Chapter-II

*An Area of Darkness: Lack of Indian Identity*
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AN AREA OF DARKNESS: LACK OF INDIAN IDENTITY

"Land of my childhood" and "area of darkness" are directly associated. This land of darkness is not just an unknown land to which Naipaul had no connection, but a seminal part of his past. The part just out there beyond what he can remember. Naipaul ventures into this dark world that actually determined his future course of actions, but he can never really grasp or define it. That at least is what he says, but the book itself is solid and exhaustive when it comes to recording occurrences and individuals. It could be seen as a positive point that the readers of the book do not have that sense on placing critical remarks on the book despite the conflict between Naipaul’s ‘imaginary’ and ‘actual’ India which becomes unknowable in the end. It could be observed from the book that it was a very personal project for Naipaul. It is this personal aspect that makes the book something more than a travel narrative. Naipaul makes use of the fact that his own identity as a part of the Indian
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Diaspora makes his response to India a point of broad interest. Thus he gets away with things in this travel narrative that another writer never could. He can be rude and judgmental toward what he observes, but it does not come out as mean spirited because these personal responses are part of the interest of the book.

*An Area of Darkness* is a travelogue detailing his trip through India in the early sixties. It was the first amongst Naipaul's globally recognized Indian trilogy which includes *India: A Wounded Civilization* and *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. In this novel, Naipaul conveyed his experiences in India over a span of one year. The novel has given Naipaul a channel to convey his disappointments with India. He discloses the incidents occurred en route. It gives a personal feel as it is written in the first person narrative voice. A classic of modern travel writing, *An Area of Darkness* is V.S. Naipaul’s perceptive reckoning with his ancestral homeland and an extraordinarily discerning chronicle of his first encounter with India. *An Area of Darkness* is an intense pessimistic work in which Naipaul has emphasized on the appalling parts of India. The novel is abounding by explanatory passages which helped Naipaul delineate his core subject matter. The first visit of Naipaul to India was disappointing to him. It communicates the acute sense
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of disgruntlement which the author experienced on his very first visit to his native place. Naipaul’s travel narratives appear to have unscientific perspective. True to his style, the travelogue is anecdotal and descriptive. An Area of Darkness is part autobiography and part travel genre. The first thing to realize about An Area of Darkness is that it was first published in 1964, several years before the popularization of India as a place of enlightenment by the Beatles. And his book reads as a pre-emptive strike on that idea of India as a source of spiritual light. Naipaul settles on dirtiness and public defecation. The metaphor of darkness occurs every now and then but it is hard to perceive what he actually meant by it, Naipaul writes:

“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.”

Naipaul grew up in Trinidad surrounded by an environment that had received its form from India, even as actual memories of India were lost. Later in the book there is an interesting passage in which he mentions his familiarity of the Himalayas from “brightly
coloured religious pictures in my grandmother's house."\textsuperscript{2} Nobody has told him the real stories of India; he remembered some vague abstractions only. Thus India was for him an "area of darkness" out of which arrived completes the world he knew as a child. The metaphor of a "hut at evening, with light extending only a short ways out from the hut\textsuperscript{3}" emphasizes the islanded and limited nature of his upbringing in Trinidad. Surrounded by elements that give evidence of coming from somewhere deep in time and space, but whose origin he could never imagine.

There was a contradiction between the imagined India of Trinidad and the actual India and it was too overwhelming to be disputed. Naipaul could not help himself but to escape. Naipaul was stunned as his idea of himself was confronted by it. A shocked Naipaul delineates:

"Hysteria had been my reaction, and a brutality dictated by a new awareness of myself as a whole human being and a determination, touched with fear, to remain what I was.\textsuperscript{4}"

The opening chapter of the book is an excellent example of excusable harshness. He stops in Egypt on his way by boat to India, and gets to Cairo:
“Cairo revealed the meaning of the bazaar: narrow streets encrusted with filth, stinking even on this winter's day; tiny shops full of shoddy goods; crowds; the din, already barely supportable, made worse by the steady blaring of motor-car horns; medieval buildings partly collapsed...”

You get the idea that he is not an enthusiast for Cairo. He even announces that he took a bus back to Alexandria two days early and retreated onto his ship. If some other writer were to write about any place in the world in this same harsh manner he would be marked as a boor. But in Naipaul's case, it is OK because his response to the East is a part of the inner drama he is working to narrate.

*Middle Passage* is a travel book about the Caribbean islands. In it, Naipaul discovered his true talent: writing about decolonized third-world countries. He honed a special vision for the talented X-ray gaze into the ills of these newly emerging societies. Passage, the first in the genre, sets the general pattern Naipaul's travel writing was to follow. Indeed, readers familiar with Passage have a distinct premonition what to expect in Darkness. The two books are alike in many ways but also dissimilar, in that Naipaul uses two different criteria in treating the two societies. In the West Indies, his standard
is modernity and the way it manifests itself in the formation of the nation-state. In India, on the other hand, his vision is stereotypically orientalist i.e., India is depicted as irremediably static and as quite incapable of modernity. An Area of Darkness presents India as a space the narrator negotiates to define his own identity. Then the space for the orientalist's exploration is always a proving ground for the self. In this respect, Naipaul follows in the footsteps of such figures as Conrad’s Marlow and Jim; Kipling's Kim and (in “The Man Who Would be King”) Peachy Carnehan and Daniel Dravot; and Paul Scott's Merrick. As Naipaul uses India to reconfirm orientalist stereotypes in An Area of Darkness, the text clamorously echoes Conrad's Heart of Darkness, a work Naipaul holds in singular esteem in his essay “Conrad's Darkness” (The Return of Eva Peron). Conrad's influence on Naipaul's African writing, apparent largely in this essay, has merited a deluge of critical attention, but this same influence on Naipaul's Indian writing, in particular, on An Area of Darkness, has received inadequate notice, though the title blatantly calls attention to Heart of Darkness. Glyne Griffith is one of the early critics to examine the orientalist dimension to Naipaul's travel writing. Griffith endeavours to draw a comparison between Heart of Darkness and An Area of Darkness and maintains that
Naipaul's stress on the scatological exposes an ontological predicament which is signified in the narrative by brutes defecating all over". Like Griffith, Sara Suleri treats Naipaul's orientalism while examining the problematics of self and identity in *An Area of Darkness*. She reads the book as an orientalist text that undermines its own stereotyping because the narrator cannot deny his bodily identity as an Indian. This creates an ambiguity in the text, which is never truly resolved.

