

Naipaul's Divided Self in *An Area of Darkness*

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Abstract

*This paper seeks to analyze V.S. Naipaul's futile attempt of seeking his lost identity in particular reference to his travelogue *An Area of Darkness*. This study shows how he fails in grabbing the self identity as an Indian and how he diverts himself from his quest when he has time and again suffered by the memory of past.*

The study adopts qualitative methodology and takes memory studies as a theoretical tool to interpret and analyze the primary text. Moreover, the study focuses on analysis of the text in concern with seeking the fundamental identity that once was lost being a migrant to a distance land. The writer falls in the prey of his own memory time and again and finds himself distorted and distanced from his identity as he is seeking his Indianness there. The study argues that Naipaul remains neither Indian nor Trinidadian due to his own divided cultural and individual self that he possesses in his undying memory.

Keywords: *Self identity, collective memory, alienation, home, rootlessness*

Introduction

An Area of Darkness is V. S. Naipaul's account of his visit to India, in which he does not only express his anthropological, sociological, historical and ethnographic observation and discussion but also his deep introspective reflection. Naipaul's first visit to India in the sixties was preceded by the romantic notions and stories on which he was fed in Trinidad by his immigrant relatives. There he had been brought up as Hindu child in Hindu family and his visit to India was also motivated by his desire to explore his own roots. His activities show that the romantic picture of India was embedded deep in the consciousness of V.S. Naipaul. On the basis of the romantic notions and stories about India, mostly heard from his grandparents, V.S. Naipaul had also built up within him a picture of a dream India which could be a home for him now.

His visit to different locations of India, he had hoped, would help him understand his true self and would give him an identity that would stop troubling him thenceforth. The memory instigates in him a desire to traverse to and across India with an intention

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to explore the country of his origin and discover himself by means of his journey. The study, thus, digs beneath the memory of a Trinidadian family of Indian origin as to measure and establish the extent of impact of collective memory of the Indian root that compels Naipaul to undertake a journey that offers him an amalgam of hope and disappointment. Naipaul's frequent exposure to stories about India from his grandparents and gatherings of other people of Indian origin invariably instigate him to visit India.

Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness*, begins with the narrator's setting out from his home, either in search of some specific goal or else seeking new experiences and interesting stories. Since travel is the "negotiation between self and other that is brought about by movement in space" (Thompson, 2005, p.10), *An Area of Darkness* has maintained a complex relationship with any number of closely related other genres. It figures out not only the literal travels of its author, but also an emotional and psychological journey within the author.

Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness* has become a common field where multiple theorists and scholars implant their multiple theoretical seeds in it, and let it as they desire. It suggests his travelogue has got a wide range of response where multidimensional criticism is appeared to traverse through different angles. Since, Naipaul remains unaware, he could not avoid his collective memory that was instill within him.

Maurice Halbwachs was the first person who conceptualized collective memory as 'Living Memory' of one's social group. It is a mode of experience of being able to share memories of events, places and ways of life within collectivities with which we in some way identify (Zerubavel, 2003, p.39). This form of identity is articulated through a shared past and a continuous process of reconstruction of a common narrative in relation to which we define ourselves as members of such collectivities. In *An Area of Darkness*, too, V. S. Naipaul is overwhelmed with the memories of events, places and the livings that he had dreamt by the communicative memory drenched through the small village created by his grandparents and the immigrant relatives.

Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness* has also been understood as embedded with the notion taking the colonial perspective in a wide variety of scholarly writings. Critic Suman Gupta (2010), too, discovers the colonial overtures in the book as he contends that Naipaul is concerned primarily with "describing the nuances of unique kind of colonial mimicry he found in India" (p.80). Another critic Pankaj Vaishnav (2014) finds Naipaul "culturally displaced and distorted due to his own sense of distancing". Naipaul, to him, did not attempt to dive into the ocean of "Indian culture, rather simply developed the sense of negativity as a mere reflection of surface understanding of India" (p.13).

