



AGONY OF BELONGINGNESS IN NAIPAUL'S AN AREA OF DARKNESS

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ABSTRACT

The travelogue, An Area of Darkness is Naipaul's journey of an endless agony of belongingness, despondancy and insatiable quest for his identity. He is a man of predominantly three worlds. His first world was Trinidad where his grand parents and parents were brought as indentured labourers and where he was born. Trinidad was a deep unhealing wound and perpetual humiliation for him which reminded him of the colonizer's exploitation and inhuman treatment. The second world was London where he went for his higher studies and started working for BBC. It was the world which was beautiful, well fed, dazzling, civilized and powerful. It was the crown of the developed Europe with all its royalty, dignity, grace and glamour. The third world for him was India, his forefathers homeland which was his last hope for pride and belongingness, a final resting place for his imagination but unfortunately in India too he suffered, wounded and tumbled in darkness for his belongingness and existence. He is disillusioned and finds himself rootless and homeless in all the three worlds. His soul was tossed between these three worlds.

INTRODUCTION

An Area of Darkness is an area of unseen, imaginary and unknown land of India which Naipaul had often pined for its visit. Its darkness is the darkness of mystery and ignorance. In Trinidad, when he was a child, he was always clustered with the people, objects, songs and rituals of India. From the very childhood, he had fascination for his ancestral homeland and so, when he grew up, he decided to encounter this area of darkness which was his cherished desire for several decades. Naipaul recalls:

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“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.”¹

As a schoolboy in Trinidad, Naipaul was always in confusion and ambigous about his belongingness. His school was a multiethnic gathering where Christians were in majority. Naipaul, having staunch Hindu origin learning in Non-Hindu atmosphere of colonizers' school, was always in strong conflict with himself. Nothing was real. Everything was abstract for him and so, he took interest in Aesop's fables and fairy tales. Naipaul remembers:

“In Trinidad, bright boy though I was, I was surrounded by areas of darkness. School elucidated nothing for me. I was crammed with facts and formulas. Everything had to be learned by heart; everything was abstract for me. Again, I do not believe there was a plan or plot to make our courses like that. What we were getting was standard school learning. In another setting it would have made sense. And at least some of the failing would have lain in me. With my limited social background it was hard for me imaginatively to enter into other societies or societies that were far away. I loved the idea of books, but I found it hard to read them. I got on best with things like Andersen and Aesop, timeless, placeless, not excluding. And when at last in the sixth form, the highest form in the college, I got to like some of our literature texts – Moliere, Cyrano de Bergerac – I suppose it was because they had the quality of the fairytale.”²

Naipaul got the scholarships for his higher studies at Oxford in London at the age of 18. It was a revolutionery change for him to go from colonized Caribbean Islands to the colonizers' country England, England was the powerful country which represented the developed Europe. London was the synosure of the ethic world; the crown of the human power, intellect and the civilized world. Oxford and Cambridge were centres of learning for the whole world. Naipaul was infatuated by the glamour, intellect and luxury of London. He was then far away from the poverty, strike humiliation and alienation of Carribbean Islands. But inspite of all the glamour and luxury in London, Naipaul's secret desire to visit and explore his ancestors' homeland, India was bruising him intensely. Naipaul's condition in London was like a bird



which to save from the outside cold weather put into a golden cage but still that cage does not give him the feeling of possession and warmth of belongingness. So, in the core of his heart, Naipaul always felt the pangs for his own origin, belongingness, identity and home.

The haunted fascination and pain to visit his ancestors' homeland brought him to India in 1962; before his coming, India was more a legendary country for him than a real one. In the very first chapter entitled 'A Resting Place for the Imagination' Naipaul puts forth his longing about India:

*"And India had in a special way been the background of my childhood. It was the country from which my grandfather came, a country never physically described and therefore never real, a country out in the void beyond the dot of Trinidad; It remained a special, isolated area of ground which had produced my grandfather and others I knew who had been born in India and had come to Trinidad as indentured labourers, though that past too had fallen into the void into which India had fallen, for they carried no mark of indenture, no mark even of having been labourers."*³

Moreover, Naipaul had his own childhood memories of an old India, the Brahminic world of rituals and myths, the few articles his forefathers had brought from India. Naipaul recollects his childhood memories of India in Trinidad:

*"More than in people, India lay about us in things: in a string bed or two, grimy, tattered, no longer serving any function, never repaired because there was no one with this caste skill in Trinidad, yet still permitted to take up room; in plaited blocks, never used because printed cotton was abundant and cheap and encase the secret of the dyes had been forgotten, no dyer being at hand; in books, the sheets large, coarse and brittle, the ink thick and oily; in drums and one ruined harmonium; in brightly coloured pictures of deities on pink lotus or radiant against Himalayan snow; and in all the paraphernalia of the prayer room; the brass bells and gongs and camphor-burners like Roman lamps, the slender-handled spoon for the doling out of the consecrated 'nectar' (peasant's nectar; on ordinary days brown sugar and water, with some shreds of the tulsi leaf, sweetened milk on high days), the images, the smooth pebbles, the stick of sandalwood."*⁴

But when Naipaul witnessed an extreme poverty and dirt in India he felt very much sad and disillusioned. He had an image of glorious India in the past; the country which was previously called the "Golden Sparrow" but when Naipaul saw the real picture of India, a



conflict arises in him between reality and the image he long cherished in his mind. In fascination, Naipaul had sketched the picture of India in her past with all her glory and richness but in reality, India was full of wretchedness, desolateness and poverty stricken helplessness, he describes:

“India is the poorest country in the world. Therefore, to see its poverty is to make an observation of no value; a thousand newcomers to the country before you have seen and said as you. And not only new comers. Our own sons and daughters, when they return from Europe and America, have spoken in your very words. Do not think that your anger and contempt are marks of your sensitivity.”⁵

This poverty stricken sight is everywhere though it is either city or villages in India. Naipaul presents his observation of villages in Andhra. He narrates:

“I had seen Indian villages: the narrow, broken lanes with green slime in the gutters, the choked back-to-back mud houses, the jumble of filth and food and animals and people, the baby in the dust, swollen-bellied, black with flies, but wearing its good-luck amulet. I had seen the starved child defecating at the roadside while the mangy dog waited to eat the excrement. I had seen the physique of the people of Andhra, which had suggested the possibility of an evolution downwards, wasted body to wasted body, Nature mocking herself, incapable of remission. Compassion and pity did not answer; they were refinements of hope. Fear was what I felt. Contempt was what I had to fight against.”⁶

Naipaul nowhere finds the India of his imagination. The India of Great Maury and Gupt dynasty was no more. He encountered the jumbled up, chaotic and directionless India the glory of which had been robbed by the foreign invaders from Moghuls, Sultans, Dutch, Portuguese, French and British. He delineates:

“Nowhere do I see the India I know: those poor fields, those three-legged dogs, those swearing red-coated railway porters carrying heavy tin trunks on their heads. ‘The mountains were rainwashed, the sky was a bright blue and the air was stiff with the scent of pine and flowers and charged with an almost electric silence broken by the sharp warnings of the rickshaw pullers.’ It is so the rickshaw puller appears, beast of burden more degrading than degraded; unseen, the source only of a holiday sound, part of the atmosphere of a Simla



romance. This is the Indian withdrawal and denial; this is part of the confusion of Indian Anglo-India.”⁷

Naipaul’s first visit to India was the fruit of his long cherished insatiable desire to visit his forefathers' homeland in physical and visible way. But when he observed India, he found huge paradox between the image of his forefathers' country he had cherished and the country existed in reality. He found no golden glory and grace about which his grandmother used to describe in the songs of Benares and Ganga. So, Naipaul found no reason to keep pride and honour in his origin of being an Indian, whereas, what he saw was but chaos, poverty, wretchedness, beggary and slavery in the filthy, narrow lanes between oily, blackish and crowded buildings in Bombay. Naipaul’s pride and wonder at once shattered and he stood disillusioned and heart-broken.

Thus, all three worlds i.e. Trinidad, England and India left him frustrated disappointed, disillusioned and heart broken. His journey of life in Trinidad, England and India was the journey of agony of belongingness, pain and sufferings which left him lonely, rootless and homeless. Naipaul contemplates in the end in *An Area of Darkness* :

"It was a journey that ought not to have been made' it had broken my life in two".⁸

REFERENCES :

All the textual references have been taken from :

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2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
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8. Ibid.