Griffith and Suleri do treat orientalism and indicate the mediation of *Heart of Darkness* in *An Area of Darkness*, but their focus is primarily on the text's orientalist narrator's self. *An Area of Darkness*, however, shows a more profound affinity with orientalism and establishes a strong intertextual link with *Heart of Darkness*. Indeed Conrad's presence can be detected early in the opening pages of Naipaul's text. Like Marlow, the narrator in Naipaul's Darkness approaches India as a destination that exists more in myth than in reality. A clue to this India appears early in the text when Naipaul recounts his boyhood image of India. His childhood India was an area of imagination, in other words, a land of myth. Thinking about the India of ancient glory, he became a nationalist and had even committed to memory the maps of India of yore. One is reminded of
the blank spaces in Marlow's boyhood map that gradually got filled with rivers and lakes and names, which had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery, a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. Marlow sadly recalls that it had become a place for darkness. Similarly, Naipaul's interest in India declined upon its independence. Independence ushers India into the real world while colonial India can be more easily imagined as a mythic land. In modern times, no longer a land of myth, India becomes a land of 'darkness' to Naipaul. If India is realized, it cannot be fantasized, and if it cannot be fantasized, it is not interesting. Marlow views Africa as a locus for adventure; Naipaul views India as a land of antiquated grandeur, whose eminence he vainly searches for in his visit. Familiarity does not breed contempt here because there is no familiarity to begin with. When the reality of modern India overwhelms him, he can only recoil in horror. In a separate piece written during the same trip, Naipaul says,

"Perhaps India is only a word, a mystical idea that embraces all those vast plains and rivers through which the train moves all those anonymous figures asleep on railway platforms and footpaths of Bombay. Perhaps it is this, this vastness which no one gets to know: India as an
ache, for which one has great tenderness, but from which at length one always wishes to separate oneself.” 6

Naipaul comes across as more genuine and less angry. He is critical of India perhaps because it is too strange for him and makes him feel less important:

"An Indian, I have never before been in streets where everyone is Indian, where I blend unremarkably into the crowd. This has been curiously deflating, for all my life I have expected some recognition of my difference and it is only in India that I have recognized how necessary this stimulus is to me, how conditioned I have been by the multiracial society of Trinidad and then by my life as an outsider in England. To be one of four hundred and thirty-nine million Indians is terrifying". 7

It is significant that Naipaul's journey from Europe to India follows the old trade route and the India that he will describe is presaged through various little scenes of the journey. The voyage parallels Marlow's expedition in subtle ways. Matching Marlow's gradual loss of civilizational values, Naipaul notices the steady erosion of the same early in An Area of Darkness. Eastern values are wholesome enough at first but begin to decay soon.
“Foreshadowing of the caste system” can be seen in the faded hotel, for the “old French waiter only served; he had his runners, sad-eyed silent Negroes in fezzes and cummerbunds, who fetched and cleared away”. An Egyptian sitting in the compartment of the train to Cairo “hawked twice, with an expert tongue rolled the phlegm into a ball, plucked the ball out of his thumb and forefinger, considered it, and then rubbed it away between his palms”, thus anticipating the casual and public defecation of Indians Naipaul will describe in the east of the east, India. A similar portent appears in the Pyramids that “function as a public latrine”.

To Naipaul, all these point toward a new idea of man, recognizable in his otherness to the European:

“From Athens to Bombay another idea of man had defined itself by degrees, a new type of authority and subservience. The physique of Europe had melted away first into that of Africa and then, through Semitic Arabia, into Aryan Asia. Men had been diminished and deformed; they begged and whined.”

Overwhelmed by this degradation, Naipaul has a new awareness of himself as a whole human being and a determination, touched with fear, to remain what he was.
Several scholars have noted that *An Area of Darkness* is a dip into Naipaul's own self. Like Marlow's resisting of primal instincts that Africa tempts him with, Naipaul struggles to suppress Indian ways of looking at things. But the resolve is touched with fear, because Naipaul, with his Indian roots, has his sensitivity to Indian culture. Hence, not giving in to 'Indianness' is a constant battle for him. The struggle is worsened by the material reality of India and its teeming millions. Consequently, the Indians are rendered an abstraction, and Naipaul has to withstand its claim on him:

"And for the first time in my life I was one of the crowd.... 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 that Indian crowd. I had been made by Trinidad and England; recognition of my difference was necessary to me. I felt the need to impose myself, and didn't know how."

*An Area of Darkness* presents a contrast between India as a stagnating and primitive society and Europe as a dynamic and advanced one. Discussing the two cultures, Naipaul notes that:
“the British pillaged the country thoroughly; during their rule manufactures and crafts declined” [and that] “a biscuit factory is a poor exchange for gold embroidery.”

Still, to Naipaul, the principle Europe embodied during its colonial encounter with India was ‘positive’ because it held enlightenment knowledge and hence ranked higher on the evolutionary scale of nations. As he said, that was a clash between a positive principle and a negative principle; and nothing more negative can be anticipated than the conjunction in the eighteenth century of a stagnant Islam and a debauched Hinduism. Further he says that in any clash between post-Renaissance Europe and India, India had to be beaten.

Long conquered by invasive forces, India lost its vitality, surviving on moribund imitative gestures. Its confrontation with Europe led to the inevitable consequence: defeat. While Europe, with its positive principle, inexorably progressed, India with its negative principle intractably regressed.