Vaishnav's notion became solid when Dr. Neeta Pandey (2013), too, asserts similar conceptions ahead. She blames that "Naipaul seems to look only into the negative aspects" (p.16). He is found Naipaul "deeply guided by the Eurocentric notions in his area of thought" (p.23). Similarly, Ajay Chaubey (2011) interprets Naipaul's writings as filled with "personal complaints" (p.5). Moreover, he gets Naipaul totally "repressed by his western self" accusing Indians for their blindness to their own realities (p.6).

A good amount of time and energy has been invested in Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness* investigating the political and historical aspects of Naipaul's travel to India taking mostly the colonial and post colonial area of research. This is why, even after being extensive studies on Naipaul and on his different writings, the role of memory to shape his identity and the sense of rootlessness is much overlooked in scholarly writings. Hence, the proposed study, as it aims to deal with the issue of quest for Naipaul's identity in term of the roles played by collective memory deeply rooted in his consciousness in *An Area of Darkness* as the primary text, explores an area that has not induced much attention from the scholars.

Naipaul's Divided Self in *An Area of Darkness*

An Area of Darkness subtitled as 'Experience of India' charts out the writer's first hand impression about India. He faces a great amount of contradiction between the imagined India of Trinidad and the actual country that he gets to visit. India shocked Naipaul because it posited a wall of differences and challenged his idea of himself. And that shock led him to delve into the inner thought of the country that he always dreamt to be attached with. It makes the book logically one of the most emotional and subjective travel narratives.

Naipaul's identity plays a crucial role in the travelogue. Although he grew up in a Hindu community in Trinidad, he remained detached from the country of his grandfather. He says, "I was without religious faith myself. I barely understood the rituals and ceremonies I grew up with [. . .] my Hinduism was really an attachment to my family" (p.12). His denial of having any religious faith reverberates in his writing.

India as a country existed in his imagination and knowledge, at a distant pole. And, the very sense of separateness is caused due to the cultural memory he is possessing within him. Cultural memory bothers the consciousness of people and invigorates them to uncover their authentic identity which they realize disjointed from any other identity marker. In this connection Dietrich Harth (2008) opines that this realization of "self" often instigates one to seek for an authentic identity that conforms to what they infer from "sites of memory" (p.86). Memory of the past, therefore, is very much pertinent to the understanding of one's self. When one finds his/her self indispensably linked to

a certain historical location and the cultural tradition the location entails, only then, he can make a true sense of what/who he/she is.

The anxiety over a missing past due to migration or self-exile is the foremost Naipaulian theme. Memory of the ancestry comes in play with his present, and compels him to undertake a journey of far reaching consequences in terms of his understanding of himself and his memory of the ancestral land. As defined by Erll (2011), cultural memory is the “the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts” (p.7), Naipaul’s travelogue is an outcome of cultural memory, in a sense it is what prompts him for the journey to India. It is the stories shared by his grandparents that led him to the journey. The real India he has experienced while visiting is completely different from what he dreamed of as his homeland. He asserts:

The India, then, which was the background to my childhood, was an area of the imagination. It was not the real country I presently began to read about and whose map I committed to memory [...] I now had almost no Hindi. But it was more than language which divided me from what I knew of India. (p.37)

Naipaul’s experiences of India and his memory about it affect him in such a way that he remains incapable to figure out who he is and what he is looking for there. His inability to understand India makes him noticeably separate not only in his thought but rather puts him in distaste where he is regretting for the self. He feels a kind of separateness and distancing from the country, and realizes a clear gap between his thought and the real image of it after all. He bears time and again the sense of detachment, and the thought of being alienated drives him to eternal quest of his lost identity as he had to live as other in England. The same displaced sense of identity after all forces him to travel India to struggle against the effects of displacement. Ever since his arrival in India, he suffers from a deep identity crisis: “I was not English or Indian; I was denied the victories of both” (p.102).

