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## **V.S. Naipaul's Wounded Self and *India: A Wounded Civilization***

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### **Abstract**

The paper aims to explore how V.S. Naipaul, through his celebrated non-fiction *India: A Wounded Civilization*, recapitulates and describes his third visit to India in 1975. It is written in the eventful days of 1975-76, the heyday of the Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi suspending all civic rights of 'the people of India' just within thirty years of its Independence from foreign rule. The book speaks of the Indian civilization as the one "Wounded", perishing and dying, difficult to be resuscitated. Naipaul casts a more inquisitive eye than ever before on India, its people and their behavioural patterns. This particular work is, in fact, a generous description of a man's complicated relationship with the country of his ancestors.

### **Keywords**

Civilization; Wounded Identity; and Longing.

Unlike *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul does not employ much of his creative abilities in describing landscapes or in creating literary images but rather he concentrates more on the emerging socio-political trends in Indian society. Although he is well aware of the repercussions of Emergency on the lives of the people of India, Naipaul is not entirely engrossed in calculating and analyzing its impact only. He is concerned about what made India the way it was. He takes into account the Naxalite movement, rise of Shiv Sena, condition of the bonded labourers, stagnation of the youth in rural areas and *chawls* of Bombay etc. In the section entitled 'Forward' of *India: A Wounded Civilization* Naipaul clearly states that the book is:

An inquiry about India – even an inquiry about the emergency – has quickly to go beyond the political. It has to be an inquiry about Indian attitudes; it has to be an inquiry about the civilization itself, as it is.... From the family rituals that lasted into my childhood, phantasmal memories of old India which for me outline a whole vanished world. (11)

Naipaul further enlarges his vision to investigate his distance from and affiliation with the land he had imagined, visited and revisited. The book presents a concise picture of Naipaul's irritation, frustration, anger and agony. It is a representation of his vision of the homeland based on contradictions, lassitude, exhaustion and feelings of humiliation. *India: A Wounded Civilization* is about how unemployment, illiteracy and extreme penury forced thousands of Indians to migrate to Africa, Trinidad, West Indies and Guatemala where they worked as labourers. Most ironically Naipaul explains the socio-political downfall of Indian democracy after Independence in the form of Emergency. In this travelogue Naipaul does not talk much about India as it presents itself and is experienced outwardly by a reluctant foreign visitor, nor so much only about the actual India, instead he positions India and prefers to debate about it in relation to other cultures that once subjugated it and placed their ineffaceable

stamp on the country and its peoples. He, therefore, is neither too soft nor too sharp in his response as he has attained a sort of seriousness in approach that proves him to be less volatile and more sober as he clearly sets forth his personal crisis which is again more tolerant than emotional:

India is for me a difficult country. It isn't my home and cannot be my home; and yet I cannot reject it or be indifferent to it; I cannot travel only for the sights. I am at once too close too far. My ancestors migrated from the Gangetic plain a hundred years ago; and the Indian community they and others established in Trinidad, on the other side of the world, the community in which I grew up, was more homogeneous than the Indian community... (8-9)

*India: A Wounded Civilization* is a record of minute details about all those factors that directly or indirectly affected life in India. The book also deals with the complexities of various rootless individuals and their attempts to make a mark on their host society. Naipaul here examines as how civilization, repeatedly attacked by foreign forces, saddled with imported institutions that make a mockery of its independence, struggles to survive. Naipaul critically analyzes the crisis of a wounded and old civilization that is also not totally unaware of its shortcomings. But at the same time he does not forget to point at the various phases in history that literally inaugurated and carried forward the whole process of degeneration. Again, he does not forget to indicate that this process that started in the past centuries has been continuing since then and has succeeded in removing a major portion of its collective memory. Naipaul carries his wounded soul wherever he goes and explores how once meaningful forms and relished memories now appear so empty, absolutely devoid of meaning and significance. Even in Trinidad, difference in origin and background result in gaps between two cultures and thereby lead to conflicts between two communities. He is now able to connect with the realities and tries

to understand the place he is not so remotely connected with. Naipaul says in the very first chapter entitled 'An Old Equilibrium' of the first part of the book:

The turbulence in India this time hasn't come from foreign invasion or conquest; it has been generated from within, India cannot respond in her old way, by a further retreat into archaism... The larger crisis is of a wounded old civilization that has at last become aware of its inadequacies and is without the intellectual means to move ahead. (8)

The text presents India's political, social, economic nakedness and the story of encroachment by foreigners. The title of the book is, no doubt, a bit cynical and satirical but the author's intention of moving ahead to project an utterly objective picture of India, makes the text a considerably serious and responsible statement. Here the word 'wounded' refers to a state of being injured, hell-fired, cursed and rendered ineffectual as compared to the earlier state of dignity, capability and vitality evidently due to the slow erosion of nobility and self-respect, lack of determination and the tendency of aimless copying of the west. The duplicity emanating from the identity crisis leads the country towards an unending longing for the past which has presumably been the bane of the civilization since its inception. Mere evacuation of the colonial powers from the face of the nation cannot provide the new codes of conduct and a sort of preparedness that the long awaited Independence deserves. In such conditions, the society inescapably breaks down or at least the state of the "intellectual confusion" that began with the questioning of everything that was native, lingers on for a pretty long period as 'discovering again that it was cruel, brutal, and horribly violent' paves way to 'the age-old anguish and the cruelties that has always lain below her apparent stability'.

In *India: A Wounded Civilization* Naipaul continues to explore and scrutinize his distance from and affiliation with the land he had imagined, visited, and revisited. His focus in this book is to study the processes involved

in and responsible for the formation of what is called Indian civilization. As has already been pointed out in the beginning of the paper, Naipaul is literally dumbfound to look at India as a nation as he does not find any such single point of departure that could help him decipher the meaning of everything that he sees in India. While talking about the cultural and political history of the country he takes up the issues related to the Hindu philosophy and religion but does not forget to discuss the contemporary myths about Hinduism and its fallacy. Here we have Naipaul's determination to discuss about India as a part of the Third world. In the very beginning Naipaul observes: "Hindu India, decaying for centuries, constantly making itself archaic" (10).

Naipaul also tries to consolidate the point that the real Emergency of India is not political but psychological as, to an extent, this staggering period is the result of the holistic acceptance of the wrongly presented Hindu doctrine of karma. With a pragmatic approach this particular book states that India's diffuse culture and assumptions about dharma and karma are at the centre of everything that is happening in India. In this matter Naipaul is quite different from Gandhi, R.K. Narayan's "Old Morality" and Vijay Tendulkar's and U.R. Ananthamoorthy's "New Morality" as, for instance, Naipaul openly regrets that Narayan's fiction has not conveyed the realities of India properly and also that, it is too fictitious and therefore, "cruel and overwhelming" (11). After visiting India many times, Naipaul claims that Narayan's world is no longer the one he could 'enter into'. In order to do so according to Naipaul 'was to ignore too much of what could be seen to shed too much of myself: my sense of history and even the simplest ideas of human possibility' as he further writes:

...that, for all their delight in human oddity, Narayan's novels are less the purely social comedies I had once taken them to be than religious books, at times religious fables, and intensely Hindu. (12)

As compared to the earlier text, *India: A Wounded Civilization* is less personal and more analytical and culturally rooted text that aims at

problematizing the issues related to the question of nation. In the section entitled 'The Shattering World' Naipaul takes up the issue of the 'New Morality' of post-Gandhian era and expresses his own point of view by drawing a comparison between Narayan's oeuvre and the world created by the playwright Vijay Tendulkar:

But Tendulkar is more violent than Narayan; his India is a cruller, more recognizable place. And though Tendulkar is Hindu enough to suggest...for Tendulkar there is no pure past and religion can provide no retreat. Tendulkar for all his brutality, is a romantic: The Vultures the man who holds himself aloof is a poet, an illegitimate son, an outsider. (30)

In fact Naipaul's inspection of Narayan's fiction reflects changes in his own approach towards India. India whose memories he has been cherishing for long turn out to be a strange land. He is very much aware of the gap in time that had created this uneven situation. Moreover he also keeps on reminding himself the fact that India he had been living with since his childhood and part of India which he is born in are extremely small in size and situated far away from the real India. So the anguish that we witness in his earlier writings on India is a bit toned down in this text. Moreover he finds an objective correlative in his analyses of various texts created by the contemporary Indian authors as he finds in them a sort of affinity with his own changing approach towards India. This attitudinal change can be confirmed by the following lines:

India, which I visited for the first time in 1962, turned out to be a very strange land. A hundred years had been enough to wash me clean of my Indian religious attitudes...and to understand for the Indian attitudes of someone like myself, a member of a small and remote community in the New-world, have diverged from the attitudes of people to whom India is still whole. (11)

Naipaul focuses mainly on the ways in which people in the Indian society continually react on each other. In the third part of the book entitled “Not ideas, but Obsessions”, we have the section named ‘A Defect of Vision’ where he deplores an absence of the external world in Gandhi’s *The Story of My Experiment with Truth*. He is very critical of Gandhi being too self-conscious so much so that the whole of South Africa, especially its scenic beauty is entirely absent in his autobiography. He calls it ‘a kind of blindness’. Although Naipaul’s allegations are not wrong, his preoccupations with nation and Gandhi’s concerns are entirely different. He further considers Gandhi’s ‘self absorption’ as ‘part of his strength’ also.

In the very first chapter of the book, Naipaul defines the novel as “a form of social inquiry, and as such outside the Indian tradition” (1977: 9). According to Naipaul such kind of social enquiry or investigation has come to India with the British. Now, he would seek in fiction evidences of change, ‘an anxiety about man as an individual’. Here he makes a serious attempt to dive deep into the psyche of India by going into the socio-economic and cultural problems that are peculiar to this country. His opinion towards India remains unchanged as he states:

How often in India – at every level – rational conversation about the country’s problem trails away into talk of magic, of the successful prophecies of astrologers of the wisdom of auspicious hours, of telepathic communications, and actions taken in response to same inner voice ! It is always there, this knowledge of the other, regulated world, undermining or balancing intellect and the beginnings of painful prescription...when man cannot observe they don’t have ideas; they have obsessions. When people live instinctive lives, something like a collective amnesia steadily blurs the past. (100)

Naipaul deals with intellectual depletion of Indians. He says darkness and mean mindedness of Indians is of the first millennium. He writes about the naivety and oblivion of knowledge in India. The wounds India received are as much internal as external. The minute injuries, the country has got, are due to its ignorant citizens. Naipaul himself is a wounded soul and it seems that he carries his wounded soul with him wherever he goes, only to rediscover the agony of his own solitude in the 'third world'. In *India: A Wounded Civilization*, Naipaul explores the common need of Indian people, in all their diversity, for both a secure material existence and an identity released from the humiliations of poverty and the bonds of 'karma'. He states that it is

In fact a form of self – cherishing in the midst of a general distress. It is parasitic. It depends on the continuing activity of others.... It needs the world, but it surrenders the organization of the world to others. It is a religious response to worldly defeat. (15)

Dharma, according to Naipaul, is an elastic concept that signifies the quality of individual life within the limits of the possibilities of a particular society, but in Indian situations, he finds it to be in a highly deplorable condition fraught with injustice and cruelty inspired by an extremely limited view of man. He candidly observes: "It can accommodate bonded labour as, once it accommodated widow burning" (119).

Naipaul dislikes the condition of continuing poverty and Indians' tendency to talk too much about their country's established past. The persistence of caste restrictions and humiliations of the Emergency seem impossible to overcome. He is specially tough on Hinduism which has exposed its votaries to a thousand years of defeat and stagnation. It has given men no idea of the state. It has always enslaved one quarter of the population and left the whole population, fragmented, vulnerable and unable to respond to the challenges. Yet there is also a hope that is suggested in this book. Naipaul believes that movements of the oppressed classes and an awakening and



protests against the *status quo* followed by positive action can ultimately pave the way for a better future of India. C.D. Narasirhaiah wittingly observes:

Presumably, or re-reading his own type script before publication he may have told himself that in the interest of artistic truth he would do well to throw in a complimentary remark here and there, as for example, 'India is not my country, And yet I can't be indifferent.' The reluctance to be indifferent is dictated not by sentimental or altruistic considerations but wholly by unashamed opportunism without ... Areas of darkness wounded Civilization... Mr. Naipaul's occupation is gone. What, if not this, are the overwhelming compulsions behind his writing? Most assuredly, not to apply the healing touch to the ills of contemporary society, a writer's responsibility to his fellowmen – the entire corpus of Naipaul's work gives the life to it. (98)

For him at that point of time India, a 'third-world' country, without a sense of history, without an ability to cope up with the changing world had to break off all its ties with the past in order to get the best out of the present.