But it is not merely social Darwinism that prejudices Naipaul against India; echoes of evolutionary Darwin resonate in An Area of Darkness on many occasions. As soon as Naipaul arrives in India, he
begins to notice the Indians and is shocked to see that the vast majority of them are deformed and devolved, people with arrested growth. The first Indian Naipaul meets upon arrival at the Bombay Port is Coelho, the Goan, sent by Naipaul's travel agency to facilitate his exit through the Indian Customs. Coelho is described as “tall and thin and shabby and nervous”\textsuperscript{15}, while his assistant is “stunted and bony”. The Indians Naipaul sees on the other vessels are “of small physique, betokening all the fearful things that had soon to be faced”\textsuperscript{16}.

Similarly, Indians, to Naipaul, are a sub species of humanity. However, unlike Marlow's depiction of Africans, Naipaul clearly describes them in terms of failed evolution:

“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; to give way to that was to abandon the self I had known.”\textsuperscript{17}

Not surprisingly, in the ruins of Vijaynagar, the Indians “inside, the inheritors of this greatness: men and women

\textsuperscript{32}
Indians who are not in the category of devolved humanity do not fare all that well in *An Area of Darkness*. They are India's rising bourgeoisie, and they are the topic of Naipaul's severest censure for their 'mimicry' of the departed British. Thus there are Bunty, the boxwallah, and Mrs Mahindra, the contractor's wife. The boxwallahs, a class of men, who hold sinecure executive positions in British businesses mostly in Calcutta, is the most despicable product of the East-West encounter because they still ape Raj manners. Mrs Mahindra, representing her class's crass imitation of the West, unabashedly professes her "Craze, just craze for foreign" and takes a great deal of pride in possessing things foreign.

Even Indian nationalism, Naipaul claims, began as mimicry of the British. Curiously enough, in Naipaul's estimate of Indian nationalists in Darkness, Gandhi is an admirable figure. Naipaul calls Gandhi "the least Indian of Indian leaders" [whereas] "Nehru is more Indian [because] he has a romantic feeling for the country and its past" [Gandhi, according to Naipaul], "saw India so clearly because he was in part a colonial". The roles of these two nationalist leaders will be reversed in *India: A Wounded Civilization*,

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Naipaul's next book on India. But in Darkness, why is Naipaul so approving of Gandhi? The reason relates to the text's orientalist vision of India. Certainly, it is much easier to conceive India through an orientalist lens, unchanging and beyond the reach of modernity, only if India remains a land of holy poverty as Gandhi wanted it to be after independence. Indeed Gandhi's anti-modern vision of India is the rife ground for orientalist imaginings. To Naipaul, Nehru, on the other hand, "has a romantic feeling for the country and its past; he takes it to the heart, and the India he writes about cannot easily be recognized"\textsuperscript{21}. Obviously, the modern India that Nehru is trying to create would cause India to lose its oriental charm. This is the reason that when Naipaul first arrives in Bombay, he is shocked to see how:

"The building spoke of London and industrial England; and how, in spite of knowledge, this seemed ordinary and inappropriate"\textsuperscript{22}.

A like tendency is seen in \textit{An Area of Darkness}. Naipaul does not pronounce British rule in India either beneficial or harmful, though most of his comments on the issue suggest the latter. He declares that England in India was an incongruous imposition and reacts against the English presence on more than one occasion: "The British had possessed the country so completely. Their withdrawal
was so irrevocable" and "The British pillaged the country thoroughly; during their rule manufactures and crafts declined." Naipaul inspects the issue at length in an article published soon after Darkness and observes that it was an encounter which finished in reciprocated withdrawal and uselessness. Thus Naipaul's critique of British imperialism in India resembles Conrad's excoriation of Leopoldine Congo, although British imperialism is hardly a focus in Naipaul's Darkness as the Belgian is in Conrad's. What is proposed in this statement certainly grants Naipaul a remarkable power, for his is a consciousness that feels Indianness and all its denial and bad attitudes and yet can distance itself from those and critique them on a Western platform. It is a consciousness that can penetrate its object of study though it itself is a part of the same object. Thus it intimates its right to a complete epistemological grip on its object.

Notwithstanding that tremendous claim, being both within and without India ambiguity surrounds the nature of experience Naipaul narrates, creating a sense of indeterminacy in it. On the one hand, Naipaul claims full control over his subject; on the other, he disavows the finding it yields. At the end of Darkness, he says:

"It was a journey that ought not to have been made; it had broken my life into two. 'Write me as soon as you
get to Europe,’ an Indian friend had said. ‘I want your freshest impressions.’ I forget now what I wrote. It was violent and incoherent; but, like everything I wrote about India, it exorcized nothing.”

This apparent contradiction, knowing India and not knowing it, corresponds to the duality inherent in the discourse of Indology. The idealist view emphasizes India's differences from Western culture and is fascinated by them whereas the positivist denigrates them, recommending their speedy replacement with Western values. Both views, according to Inden, conform to the episteme of Indology: that India is Europe's other.

Naipaul's India in Darkness veers between the two. The India of his childhood, the land of myth and fantasy, conforms to the romantic India created by Jones and those loyal to him whereas Naipaul's felt experience of India and his commentary on it comply more with the view advanced by Mill and the positivists. The tension from the two pressures creates the epistemological uncertainty in An Area of Darkness.

Inden informs us that early Indological accounts usually had two components: descriptive and commentative. There is another, explanatory or interpretive, but this last is a later phenomenon. All

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three can be seen in Naipaul's writings about India; in Darkness, however, Naipaul mostly describes and sometimes comments. His description as all Indological descriptions are placed in what Inden would call a framing commentary. Treating a similar issue in Darkness, Ashish Roy shows that description and narration nor the ‘failure of narrative which yields a successful narrative, a narrative of success’ go on to the making of self in the text. Analyzing an anecdote in which the narrator of Darkness has just alighted from an air-conditioned train compartment into the blistering heat of Delhi where beggars whine, overburdened porters stagger under loads of trunks, and a hotel agent waves his ‘grubby folder’ from time to time Roy remarked that here with single dive of the imagination, the bounder recalls his true self of which he was about to be uncovered, destroys the enemy, creates himself in the middle of all actions that is nonactivity, arrives at, gradually ponders, reads, Writes, Authorizes the scene of writing.