Naipaul’s sense of displacement and the inability to place himself in the societies make him a man without a home and his “homelessness” becomes for him a “universal condition” (White, 1975, pp. 2-3). A larger desperateness grows in Naipaul with the sad realization when he comes to understand that the real India and the India of his childhood are completely different places. His memories of the practices of Indian customs and traditions, which he experienced in the Hindu community in Trinidad, differ considerably from what he experiences later in India. That is also one of the prime reasons for his woes and grieves that he feels in the Indian environment. The real India fails to fulfill the vision of India of his imagination. He finds himself in a society to which he cannot belong. So, the main concern in this book is to show how after

generations of gaps, one finds oneself utterly alien and homeless in a land from which one or one's ancestors have migrated or got displaced.

Naipaul's idea of India was formed in him with the very fact of his birth into a Hindu joint family in Trinidad. India also existed around Naipaul in the various domestic things that his grandfather had brought from India:

India lay about us in things: in a string bed [...] in plaited straw mats; in innumerable brass vessels; [...] 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 [...] the images, the smooth pebbles, the stick of sandalwood. (p.23)

Here, Naipaul attempts to recapitulate the cultural beauty of India as his inseparable identity, though he was there in distant land, seemingly unaware of those artifacts since a generation. But the constant hunt of the same cultural ethos drags him to travel his one and only pristine land i.e. India.

Naipaul's dreams, assertion of self and evasion of family responsibilities are the result of his cultural, social and psychological rootlessness in a multi-cultural land of Trinidad. Commenting on the significance of ancestral consciousness Champa Rao Mohan (2004) posits that the "social identity of people is rooted in their culture while at the individual level, it is determined by personal achievements" (p.47).

On the one hand, he tries to be aloof from any connections that come ahead, whereas on the other hand he is found to be entangled in the cultural labyrinths that exist in his subconscious mind. He simply becomes irritated when he found the change in the way the festival Diwali celebrated. These two separate selves had stayed and pinched him together as long as Naipaul was either in Trinidad or in England. And his first hand experience of India tore his two selves apart. His life was broken into two. So as an unbeliever he cannot believe in the rites and ceremonies.

Naipaul came to visit India with certain preconceived thought which had been shaped in his psyche since his boyhood. His explicit intention as prevailed in his book is to discover his identity and his roots from which he had been alienated culturally, emotionally and also by birth. His acquaintance with India was only through what he had "heard about it from the parents and relatives" (p.21). From his childhood he had romanticized India and on his visit sought to realize the romanticized images of the land of his forefathers.

With this concept he arrived to India and was eager to quench his perennial thirst of fundamental Indianness. Sometimes the over expectation and misjudgment leads to

a hilarious outcomes that may make the observant a stubborn. On the very onset to India, Naipaul faces the same fate. This happened because the India of his dreams has been overridden by an India crawling with "the children, the dirt, the disease, the undernourishment, the cries of baksheesh, the hawkers, the tout, etc."(p.11). This feeling resulted in disillusionment. Memory of his past and the result of his experience in time and place, Naipaul couldn't appreciate India in the way she was appreciated and highlighted in the books he had read.

The subtitle 'Fantasy and Ruin' is Naipaul's direct confrontation with his imagination. He digs up the roots of his imagination and dissects his past experiences. On one level, he himself knows that now he would not be able to identify himself with India. In Bombay, he finds himself lost:

And for the first time in my life I was one of the crowds. There was nothing in my appearance or dress to distinguish me from the crowd, eternally hurrying into Church Gate station [...] To be an Indian in England was distinctive; in Egypt it was more so. Now in Bombay I entered a shop or a restaurant and awaited a special quality of response. And there was nothing. It was like being denied part of my reality. Again and again I was caught. I was faceless. I might sink without a trace into the Indian crowd. I had been made by Trinidad and England [...] I felt to need to impose myself, and did not know how. (p.39)

Being a country of his imagination, he is found busy on looking for his presence in the city Bombay where he realizes that he would be outnumbered by the crowd who claims them as Indian. His passion of being called or recognized as Indian goes on futile, and he is still searching for the special recognition thereafter.

