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Dawn of Empathy: V. S. Naipaul's *India: A Million Mutinies Now*

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Abstract

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul (1932-), the expatriate writer of Indian origin, is one of the most prominent figures in the list of exiles and expatriate. Born in Trinidad, he is a third generation descendent of a family of Brahmin Pundits, hailing from a village in Eastern Uttar Pradesh. He has been recognised as a Commonwealth writer, a world traveller, a voice of the Indian diaspora and a literary figure of world significance. Besides being a noted novelist, he is a great travel writer too. His fictional and non-fictional writings deal with the problems of colonial, postcolonial, and Third World societies. He has written extensively on alienation, displacement, identity crisis and frustration of diasporic people. Naipaul has been placed as an exile figure, a rootless nomad in the literary world, always on a voyage to find his identity.

Keywords- *Diaspora, Expatriate, Rootless, Third World, Empathy, Catharsis*

Repeated journeys to the land of his ancestors have changed Naipaul's outlook about India. Naipaul's third visit to India provides him a chance to enter into the gyrating movements of Indian history in a more substantial manner, in which he takes into account in a more patient and detailed way the nuances of post-independence scenario. It is an outcome of a ceaseless effort to connect with the unchanging structures of an archaic India and to understand the way those structures have got dismantled and replaced by other whirls of resurgences. *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990) the third book of Naipaul's acclaimed Indian trilogy, unfolds this understanding working in the creation of this book. Naipaul's efforts to understand the India of the eighties of the last century repeatedly send him back to the understanding of an archaic India. With every page of this book, stage by stage, one feels the opening up of experiences through which Naipaul records his experiences of a changing India in a positive manner and experiences the long awaited peace and tranquillity generated by catharsis.

Naipaul has indeed come a long way from his earlier negative outpourings, inverted visions and caustic comments. Now he witnesses change in all walks of life He admits this change by saying thus:

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But there was in India now what didn't exist 200 years before! A central will, a central intellect, a national idea. The Indian Union was greater than the sum of its parts and many of these movements of excess strengthened the Indian state, defining it as the source of law and civility and reasonableness (MM 603)

Naipaul's earlier works, especially those on India have been characterized by violent reactions and caustic comments. But now in this concluding book of his Indian Trilogy, those violent reactions and negative outpourings have given way to gentle and sympathetic views. Naipaul has got maturity in his looking at the things. Having made peace with age and having conquered his impatience and anger, he is now content to be a patient listener. Naipaul has mellowed over the years and it is evident in this book. Critics like Kavitha Shetty states her views regarding this mellowing in her article *The Mellowing of Naipaul*, thus:

In those seven years (between the publication of *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) and *A Way in the World* (1994), the mellowing of Naipaul seems to have accelerated wildly from the griping acerbic prose of his youth to the sharp far more considerate observations in *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, to this wise, warm stirring work, Naipaul is like a body of water that has flowed from turbulent stream, to raging river over rapids and waterfalls to find his level in a calm, yet powerfully alive sea of prose (2)

She states further, "it has that, mellowness which comes only as the day wanes, when the harsh brightness of day gives way to a more gentle onset of dusk. . . a time for reflection, for regret." (2) Evidence of this mellowing of Naipaul's sensibility can be seen even in an earlier travelogue *A Turn in the South* (1989) which records Naipaul's experiences in the American South. In an elegiac tone, Naipaul speaks, "there is a need at certain stage to hoard emotion, to spare passion from public causes for one's own spiritual concerns, to make one's peace with age and the frailties of one's own human state." (107)

India: A Million Mutinies Now presents the picture of India through the words of Indians, both public figures and common people, whom Naipaul meets and talks to. By carefully keeping himself out of the picture, Naipaul has given the country a chance to speak for itself. At certain stages of the book some statements with a high potential for controversy and debate are made by the narrators/speakers but Naipaul surprisingly refuses to comment. His silences are often eloquent in themselves. Naipaul's earlier travel books on India are marked by the venomous and ruthless exposure of the most negative features of an ancient country i.e. India. The author has peeled off every single cover that may hide some area of discomfiture. But *India: A Million Mutinies Now* has a distinct feature and auditory aura. Here Naipaul is not an impatient traveller. He lends a patient and compassionate ear to

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several speakers. In texture and tone, the work is a departure for Naipaul from his earlier travelogues on India as he himself states, "I was not interested in what I thought; I was interested in what people thought." (MM 265)