With all its inactivity and a history, the Indian civilization perfectly answers to the descriptive mode of representation, however tedious the task may be. Description, moreover, is the appropriate mode to represent what is timeless and lacking the power of representing itself. For these reasons, description, according to Roy,
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is considered the damned genre in Western writing: Description has always, in Western rhetorical theory, been regarded as a second-order, menial labour, a necessary evil in the heroic gesture of making narratives.

That Naipaul succumbs to similar stereotyping in his Darkness is evident in his comment on the state of literature in India. He declares novel-writing to be an inappropriate vocation for Indians. He believes that Indian attempts at the novel further reveal the Indian confusion. The novel is of the West. It is part of that Western concern with the condition of men, a response to the here and now. Naipaul ridicules Indian novelists who mimic Western writers, but his sample is too scanty to be representative. He describes only those who write in English. Certainly, the following does not apply to many who write in Indian languages.

Other writers quickly exhausted the readers with their assertions that poverty was sad, that death was sad. They read of poor fishermen, poor peasants, poor rickshaw-men; innumerable pretty young girls either simply or suddenly died, or shared the landlord's bed, paid the family's medical bills and then committed suicide; and many of the modern short stories were only refurbished
folk tales. Even if Indian novels pursued mostly such trite stories, Naipaul does not grant them their own aesthetic criteria. In this 'description' of Indian novels, a 'framing' or 'interpretive' 'commentary' is not late in coming. The sweetness and sadness which can be found in Indian writing and Indian films are turning away from a too overwhelming reality; they reduce the horror to a warm, virtuous emotion. Indian sentimentality is the opposite of concern. Said says, 'Narrative asserts the power of men to be born, develop, and die, the tendency of institutions and actualities to change, the likelihood that modernity and contemporaneity will finally overtake classical civilization.'

True not only of Darkness but most of Naipaul's early non-fiction, the strategy is a product of deliberate effort. In an interview given years later, Naipaul says that his fiction and non-fiction 'come out of two entirely different segments of the brain,' that 'fiction begins on the typewriter' while the 'other has to be done very carefully, so it's done by hand, because it's very planned.' Thus fiction is spontaneous while non-fiction is studied. A major difficulty in the latter is the struggle the author endures to suppress elements undermining his set impressions. Naipaul states in the same
Naipaul denies Indians a role in the account of India he offers in Darkness, and India becomes a construct of his orientalist fantasy in the text. Indians who appear in the text remain passive participants in his narrative, which, in the last analysis, is a study of Naipaul's own self. That self fights a hard battle to efface its own Indianness and to shield its identity from being Indianized. The discourse of orientalism comes very handy to Naipaul to overcome the threat of his disintegrating self, for it is preserved by creating dialectic of the self and the other and adhering to their defined parameters.

Mander praises Naipaul's descriptive powers, but notes that *An Area of Darkness* is similar to other novels that explore British influence in colonial India. From their duration, their intimacy, and intensity, an outsider might take Anglo-Indian relations to be one of the richest and most fascinating of historical themes. The British, after all, ruled India for some two centuries sending out, not the riffraff of their cities, but many of their finest minds and wisest spirits. And India was not always unresponsive. The great Bengali
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reformers of the 19th century were equally determined to revive India's traditions and to bring India the best in modern European thinking which tended to mean Bentham and the two Mills (the elder Mill, of course, was one of the greatest of all British servants of India). Yet, by the end of the century, the mood had gone sour. It was in Bengal that the first anti-British terrorist campaign was to break out. In Kipling's Kim there is affection and respect for India and the ways of its natives though not for the new, Western-educated "native" that reflected the experience of many a British District Collector in the 1880's. How much of this was left by the 1920's may be judged from E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, an accurate book in this (though not in every) respect. Again, the powerful impress of British institutions on contemporary India can mislead, as the Englishness of a Nehru misled. Nehru's successor and his possible successors are distinctly less English, less Western, distinctly more traditional, and more Hindu. The course of Anglo-Indian relations has its bursts of grandeur; but on the whole it is a wretched story. It never was a marriage of true minds; to many it seems in retrospect more like a squalid mesalliance.

Since Independence there have been only three books which have done justice to the Anglo-Indian theme. The first, in point of
time, was Nirad C. Chaudhuri's great Autobiography of an Unknown Indian, perhaps the best book in the English language ever written by an Indian. The second was The Men Who Ruled India, by Philip "Woodruff," an eloquent, erudite, romantic monument to the British administrators of imperial India perhaps the most convincing apologia for imperialism (though its author, Philip Mason, is no "imperialist" in the contemporary, pejorative sense) that has ever been composed. V. S. Naipaul's new book, An Area of Darkness, deserves to take its place as the third in this pantheon. It differs from its predecessors, each written shortly after Independence, in that it records a contemporary India, the India of Nehru's last years, of the Sino-Indian border dispute. But it differs also in the quality of the author's involvement. Both Mr. Chaudhuri and Mr. Mason were children of the British Raj, indeed their books may prove, with Kipling's and Forster's, its most enduring monuments. Mr. Naipaul, too, is a child of British imperialism, but in rather more indirect fashion. He is the grandson of a Brahmin from the Benares region who went to Trinidad in the 19th century as an indentured labourer. But his education is British and he confesses that he lacks sympathy with much that is deeply Indian, he has no religious sense, no liking for metaphysics. Nevertheless, admirers of his earlier books must
have hoped that he would one day write about India. They have been richly rewarded.