However Naipaul's delineation of India is not accepted by Indians in toto and his depiction of India, either as an 'area of darkness' or "wounded civilization" is imperfect and in a sense unrealistic. Naipaul being an unhappy Trinidad-Indian, visits India with a Western eye. He comes to India almost in a mood of irreverence and belligerency. In his article "The Complex Fate of V.S Naipaul", D.S. Maini asserts that "Naipaul appears to have little respect for, and less understanding of, the vast sociological and psychic changes how under way in India". (105) Naipaul arrives India with a payload of prejudice and freight of complexes. In the words of T.H. Basvaraja in his article "Naipaul's India and Wounded Civilization"

Indian critics state that it is due to his lost identity and double alienation. Naipaul writes negatively about India and his own

confusion regarding his negativity. Nevertheless it must be said that what Naipaul writes about India is not wholly untrue. This assertion that India is oppressed by yoke of foreign rule and its own limitations is acceptable. (III)

It is clear from the work of Naipaul himself that most of the confusion and contradictions that he finds so irritating in Indian society are general characteristics of almost all the ex-colonies trying to find themselves. The tendency of mimicry among Indians is the inevitable consequence of historical events, the anti – English agitations of India are all the fumbling attempts of displaced and dispossessed peoples to find out or recover their identities. Dependence, political, economic, intellectual and psychological and self contempt are invariably the mark of colonial societies. Naipaul is not unaware of this yet curiously fails to take this into consideration when he castigates the third world societies for their deficiencies. There is awareness that slavish imitation of dominating culture is a universal phenomenon, not exclusive to any race, land or culture. It is true that any relationship of ruler and ruled would lead to such a situation as it exists in the colonies.

The claims of a glorious past, the ancient India and its thoughts, the Hindu ideals of non – attachment and non – violence, taken to its greatest height by Mahatma Gandhi, these are the ideas that can still win millions of votes today in India, but for Naipaul these are what has gone into the making of this civilization which is finding itself unable to move forward in modern times, after Independence, which has given men no idea of a contact with other men. No idea of the state'. In Bombay, Naipaul visits chawls where dwell the factory workers of the city, unwanted but necessary, with their allegiance to Shiva Sena and their committees. In them, Naipaul finds a people who have broken away from a past which holds no hope for them and who are making 'a new claim on the land'. This is perhaps here where Naipaul is least pessimistic about India for everywhere else he finds people just barely surviving, without a

want for more, in complete acceptance of their karma. This is 'the distress of India' 'her holy poverty' romanticized by Gandhism, which Naipaul finds impossible to accept.

To conclude, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, where India's hypocrisies are unleashed by the author who mentions Gandhi and Bhave and their 'nonsense' propaganda of taking India back to the phase of its glorious 'Ramrajya', emphasizes the earnest need to create a society based on scientific outlook instead of the one lost in thinking about the old days. Naipaul seems to be arguing for India all set to create an identity of its own and to work to achieve the targets as a nation. Being satisfied just by reliving its history is to relish a wounded civilization. Naipaul delineates the Indian immigrant's dilemma their problems and plight in a fast changing world. The agony of exile, the pangs of a man in search of meaning and identity and a daredevil who has tried to explore myths and seen through fantasies are some of the predominant shades of Naipaul's writings. Out of this dilemma is born a rich body of writings which has enriched diasporic literature and English language. Naipaul's confusion is exposed in *India: A Wounded Civilization* in his own words. He is in dilemma and is not able to decide anything with certainty as whether to consider India to be his home or not. The overall impression of the book is of acceptance of the nation and its people whom he despised so much.

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