the decay of the old customs and reverences saddened me when the boy whispered 'Real brahmin', and when, many years later, in London, I heard that Ramon was dead. (*Area* 31)

The brilliant pictures of divine beings against the backdrop of snow-capped Himalayas in his grandmother's house has had a lasting impression in Naipaul's mind. It lay hidden deep in his mind in all its innocence, untouched by his dismissive notions on religion and caste. And during his maiden visit to India it is a dream come true to be among the Himalayas. It imparts a "special joy" of possessing something astonishingly valuable (Naipaul, *Area* 178). Equally sorrowful is the sense of the irrecoverable loss of the past. As Naipaul puts it: "It was mine, but it was something I had lost . . ." (*Area* 179). He was impressed by the grandeur of the city of Bengal and the gracefulness of its inhabitants. He wonders how India "Out of all its squalor and human decay . . . produced so many people of grace and beauty . . ." (*Area* 263).

Naipaul is a writer of fluid identity. He was born to Indian parents settled in the British colony of Trinidad, and moved to England securing a scholarship for higher studies at the age of eighteen. These cross-cultural migrations imparted in him multiple identities. But in India, his straddling between the identities of an insider and that of an outsider, springs from a sense of alienation in the midst of familiarity. He travelled to the India of his imagination or fantasy. It had grown out of his private world experiences of the family life in Trinidad. It consists of his grandmother's house, the picture of religious deities set against the background of the Himalayas, and the peculiar Indian setting that the elders in the family tried to establish in Trinidad. This idea of India is purely his own and it



is neither the colonial India nor the India of Kipling or Forster (Naipaul, *Enigma* 168). The family life and the private world it constituted soon came to an end at the age of eighteen when he moved to England for higher studies and it severed his ties with the past forever. But an image of India, the India of his fantasy remained in the remotest corners of his mind. It was to this India that he travelled for the first time in his life, at the age of thirty, as part of an assignment with a publishing company. Starting from England, he travelled to India via Alexandria, Sudan, Cairo, Djibouti and Karachi. The pestering cab drivers of Alexandria, the greedy cobbler in Cairo and the whining beggars in Karachi, all made him run away and take refuge in the liner he was travelling. All these experiences imparted in him a sense of the West just melting away and the East fast approaching. It portended his encounters in India. He was well aware of the filth and poverty in India. But he travelled to the India of his imagination and fantasy, which unfortunately was left unanswered or unmatched during most of his encounters in India, except a few occasions. During those occasions when his experiences corresponded and concurred with the India of his imagination he assumes the identity of an insider. He embraces the identity of an insider while amongst the romantic Himalayas and in the midst of the grandeur and glory of the city of Bengal. Naipaul's pose as an outsider is manifested in his less apathetic and uncharitable observations of the degradation of India. Enraged by the disquieting scenes and experiences, Naipaul lashes out against the socio-political degeneracy in India. Still there are moments when his heart yearns for the long-lost past and bemoans the irretrievability of a cultural patrimony. The outcome of Naipaul's confrontation with the "real" India, unlike the "unreal" one in his imagination, is the unmasking of the duplicity of the romantic image of India he had nurtured in his mind. He had accepted the complete linguistic, social, cultural and psychological alienation from India at an early age itself. And the India of his

imagination was the only remnant of his past, the speciousness of which was exposed during his travels in India.

Looking back to the days of his year-long sojourn in India, Naipaul, the outsider observes: "India had not worked its magic on me. It remained the land of my childhood, an area of darkness . . . it was closing up again, as fast as I withdrew from it, into a land of myth . . ." (*Area* 274). Naipaul's yearning to retrieve his past and to be an insider in India, the land of his grandparents, find explicit expression in his words: "I did not want India to sink; the mere thought was painful" (*Area* 263). As Holland and Huggan aptly put it: "To be in transit, in Naipaul's work, is to be in a continual state of crisis" (42). All of Naipaul's travel narratives exhibit a "displacement" that appears to be "originary" as if all places are " 'wrong place(s)' " (Porter 307). Naipaul's Indian trilogy is noted for this sudden displacements and shifts in the subject position. And in his first book in the trilogy, *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul is more an outsider than an insider.

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