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From a Quest for Moorings to an Oracle: A Study of V. S. Naipaul

Dr. Shobha Bajpai

Head, Department of English
BSNV PG College, Lucknow

Abstract

V. S. Naipaul is the dispossessed child of the Raj who has come on a long and marvellous journey to be the recipient of Nobel Prize for literature in 2001 for combining existing genres into a style of his own in works that compel readers to see the presence of suppressed histories. He is the descendant of indentured labourers shipped from India who was born in Trinidad and his early childhood familiarised him with all sorts of deprivations and depreciation material as well as cultural constraints. The migration within British Empire from India to Trinidad gave him the comfort and command over English language. Naipaul is considered the leading novelist, who has emerged from the English-speaking Caribbean, he happens to be a master of English prose style and he is known for his studies of alienation -- an individual's sense of being on the outside of society. His works range from short stories, through the novel, to travel narratives. He took many journeys to India and Africa. During these journeys against all likelihood his quest leads him a spirit of pure comedy that runs through his early writings. Naipaul lived on the margins of two societies and cultures and he created characters like Bogart in "Finding the Centre", who too lived on the margins and trying to find a centre. His world is varied and complex and hence all attempts to find a centre are going to lead to over simplification.

Key Words- *Decolonisation, Diaspora, Moorings, Oracle, Prolific, Victimhood.*

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Although ever since V.S. Naipaul started his literary career as a writer he is known as a literary luminary yet he never ceased to be a controversial writer for his oracle. As an interpreter of cultures; civilizations and histories Naipaul appears distinct and unique. He explored and interrogated post-colonial romance and reality that have shaped the contemporary society and its politics. He has invariably talked about the most unpalatable issues encountered by human destiny. His use of language is as simple as beautiful it is, he uses precise words with strong expression. He is the descendant of indentured labourers shipped from India who was born in Trinidad and his early childhood familiarised him with all sorts of deprivations and depreciation material as well as cultural. The migration within British Empire from India to Trinidad gave him the comfort and command over English language as his own first language and he could receive an Oxford University scholarship to get an opportunity to acquire a particular kind of education in England. He is the dispossessed child of the Raj who has come on a long and marvellous journey to be the recipient of Nobel Prize for literature.

Naipaul's firm and profound determination to establish himself as a celebrated writer helped him to sail through many despairs and frustrations. Many a times to confront and overcome his despair he embarked into different sorts of journeys to India and Africa. During these journeys against all likelihood his quest leads him a spirit of pure comedy that runs through his early writings. It was the period of decolonisation and people were asserting for their roots and identities. Naipaul also felt this turmoil and the collision of emotions and resultant guilt that prevented him to come to terms with himself as to who he really is. When he took to these journeys he tried to find out the meaning of culture and histories. His firm determination to establish himself as a writer forced him to take an inward travel, where he confronted the victimhood as a growing child but the same force granted him his literary background and liberated him from guilt and shame and also from self-pity. His quest leads him to believe and also convince others too that each one of us can live as a liberated person. He says it is a matter of our will, choice and also our intellect. Some eminent critics believe

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that third world people are trapped in their own histories and they have little choice to come to terms with themselves. Naipaul envisaged that these people have to overcome the trauma of victimisation and have to take some responsibility to seek the privilege for themselves like first world people.

Naipaul's writings occupy a significant position between culture and countries. It has generated theory and defined positions as it has constructed new identity, which has negotiated boundaries and confined and related to different temporal and spatial metaphors. Cultures travel take root or get dislocated and individuals internalize nostalgia or experience amnesia. Writers like Naipaul who live on the margins of two societies and cultures have created characters like Bogart in "Finding the Centre", who live on the margins. Their world is varied and complex and hence all attempts to find a centre are going to lead to over simplifications. This character contains all the instinct and brilliance of Naipaul with a sustained and engaged intimacy. In the prologue to an Autobiography Naipaul goes back to Trinidad, to his childhood, his family and particularly to his father in search of his roots. This narrative clarifies the process that have evolved and limited Naipaul as a writer.