The strengths of Mr. Naipaul's book lie, then, where one would expect them to lie, in his novelist's ear for talk, in his shrewd, observant eye for detail. The descriptions of that lakeside hotel in Kashmir where he stayed, of that first agonized encounter with the sights and smells of the Orient in Bombay and Alexandria, are done with a sureness that is equal to anything in his fiction. But it is above all Mr. Naipaul's account of his return to the ancestral village ("the Village of the Dubes") that seems certain of a high place in any anthology of English writing about India. Until the very end of his journey, the author seems to cling to the illusion that somewhere, somehow, he will discover what it is that connects him, through his Brahmin forebears, with this sprawling, defecating, inchoate India of today. Arrived in the village, he finds the shrines erected by his grandfather, with money sent from Trinidad, still standing. But the village and its Brahmin community are not quite as he and his Trinidad family had been brought up to believe. A traditional welcome is laid on: but it is soon apparent that this prodigal's return is seen as a financial opportunity not to be missed. It is the final humiliation. The shameless beggary of India, as it must appear to a
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Westerners could not be more cruelly brought home. Mr. Naipaul, who is nothing if not candid, admits that he panicked: from that moment he wanted only to get out of India as fast as he could.

In the best of his descriptive episodes Mr. Naipaul and there is no higher praise, is not far inferior to Kipling. But the book has the defects of its virtues; it is interested largely in the immediacy, the accidents of life. Now that, in an Indian context, is very strange. For the Hindu sets little store by appearances, the world of maya. To the Hindu, essence is all. That is why most reportage, most descriptive writing in modern India, is so bad. In other words, the average Indian writer is weak precisely where Mr. Naipaul is strong. But it does seem that Mr. Naipaul is deaf to a good deal in the complex music of India think, for instance, of the breathtaking aesthetic appeal of Satyajit Ray's films because his own gifts lie in quite another direction. For all his Brahmin ancestry, Mr. Naipaul is very English in his sensibility (he is primarily a comic writer). In one sense, then, his book is intensely personal. It is the record of an attempt to clear that "area of darkness" which India, since childhood, had represented in the author's mind. The attempt succeeded, disastrously well: the darkness of ignorance yielded to the more painful darkness of knowledge. In that sense, Mr. Naipaul's journey

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was justified: he will hardly need to go back. But there is more to it than that. It is not chance that Mr. Naipaul's personal Odyssey conforms to the pattern of so many other attempted explorations, so many other passages to India, both in its high expectations, and in its final humiliation and rejection. Indeed, it appears to echo the tragedy of the British Raj itself. Mr. Naipaul's book is the latest, but not the last, nail in the coffin of that brave, but ill-favoured endeavour.

Near the end of the book he makes another go at the "area of darkness" concept. Having spent a full year in India he admits his failure like this:

"India had not worked its magic on me. It remained the land of my childhood, an area of darkness; like the Himalayan passes, it was closing up again, as fast as I withdrew from it, into a land of myth; it seemed to exist in just the timelessness which I had imagined as a child, into which, for all that I walked on Indian earth, I knew I could not penetrate". ²⁸

This novel is part autobiography and part travel genre. Naipaul writes about his experiences in India over span of one year. Naipaul uses descriptive passages very well to outline his themes. The general vision given in this novel of India is sombre and dark. The
title *An Area of Darkness* refers to India. Many of the negative aspects of Indian culture are highlighted and Naipaul seems to see the whole bleakness of the culture at every stage. Colonialism is an important issue in the story and again this is treated with a good deal of ironic detachment. Towards the conclusion of the story Naipaul acknowledges that he should never really have returned to the country. The story is a semi-autobiographical account given by Naipaul of a year he spent in India in 1964. The opening section entitled Travellers Prelude deals with the difficulties surrounding bureaucracy in the country. Naipaul speaks about how he made many difficult efforts to recover alcohol that was confiscated from him.

The book is divided into three parts and eleven sub-parts. Part one is entitled A Resting Place for the Imagination. He speaks about his ancestors coming to India as indentured labourers. He also deals with his first experiences on the issue of race, of Muslims and Hindus. Naipaul was born an unbeliever. He grew up in an orthodox Hindu family. In India he explains how caste comes to mean the brutal division of labour and this was an unpleasant concept. While he was an unbeliever he was still saddened at the decay of old customs and rituals. Naipaul talks about the poverty in India and
how it is one of the poorest countries in the world. When he moves to London he find himself as one more face in the midst of Industrialized England. Naipaul’s idea of India found its way to him through the very fact of his birth into a Hindu joint family in Trinidad. India lay around him more ‘in people’ than ‘in things’ ever since he gained consciousness. One of his earliest memories is of ‘Gold Teeth Nanee’ and her grave dignified husband whose fierce loyalty to their language (they spoke only Hindi) and to the Indian way of life made them look like foreigners in Trinidad. They carried India within them. It was not fragmented by their Trinidadian reality, which they denied by their refusal to recognize it. India also existed around Naipaul in the various domestic articles that his grandfather had brought from India. He reminisces:

"India lay about us in things: in a string bed......in plaited straw mats; in innumerable brass vessels; in wooden printing blocks.....in books.....in brightly coloured pictures of deities on pink lotus or radiant against Himalayan snow; and in all the paraphernalia of the prayer-room.....the images, the smooth pebbles, the stick of sandalwood."29

Another introduction to the Indian way of life was through the stories that his father wrote, Naipaul says that the stories celebrated
Indian rural life, and the Hindu rites that gave elegance and wholeness to that life to him they gave a exquisiteness to the Indian rural life he had never known. And when they went to the country to visit his father's own relations, it was like a fairytale come to life.

Naipaul speaks about the Indian English mimicry and how this is just like fantasy. He goes on to speak about the custom of defecating everywhere and how they refuse to acknowledge this fact. The approach to many villages is not a pleasant experience therefore. Naipaul speaks about Mahatma Gandhi and how he was able to look at India squarely and see its problems in a totally objective manner.