The impatience and pain which characterized Naipaul's earlier writings, seems to have been replaced by a new level of tolerance. The filth, grime, and rampant corruption of the country find little mention in *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. Naipaul's off the cuff, lopsided and judgemental tone which pervade the earlier two books are rarely seen in this final travelogue. The conversations here are spontaneous unlike those in *An Area of Darkness* (1964) which seemed staged and exaggerated. One can get the feeling that this time Naipaul travels to 'discover/explore' rather than to 'confirm' as was the case with his earlier visits. *India: A Million mutinies Now* is a book of 'voices' rather than 'scenes' and the voices are varied like political activists, businessman, journalists, terrorists, slum dwellers, women and so on. If *An Area of Darkness* ends on a note of disillusionment, *India: A Million Mutinies Now* is a striking expression of Naipaul's altered outlook of the 80's and 90's. Perhaps this is the book which marks the beginning of the softening of Naipaul's vision.

On his first trip in 1962, Naipaul had come with a deeply ambivalent self; aspiring towards the metropolitan while still being rooted in a non-metropolitan Trinidad. The results were disastrous, whereas this time around in later 80's, he comes up as a person more at peace, maturity and understanding with himself in particular and the world at large. His preoccupation with himself which is evident in his earlier work has also been replaced by a genuine compassionate interest in people. Proof of this changed outlook is encountered in the opening of the book itself where Naipaul says, "with me, in the taxi; were fumes and heat and din. The sun burned; there was little air; the grit from the bus exhausts began to stick to my skin. It would have been worse for the people on the road and the pavements." (MM 1)

A similar description in his earlier books might have fallen short of the last sentence of the above quoted passage. But now, empathy and compassion mark Naipaul's observations. The people's troubles are now brought to the fore. Even the methodology of Naipaul shows sign of a slight shift.

The title of the book despite the negative connotation of a word like 'Mutiny' outlines Naipaul's new progressive outlook on India. The words 'Mutiny' and 'Million' both initially bring to mind the picture of a mass uprising against authority but what one finds in the book are small mutinies raged by millions of individuals in the struggle of their personal lives, their battle against society, against authority, against prevailing ideologies. People have woken up from their deep slumber of ignorance and illiteracy. They have started struggling for their livelihood. Unlike his earlier visits, Naipaul notices a rare courage, a spirit of perseverance and a will in each person he meets and talks to. In an interview published in *Times of India* on 30th October 2000 where Naipaul shows the brighter side of his personality

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which has emerged out of his maturity. Naipaul says, “there is a kind of intellectual life now that didn’t exist in the 1960s. India is on the verge of immense intellectual development, I think in every field”

This type of sensibility which grows in Naipaul’s mind is an outcome of his changed way of looking at his object of study. In *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, Naipaul reveals a more patient and mature way of understanding the problems which has crippled India since the time immemorial. The discussion which Naipaul has created in the two previous travelogues on India where he talk about loss and futility only, has changed its content because Naipaul has taken into account the passage of time where the past generations of grandfathers have done much to bring about the change visible in the lives of the grandsons. Naipaul goes into great detail of understanding the data of interviews from cross-sections of society, from all over India to see how the caste and rigid systems are breaking down in the wake of numerous mutinies. In this context, a very apt observation made by critics like Mallikarjun Patil goes thus, “whatever the Indian critics think of Naipaul’s other travelogues on India; *India: A Million Mutinies Now* is splendid work about changes and development in India.” (154)

Over the passage of time and in his third encounter with India, Naipaul finds this sluggish country, gradually transforming its weaknesses into strength. Naipaul witnesses a strong upward movement in the lives of the masses. Weakness has become the source of strength to a great extent and opportunities are being looked for to face challenges in every possible way of Indian life. This India has emerged out of the gruesome impacts of the Independence movement, Partition of India, Chinese aggression, Emergency, and few others. All these have not deterred the path of India rather these have pushed India forward. With every aggression and defeat India has regained its vigour and resolved to go further and prove its tenacity. The toiling hands and feet of million smaller men have kept India moving all along on the path of success and happiness. Naipaul comes to this sort of understanding of India in this final book of his noted India Trilogy. It is worthwhile here to quote Namrata Rathore Mahanta, who writes:

He (Naipaul) sees a million mutinies breaking out in the margins: mutinies of castes, of class, and of gender. He sees these rebellions as positive movement towards the restoration of India. Naipaul observes that the dark shrouds, holding beneath them centuries of violence are being torn apart; structures of dominance are being dismantled. (70)

So unlike his earlier travelogues on India which carry out Naipaul’s most angry attacks, *India: A Million Mutinies Now* rectifies all such blemishes to a great extent and fills the author with a sense of empathy towards the soil of his ancestors.

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