Talking about the loss of his moorings Naipaul writes, "Nearly all my adult life had been spent in countries where I was a stranger. I couldn't as a writer go beyond that experience. To be true to that I had to write about people in that kind of position. I found ways of doing so; but I never ceased to find it as a constraint", further brooding over the making of a writer he comments, "I was eleven no more, when the wish came to me to be a writer; and then very soon it was a settled ambition." Hence, as a child trying to read he had felt two worlds separated. Whether it is the childhood world of- a remembered India or the more colonial world of his city, the quest for moorings and charting new identities are reflected in almost all his fictional and non-fictional works. In an essay "Reading and Writing : A Personal Account", Naipaul shifts through memories of his childhood in Trinidad his university days in England, his first attempts in writings, seeking the experience of life and reading that shaped his imagination and growth as a writer. He puts it, "we were an

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Immigrant Asian Community on a small plantation Island in the New World. To me India seemed very far away, mythical." At the same time he writes, "we were still full of instincts of people of gangetic plain, though year by year the colonial life around us was drawing us in" (p.10). Naipaul has shown great mobility and adjustability as he was involved in double act of migration - from India to West Indies and from there to Metropolitan Centres. Commenting on the varied dimensions of Indian Diaspora, Bhiku Parekh has rightly remarked that there are "half a dozen religions seven different regions of India nearly a dozen castes" (p.105). He says, the diasporic Indian is "like the banyan tree, the traditional symbol of Indian way of life, he spreads out his roots in several soils, drawing nourishment from one when the rest dry up. Far from being homeless he has several homes and that is the only way he has increasingly come to feel at home in the world" (p.106).

It is noticed that the act of double migration has enhanced their networking and gave them a sense of solidarity, which reverses the concept of homelessness. In spite of the multiplicity of homes the gap between "home" - the culture of origin and "world" - the culture of adoption could not be filled. It persisted. It has the tendency of persisting in many other ways and very often conflictual. In fact the diasporic placement and Identity crises are invariably linked with the name of the nation which stands for the whole range of cultural forms of moral training, colour neurosis, sexual openness or diffidence which outweigh or impede with the natural process of identity formation. The strains of the colonizer-colonized syndromized relation are also indirectly foregrounded in the diasporic experience that comes as an extension through the experience of a migrant, a traveller or émigré already foreshadowed by the earlier and historical experiences of slavery, plantation colonialism or indenture system. The colonized one either doomed to be a mere reflection of his master or he must fight his master to enter into the realm of symbolic. The withholding of legitimate consciousness of selfhood is vividly shown by Naipaul when he puts it as, "To arrive after three year s in the city, at Mr. Worm's exhibition class, cramming hard all the way, bearing everything by heart, living with abstractions, having a grasp of very little, was like entering a

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cinema sometime after the film had started and getting only a scattered pointers to the story. It was like that for the twelve years I was to stay in the city before going to England". (p.15).

Naipaul wrote that he never ceased to feel a stranger. He saw the people of other group only from outside, his school-friendships were left behind schools or in the street. He had no proper understanding of where he was. And by and by he understood that there was a further world outside to which his colonial world was only a shadow. Naipaul confessed that he didn't know his world completely even after he had written some of his early books of fiction. Naipaul said when he thought of writing the blankness inside him used to make him nervous and then it was like a belief in magic and he wrote with an auto suggestion that when the time would come there would be no blankness and the book would be written. He wrote that by indirections he found directions out. Knowledge came with the writing. Each book took him to deeper understanding and deeper feeling and finally led to different ways of writing. He says, "every book was a stage in a process of finding out; it couldn't be repeated."