Part Two opens with the image of a Doll's House on the Dal Lake. This is in fact a hotel called Hotel Liward, which is situated in Kashmir. He speaks about his relationships with the various people who worked in the hotel and the ensuing conflicts, which occurred. His foil is the Khansamah who has never learnt the art and as a result remains a tormented man. Naipaul's interactions with the Khansamah bring out a fine analysis of anger. The Khansamah's anger and the almost simultaneous 'recognition of his own weakness' made him a 'tormented man'. Naipaul felt himself to be as inadequate as the Khansamah. Naipaul says:
"I suffered with him.....and I was surprised by the rise within myself of that deep anger which unhinges judgment and almost physically limits vision.....the moment of anger is a moment of exalted, shrinking lucidity from which recovery is slow and shattering."30

'The Medieval City', on the surface, deals with the features of Srinagar. Naipaul sees people who have forgotten their history and survive on legend. That is how Akbar's 'late sixteenth century fort in the Dal Lake' came to be regarded as five thousand years old. The details of 'the man' who had brought the hazratbal relic were not known; religion was life and the law. The muslim medical student did not believe that the world was made in six days but was more of a religious fanatic than Aziz who, secure in his system inspected other systems with tolerant interest. Naipaul studies the 'medieval mind' which could 'casually' assess a building as five thousand years old. This same capacity facilitated other amnesias. The medieval mind could easily forget the last three to four hundred years of its past:

"And it was because it was without a sense of history that it was capable of so complete a conversion. Many Kashmiri clan names-like that of Mr. Butt himself-were
often still purely Hindu; but of their Hindu past the Kashmiris retained no memory.”

We learn about the function of the Indian Civil Service. He is encouraged to join a pilgrimage to the Cave of Amarnath the Eternal Lord, which is ninety miles north of Srinagar. He, speaks about his joy and that of the other pilgrims as they climb the Himalayas and try to get inside a cave. ‘Pilgrimage’ begins with a description of the five-foot ice-lingam of Amarnath:

“It was a mystery, like Delphi, of the older world. It had survived because it was of India and Hinduism which, without beginning, without end, scarcely a religion, continued as a repository and living record of man’s religious consciousness.”

Even though they are on a pilgrimage Naipaul states how as soon as they got inside the cave it was like a typical Indian bazaar. Himalayas, the next prominent feature of the chapter had a special place in Naipaul’s childhood memory. He reminds:

“I felt linked to them India, the Himalayas: they went together. In so many of the brightly coloured religious pictures in my grandmother’s house I had seen these mountains, cones of white against simple, cold blue. They had become a part of the India of my fantasy.”
Naipaul recounts many anecdotes among them one about a young couple called Rafiq and Laraine. Rafiq is a poor musician. They spend a good deal of time fighting but eventually they get married. They split up however as she is unable to bear the poverty in India. She returns home to America.

Part Three is entitled Fantasy and Ruins. This section deals with how the British possessed the country completely. Their withdrawal was irrevocable. He speaks about the English of the raj how they swaggered and had mannerisms and spoke a jargon. He mentions Kipling and how he is a good chronicler of Anglo-India. This fragment is Naipaul’s direct confrontation with his imagination. He dissects his past experiences: his experiences as a colonial in Trinidad, his experience of England as it existed in Trinidad, his experience of Kipling and other writers on India; and of his idea of India that he had formed in Trinidad. He was not prepared to accept the England that he saw in India. Confronting it, he says:

“This conformation laid bare a small area of self-deception which, below knowledge and self-knowledge, had survived in that part of my mind which held as a possibility the existence of the white Himalayan cones against a cold blue sky, as in the religious pictures in my
grandmother’s house. For in the India of my childhood, the land which in my imagination was an extension, separate from the alienness by which we ourselves were surrounded, of my grandmother’s house, there was no alien presence.”

He talks about how the Taj Mahal, a great building without a function. He goes on to speak about writers and how Indian attempts at the novel reveal the Indian confusion further.

The next chapter is 'The Garland on my Pillow' in which Naipaul has recorded meetings with different people. He portrays the picture of India in conflict which arises out of ignorance. Naipaul moves on to speak about Indian railways and how he befriended a Sikh while travelling by train in the south of India. An inspector of Forms and Stationery in the Northern Railway is non-existent for a Railway officer busy with his ‘presidential tours’. He met a cigarette smoking Sikh onboard who had violent hatred for Dravidians. He was proud of his Aryan lineage and regarded non-Aryans with contempt. In the starting of the chapter, the Sikh seems to appear as an extension of Naipaul’s response to the pain, squalor and poverty of India. Naipaul turns away from the hospitality of the sweetshop-owner and prefers the company of the Sikh. But later on, Naipaul is
able to see the difference in the Sikh’s debunking of India and the painful hysteria of his own response. While the Sikh was responding to an idea of himself, Naipaul saw himself responding to India with a love insensibly turned into a self-lacerating hysteria. The Sikh’s hatred was venomous and it was without concern. Naipaul was able to detach himself from the Sikh’s reactions, He says: “He was reacting for me, as he had done on the train. But now I knew my hysteria for what it was. The words were his, not mine. They broke the spell”

Naipaul leaves the Sikh behind to let himself be overtaken by the hospitality of the sweetshop-owner. He was grateful for the warmth and kindness of India. In the end he returns to his hotel room to find a typically Indian show of appreciation by one of his readers. He finds his room filled with incense smoke, flowers strewn all over his bed and a garland on his pillow. The incense suffocated him, his eyes watered due to the smoke, his room was littered with ash. But, this appreciation touched his heart. It was genuine.

There is another chapter ‘Emergency’ which deals with Indian responses to the Chinese attack on India. The attack had caught India unawares and the meaning of Emergency meant more speeches and
more statutes of law. The common man and politicians were both feeding on words. The lectures at the Theosophical society were monotonous and irrelevant to the situation at hand. Naipaul saw the Aurobindo society in Pondicherry as a ‘self-contained organization, efficiently run by its members.’ In Calcutta, Naipaul tries to find the city that had been the cradle of Indian renaissance. He found the ‘products of the dead Indian renaissance’ to whom, independence was merely an opportunity to withdraw from India, to step into the show of being ‘British’. Durgapur, the steel town was a small point of hope for revival. No sooner had Naipaul crossed Durgapur, he was beset with doubt. The survival of this small point of hope looked threatened with the news of the defeat of the Indian Army on the Indo-Chinese border. Nehru’s speeches were already beginning to sound like ‘helpless condolence’.