Naipaul had never been to India before the year 1962. He had visited India only in dreams and in his imagination. But, when Naipaul came to India, he felt more than the usual fear of arrival whether he would be accepted as Indian or still would remain as outsider there, too. He fears of not getting the space even in his dream land. It was ultimately a dream land for Naipaul, a resting place for his imagination, his homeland. But he lost his identity in the crowds of Bombay. He was like each person in the crowd. As a whole, Naipaul suffers a lot due to his lost identity. He was moved or pushed again and again by the time, location and the lives he is living now. Wherever he has gone, he found himself shapeless, directionless, even aimless when he instill the feeling of no response from where he thought he would be given a special response.

On the one hand, he is distressed by his rootlessness; he does not feel to be an Indian. On the other hand, he is frustrated when he goes on panic by his dissimilarities. In Bombay

when he “entered a shop or a restaurant and awaited a special quality of response”, there was “nothing” (p.39). The feeling of separateness and disillusion leads Naipaul nearly to a complete negation of India, as it is suggested at the end of the travelogue. He asserts that it was only now, as “my experience of India defined itself more properly against my own homelessness, that I saw how close in the past year I had been to the total Indian negation, how much it had become the basis of thought and feeling” (266). He was there in pursuit of his long lost recognition which he could not easily have it, that makes him not only worried but develops some sorts of peripheral negation regarding India.

But his innermost being was critiquing India not because he hates India, but because he loves the land in such degree that he always prays his pristine land’s glorious past. On the one hand, he looks India through western eyes, but on the other, he feels himself incomplete if there is no sense of Indianness in his speech, thought and action. This is why, Naipaul’s divided self makes the story of *An Area of Darkness* the story of an identity crisis to an individual who is forced to live away from the country existing as a being half insider and half outsider.

Conclusion

The theme of cultural disintegration receives detailed treatment in *An Area of Darkness* describing three generations of East Indians. Naipaul’s novel succeeds in transcending the individual self by universalizing the issue of alienation. V.S. Naipaul suffers from the identity crisis that was laid to him by his collective memory while living in Trinidad and England as an outsider. He seems to be fighting then and now finding his voice there getting the memory of India in his mind which was developed since his childhood when he was time and again narrated the glorious stories of India by the migrated labourers especially his grandparents.

Definitely, his purpose to come to India probably was to return to the land of his cultural roots in order to secure the idea for composition. Incidentally, his journey to India gave him an opportunity to touch and recognize some negative facets of his mother country. Naipaul sees a great many people spitting and pissing on the streets; he sees beggary and destitution, and he sees the combination of all these activities. It made him disappointed, and prompted him to write in a dismissive tone that “Indians defecate everywhere” (70). His deepest sense of hopelessness and despair has overtly manifested in *An Area of Darkness*. He cannot cope with both the surface and deeper realities that he has to face being for the first time in the land of his forefathers. The real India fails to fulfill Naipaul’s expectations. He is absolutely disgusted by the appalling conditions in the country. In this travelogue, he paints a dismal picture of India, and yet it shows his great passion and untiring fascination for it. This love-hate relationship

with India makes his writings more interesting and more complex. They also elaborate the need Naipaul felt to trace his 'roots' and trace his journey in search of 'roots'.

This paper has focused on investigating what role collective memory plays in one's identity in general and Naipaul's in particular. The myths, stories and legends he hears from his grandparents and the neighbours incite him to undertake journey of India which he perceived to be a land of wonders. The India he formed in his imagination was an ideal location of cultural grandeur. He travels to India with a hope of realization of the ideal land of his imagination. However, when he comes face to face with the Indian reality, his imaginary perception of India shatters and he suffers a sense of rootlessness.

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