Narrative is a primary act of mind, through which human consciousness operates. The mind invokes previous experiences, relates and responds to new experiences to shape a universally verifiable world. In order to be prolific writers make up stories about themselves and others and about personal as well as social past. Psychologists believe that one holds on to stories to make sense of an otherwise confusing world. Literature develops along with life as writers try to meet the challenge of their time, tells the readers the truth about the world, current events as also about themselves and voice their concern about the truth without which mankind cannot advance. An artist therefore concerns himself with the most burning questions of the day. A writer's attitude plays a very crucial role in depicting the reality. In fact, no correct evaluation of the writer is possible without probing into the writer's attitude to life because a piece of literature is not merely a dream but an act of deliberate communication, a choice of verbal gestures for advocating a certain point of view. However,

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deep an experience in childhood or middle age it takes thought, to understand what one has lived through or where one has been.

Naipaul believes that although novel is an extra-ordinary tool for writers to show what has been shown before and in the process altering the vision of the world yet it has its limitations. He says, "As a form it is now commonplace enough and limited enough to be teachable. It encourages a multitude of little narcissisms from near and far; it stands in for originality and give the form an illusion of life. It is a vanity. "Thus, he persuades others as well to look for a new and more suitable literary form as novel is not the final and highest literary form He says, "What is good is always what is new in both form and content. What is good forgets whatever models it might have had; it is unexpected and we have to catch it on the wing" (p.62).

Literature like all living art is always on the move. Writers should have true knowledge of geography and with it a sense of historical wonder and self-exploration. Travelling is not only glamorous. It also makes unsuspected demand on the writers and becomes a necessary stimulus for them. It broadens their worldview, it shows them changing world and takes them out of their shell; it becomes the substitute for the mature social experience, the deepening knowledge of society. He says the English or French writers of his age had grown up in a world that was more or less explained. They wrote against a background of knowledge. To the marginalized writers he said, "... to be colonial was to be spared knowledge, to live in an intellectually restricted world."

The postcolonial theory, deriving its content mostly from post-structuralist and post-modern debates has more or less replaced the older modes of reading from New Criticism, Existentialist and Marxist oriented studies. While all this is changing the role of academics and critics in terms of interdisciplinary discourse of literature, art and cinema, the older issues of migration, exile and alienation have seem to lost their appeal. What used to be talked about fragmentation and rootlessness a few years back to define the kind of scattered and splintered experience one tried to come to terms with, is now perhaps better understood in two

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tendencies of essentialism and pluralism. Yet Naipaul is still somewhat different for the reason that not only his fictional or non-fictional work but also his opinions have for long been embroiled in controversies of several varieties such as political, ethnic, cultural, sociological, religious, historical and literary. Creating a fresh flutter Nobel laureate V.S. Naipaul in his recent visit to New Delhi expressed his profound disappointment over the treatment of Tehelka by the Centre and Gujarat violence by Modi Government. He told the media that at some point of time the government would withdraw from the sorry state of affairs and admit its lack of graciousness. It could have damaged the country. Concerned over the crushing of intellectual life he said, "books writers and good journalism play a very crucial role in the process of making the country to look into itself." Although he maintained that Tehelka was a mistake by the government yet expressed his hope that something good would come out of the ashes of Tehelica. The salt and the pepper were added by his gorgeous wife's short and aggressive interrogation, which was immediately followed by appreciation of Indian Home Minister. All this was little conspicuous to be easily digested. The whole episode easily unfolded the comment made by John Thieme about Naipaul that, "He is, of course, a writer who, because of his scathing portrayal of Third World Societies, particularly in his non-fiction, has attracted more than his fair share of critical praise usually....." Hence it has been noticed that there is always the consistent twin angle from which his writings and oracle can be viewed in the changing post-colonial scenario.

Said has appreciated Naipaul while comparing him with Rushdie for his "ruthless honesty." Naipaul's ruthless yet honest oracle raised his stature from fragmentation and rootlessness to essentialism and pluralism. His assimilation rests on the one hand, in a unitary, essentializing tendency derived from his national identity and the more open, pluralistic one as internationalistic. The later has got a more prominent and pronounced pull. For Naipaul, the meaning of colonialism, its history and the fall-out of its human encounters are intertwined and often exchangeable. In the large body of his fictional and non-fictional

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oracle so many tracks and traces lead in and out of the overwhelming set of historical and human experiences that it is quite impossible to separate one end from the other.

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