The chapter also describes an Indian commissioner’s absurd obsession with soaps and shoes. The people belonging to the area under his charge made soap and shoes. This obsession was his defence, for himself and for his daughter, who was in England and deeply distressed when she had heard that ‘no one wore shoes’ or ‘washed’ in India. Underneath this soap and shoes exhibit Naipaul sees the hands of craftsmen and is comforted by the thought that
with so little encouragement and such poor materials these people were still able to exercise their craftsmanship. Commissioner, in his speeches, insisted the people to grow more food, to grow strong and skilled to fight the Chinese. The preparations of civil defence were soon lost. On a trip to Lucknow, Mr. Nehru lost his temper on seeing the civil defence practices. All this digging of trenches, he said, was a waste of time. And India returned to its normal life. The Chinese attack and the emergency soon become history. The experience of India which Naipaul had expressed in the previous chapter is seen progressing towards a greater acceptance in this chapter. He rejects his thesis of the Sikhs being the only few whole men in India. Naipaul says:

"Out of all its squalor and human decay, its eruptions of butchery, India produced so many people of grace and beauty, ruled by elaborate courtesy. Producing too much life, it denied the value of life; yet it permitted a unique human development to so many. Nowhere were people so heightened, rounded and individualistic; nowhere did, they offer themselves so fully and with such assurance. To know Indians was to take a delight in people as people. I did not want India to sink; the mere thought was painful." 35
The last chapter of the book is 'Village of the Dubes'. This chapter is an account of Naipaul’s visit to his maternal grandfather’s ancestral village. He what afraid about what was going to come his way. He sees mango groves in the beginning which surrounded the village and the dust which engulfed the village. He admired the spires of the shrines that his grandfather has built. He saw women without veils and heard an IAS man accompanying him calling them ‘very fearless’. He met the woman, named Jussodra who had come with his grandfather from Trinidad. He saw the photographs taken in Trinidad and heard the stories of his grandfather’s struggle to re-establish the family. It ought to have been a final homecoming for Naipaul. But it was not, Naipaul has said that in a year, he had not learned recognition. He had learned his detachment from India, and was satisfied to be a colonial, past-less and ancestor-less.

He comes to the conclusion however that India for him remains An Area of Darkness. He has learned over the years his separateness his contentment with being a colonial without a past and without ancestors. At the conclusion of the novel he tells us about his encounter with an emaciated man called Ramachandra. This man wants help to start litigation and get some land, which formerly belonged to Naipaul’s grandfather. Naipaul is disgusted at
this incident and leaves in a mood of self-reproach. He talks about
his flight home and how it was made up of anxiety and frustration.
He admits that the journey to India should not have been made as it
broke his life in two. It was his final attempt at complete retreat,
therefore it concluded, in vainness and annoyance, an unwarranted
act of brutality, self reproach and flight’.

The section ‘Flight’ elaborates it more clearly. The gap
between Naipaul and India was difficult to be bridged. Naipaul fled
from India. In London, he tried in vain, to recapture a positive
reaction to the city where he had resided and worked. The oblong
cloth was a gift from India. It was an Indian gift on account of the
affection it so effortlessly contained. But in his dreams, the cloth
was a mystery. It sought to be unravelled. But the cloth remained
unravelled. This dream in a way sums up Naipaul’s predicament of
flights and of unravelled labyrinths.

The sub parts are closely linked patterns of his experiences and
their examinations. ‘A Resting place for the imagination’ provides
the background for Naipaul’s understanding of India. ‘Degree’, ‘The
Romancers’ and ‘The Colonial’ are three major aspects of India that
he encounters. ‘Degree’ for Naipaul stands as an Indian’s
understanding of himself. String-cots and wooden blocks had lain unused in his Trinidad home for the lack of people of that ‘caste skill’. But that was not so in India. People had accepted the work outside the realm of their ‘caste skill’ and in doing so, they had not forgotten their ‘degree’. This double realization, instead of protecting the unity of his world, worked in a paradoxical manner and led to a split at a very interior level in his Indian psyche. This knowledge of Degree which Naipaul finds in the bones of Indians makes it difficult for them to combat the social confusion and disorder of castes. Ramnath, the steno refused to type because that was not his job. Malhotra with an English university education does not recognize such job divisions. Ramnath’s humiliation arises not so much out of his submission to Malhotra as out of the violation of his ‘degree’: he, a steno, had been made to do a typist’s job. Another example of keeping of ‘degree’ is Jivan. Jivan rose from an odd-job boy in a printery to an office clerk with a side business that earned him as much money as the English university educated Malhotra but Jivan continued to sleep on pavements. Vasant began as a telegram agent and became an established stockbroker, but he kept his habit of skipping lunch- a habit that belonged to his days of austerity. The two Brahmin brothers in the south had risked their caste and started
a leather business but were concerned to shield their children against caste contamination. Naipaul finds the incongruities of the imported mechanics of the new world being incorporated into the rule of degree. People like Malik and Malhotra who did not recognize this 'degree' were exceptional and their rejection of 'degree' left them rejected. Then there is the Bunty, Andy brand of Indian who sleepwalks through life and delights in its 'new closeness to power'. It is this category of sleepwalkers that Naipaul wants to shake up by the shoulders. Their static nature, their inability to respond to their situation leaves Naipaul puzzled. The chapter ends with an analysis of Manohar Malgonkar's The Prince and an acceptance of 'degree' which is at once, an Indian typicality as well as a typically Indian confusion that an outsider has to deal with.

'The colonial' is a chapter which takes up another view of post-independence India. It records the split in the eastern and the western mindset through the example of beggary in India. Naipaul notes that a foreigner cannot understand the function of the beggar in India which makes the act of charity an involuntary respect to God, like the offering of a candle or a spin of the prayer-wheel. Naipaul records the phenomenon of Indian defecation in great detail and this part of An Area of Darkness had earned him scathing criticism from
India. However, it is not a mere chronicling of fact. Naipaul attempts an analysis. Defecation is unrepresented in novels, stories, films and documentaries not because of a prettifying intention on the part of the people of India but because Indians do not see the squatters. Naipaul calls it a 'collective blindness' that arises out of 'the Indian fear of pollution'. Indians refuse to see the existence of dirt. This is followed by Naipaul's much-disputed hypothesis on Gandhi. It was Gandhi's 'colonial' vision and his critical 'south African eye' that made him look at India 'as no Indian' was able to.

'Romancers' is about the dilution of the real to create the imaginary. Mrs. Mahindra with her 'craze for foreign' and Mrs. M Mehta, Secretary of women's league, attempt to escape from their traditional roles. There is new money and the freedom that it brings. Naipaul is sympathetic towards the plight of Mrs. Mahindra but he is critical of her response to her situation which, to use a favourite Naipaulian word is only a 'mimicry', a misplaced sense of romance. He sees it as a malaise that arises out of an individual's absence of a sure sense of self and as a poor substitute to fill up the gaps in one's cultural make-up. Naipaul could not share the romance of the Indian films or of the Shikara boats because he was neither 'English' nor
Naipaul has raised certain issues in the book which are the main obstacles in the path of development of India. The major themes which appear prominent in the book are Poverty, caste system and colonialism. The story abounds with descriptions of the extreme poverty of India. Naipaul describes India as the poorest country in the world. One can find so many examples in the book which depict the pain of the poor in India. According to Naipaul, Indians defecate everywhere but fail to face up to this fact. They cannot face the harsh reality and try cover it up. Naipaul tries to find out the main causes of poverty. He analyses in a very logical way the reasons why he thinks Poverty exists in such a real way in India. He mentions at one stage how ‘divorce of the intellect from body labour has made of us the most resource less and most exploited nation on earth.’ The concluding section abounds in grim and rather depressing images of poverty. When Naipaul pays a trip to the village and meets the emaciated Ramachandra who is surrounded in dire poverty he is appalled and simply wants to leave the country at once. Poverty is seen as a self-defeating and destructive reality in
this country. Naipaul terms poverty the main impediment in the path of development of India.

Another issue is the Caste System. Naipaul speaks a good deal about the caste system in India. He describes it as the brutal division of labour and something, which is unpleasant. He mentions how the caste system only imprisons a man in his function and makes so many people anonymous and faceless. Indians who are born overseas are not accepted by the system and have no identity. Naipaul devotes one section of his book to speaking about the work that Gandhi tried to carry out for his country. Gandhi wanted to eradicate poverty and wipe out the caste system completely. He tried to attack the psychology underlying the caste system and to show that there was dignity in man and a need to clean and have proper sanitation methods. Naipaul feels that Gandhi failed to get this message across.

A substantial space of the novel is devoted to this colonialism. Naipaul throws light on the bad effects of colonialism on the country. He wrote about the destructions followed by the colonialism. He mentions at one stage how the country only pretends to be colonial, yesterday the country’s mimicry was Mogul,
tomorrow it could be Russian or American. He concludes by stating that the Indian English mimicry is like fantasy. When the British withdrew completely from India something of fantasy remained attached to their presence there. He draws a comparison between colonial India and colonial Trinidad. Trinidad is a British colony but in size it is only a dot on the map and therefore it is important to be British. Naipaul states that the England of India was different an incongruous imposition in his words. He goes on to state the negativity of colonialism and how he felt the coming together of India and England as a violation, buildings were too grand, too big for the puniness, poverty and defeat in which they were set. He mentions how these buildings strove to impose attitudes on people from both within and without. Overall the impression given in this book of colonialism in India is extremely negative.

Naipaul also talked about Cultural Context in the book. Colonial India in the twentieth century forms the cultural context of this novel. Naipaul gives the reader a vivid insight into the various sects and cultural systems dominating this country. In Part two of the novel Naipaul analyses the whole colonial process. There are copious references to Hinduism and Muslims and Buddhism and he paint some vivid pictures of the various customs, which these people
engage in. Poverty is a key aspect of this culture and contributes a good deal to the reason why he chose such a title for the novel.

Mr. Naipaul brings the essence of a social situation so vividly to life that one begins to wonder whether all the sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists who have tried to explain India have not laboured in vain. An example from the text itself amplifies what these blurbs recommend:

"Ten months later I was to revisit Bombay and to wonder at my hysteria. It was cooler, and in the crowded courtyards of Colaba there were Christmas decorations, illuminated stars hanging out of windows against the black sky. It was my eye that had changed. 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 downward, wasted body to wasted body, Nature mocking herself, capable 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; to give way to that was to abandon what the self I had known. Perhaps in the end it was fatigue that overcame me. For abruptly, in the midst of hysteria there occurred periods of calm, in which I found that I had grown to separate myself from what I saw..."37

The point which calls for an explanation is the difference in Naipaul’s India and the India of his Indian critics. So many writers have written about India before Naipaul done so, but not always sympathetically. Naipaul’s insight and depiction of India is a unique record of the division of sensibility that has become a permanent paradigm of our times. The value of *An Area of Darkness* is that the book and its critique have documented the confusion and the alienation that are the legacies of the empire. Nobody before have portrayed India through a diasporic vision. In India, nobody has exposed Indians to the pain and agony of such a vision. The novel is brimming with disagreements and confusions. *An Area of Darkness* is a first stage of a diasporic writer’s problematic relations with his originating country. Naipaul has written so many passages in the book which portray the author’s recognition with India at a very personal stage.
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An area of Darkness: Lack of Indian Identity

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An area of Darkness: Lack of Indian Identity

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