Chapter I

Introduction

Migratory movements across nations and continents are the order of the day. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, people, particularly, writers, have been migrating either to the U.K or to the U.S.A from the erstwhile British colonies like India, West Indies and Africa, in search of better prospects and larger audience for their writings in English. They find England the best place to write in. The migrant literature in many cases represents a geographic, cultural and political retreat by writers from their ailing nations of the postcolonial world back to the old metropolis. By migrating to these metropolitan centres, they have been able to secure for themselves a different, more comfortable location in the neocolonial world. As Elleke Boehmer puts it: “Postcolonial migrant literature can be described as a literature written by elites, and defined and canonized by elites. It is writing which foregrounds and celebrates a national or historical rootlessness what the migrant Czech writer Milan Kundera might call lightness sometimes accentuated by political cynicism”(233). Some of these writers keep multi cultural and multinational commitments in their minds, but they never get uprooted at home. The best example in this case
is that of Derek Walcott, the West Indian writer and the 1992 Nobel laureate. He keeps his multicultural commitment and, at the same time, abides by the treble impulse, i.e., faith to his African origin and Caribbean birth and upbringing. But V. S. Naipaul, on the other hand, seems to have nothing to do with his origin (India), and the place of his birth (Trinidad), and he is all for his country of immigration, the UK. His fundamental affiliation is to the London - New-York metropolitan access. The critical responses to his travelogue pronouncements are characterized by a clear cultural cleavage. Anglo-American critics celebrate him as the uncompromising truth-teller while third world critics condemn him for his insensitivity and arrogance that pander to western prejudices. His acerbic treatment of his subject from the Caribbean, India, Africa and the Islamic world, as depicted in his travelogues, is examined here in the postcolonial context. The study also explores Naipaul’s ideological underpinnings.

Travel writings seek to produce the ‘other’ and appropriate the ‘other’. The ‘other’ may be designated as a form of cultural projection of concept. This projection constructs the identities of cultural subjects through a relationship of power in which the ‘other’ is the subjugated element. The construction of the ‘other’ is a matter of asserting self-identity. V.S. Naipaul, a prominent but controversial figure in contemporary
literature, seems to have taken such a position in constructing the knowledge about the ‘other’ in the postcolonial world. Naipaul has been the subject of numerous serious studies and his position as a postcolonial writer is widely discussed in the present day literary context. He has ‘constructed’ knowledge about India, Africa, Caribbean and the Islamic world through his texts. Elleke Boehmer says that: “from the early days of colonization, therefore, not only texts in general, but literature, broadly defined, underpinned efforts to interpret other lands” (15). Gayathri Spivak’s polemics of the ‘construction of knowledge’ by the West is also quite relevant in studying Naipaul’s treatment of the Third World ‘other’

Naipaul is an important West Indian novelist of the colonial experience. He was born in an impoverished area of Trinidad where his father had emigrated from India. His father, a local journalist and an aspiring fiction writer, introduced him to serious literature and instilled in him the notion that he should become a writer. He was the inspiring force behind Naipaul’s masterpiece novel *A House for Mr. Biswas (1961)*. At the age of eighteen, Naipaul left Trinidad on a scholarship in Oxford, and has lived in England ever since. He has been writing since the last fifty years
and his writing includes more than twenty-five works of fiction and nonfiction. While his literary works continue to attract an increasing amount of adverse criticism outside the West, he gets high popularity and great adulations in British establishment circles: he was Knighted in 1990, awarded David Cohen Prize in 1993, and finally the Nobel Prize in 2001. His stature has grown to that of an ‘institution’ and an ‘expert’ whose assertions claim an authority and receive an exceptionally wide circulation in the West.

Naipaul’s early fictional works hold immense promise. As a postcolonial novelist, he situates his novels in colonial as well as ex-colonial societies. In the early novels, Naipaul deals with the colonial society of Trinidad and is preoccupied with the themes of dispossession, homelessness, alienation, mimicry and the search for an identity. *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958) and *The Miguel Street* are admired by readers and critics for his blend of humour and humanity. *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) is his first full-fledged account of the Indian Diaspora in Trinidad. It is a fascinating meditation on the nature of exile, survival and human intimacy under strenuous family and social constrictions. It is an imaginative
reconstruction of his father’s life and his own youth in Trinidad.

*Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963) is the only novel with English characters and setting. *The Mimic Men* (1967) takes up the predicament of the Trinidad-East Indian society under the overriding influence of the Western world. *The Loss of El Dorado* (1969) is a book steeped in historical research. *An Overcrowded Barracoon* (1972) is a collection of essays in three sections dealing with Naipaul’s colonial world and background. *Guerillas* and *A Bend in the River* are fictionalised versions of actual political occurrences and the final collapse of an already debilitated social order. But the next three decades witness the Naipaulian shift from fiction to non fiction. Of the thirteen books written between 1972 and 1997, seven are works of non-fiction. Naipaul’s fund of spirited irony and benign cheer seem to degenerate into a relentless series of travel writings denigrating the third world realities. See how Champa Rao Mohan writes about Naipaul:

Naipaul is a much discussed novelist. From the beginning of his literary career he has been surrounded by controversy because of his wry assessment of postcolonial societies. He arouses contrasting responses among his readers who are divided into opposite critical camps. On the one hand there
are critics, who pay him endless praise while on the other
there are those who, striking the opposite chord, attack him
for his unfavourable portrayal of Third World countries in
both his fiction as well as non-fiction. The latter are mostly
scholars and critics from the Third World, while the former
are mostly from the West. (14)

The proposed study focuses on Naipaul’s major travelogues on India, Caribbean, Africa and some of the Islamic nations. Since a great amount of work has been done in the area of Naipaul’s fictional writings, this study confines itself to his travel writings, an area not much explored. An attempt is made to study these travelogues in the light of the various aspects of postcolonial theory expounded by Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Bill Ashcroft, Gayathri Chakravarthy Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha and others. The postcolonial theory is used as a major critical tool in the study to draw the reader’s attention to Naipaul’s writings which have ‘produced the rest of the world’. The texts chosen for the study are An Area of Darkness, India A Wounded Civilization, India A Million Mutinies Now, The Masque of Africa, The Middle Passage, Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey and Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among the
A postcolonial reading of these travel books poses a few questions that shape this study. Do the works of Naipaul display critical consciousness? Does Naipaul reflect a writing culture that is steeped largely in Western tradition, adopting stereotypical representations of non-Western peoples? Or are his writings emblematic of a different type of mimicked postcolonial mentality, as Homi K. Bhabha would put it, white but not quite?

The study is designed in six chapters. The first chapter is the introduction that outlines the scope of the study and the methodology followed. It also gives a brief analysis of travelogue as a genre. The second chapter attempts a brief explication of postcolonial theory, which is used as a critical tool in all the studies. The third chapter examines Naipaul’s three travel books on India to see whether he employs the polemics of anti-colonial indictment and the rhetoric of national introspection, or whether his representations are made up of misconceptions and inappropriate enquiries, influenced by his colonial background. Naipaul’s depiction of Africa and the Caribbean is examined in the fourth chapter. Many writers in English from Africa and the Caribbean took up the call to include literature as a moving spirit in the nationalist struggle. They could infuse a people
with a sense of their own unique identity and spiritually kindle the fire of resistance. They focused on reconstituting a cultural identity damaged by a colonial experience from their historical, social and racial positions. The need was for re-establishing their roots, origins, founding myths and ancestors, and thus for a restorative history. In Elleke Boehmer’s words: “the colonized had to ‘insult’ and ‘vomit up’ the white man’s values” (175). The chapter critically analyses Naipaul’s attitude to his roots and origin. The fifth chapter analyses Naipaul’s concept of Islam and the study is mainly based on the postcolonial theories enunciated by Edward Said in *Orientalism, Culture and Imperialism* and *Covering Islam*. In *Among the Believers* and *Beyond Belief*, Islam is in question and it is part of Naipaul’s general indictment of the Third World. The sixth chapter is the conclusion. Only those aspects of postcolonial theory, which are suited to the explication of the select travelogues are taken for the study.

Travel has recently emerged as a key theme for the humanities and social sciences, and there has been a revival of interest in the analysis of travel writing in recent years. Travel writing has a colonial history. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Africa, Asia, and Americas appeared in European eyes as *terra incognita*, as world without names. In the various
sensationalized accounts of early European travellers these lands were reported, fictionalized and imagined for a domestic audience. With the resurgence of interest in contemporary travel writing, there comes a critical study of the new genre within colonial discourse. A critical analysis of the texts written by Westerners about colonized countries is made to lay bare the real motive of such writings. This kind of work begins with Edward Said’s extraordinarily influential book *Orientalism* (1978), which traces the similarities in the rhetorical and informational structure of a wide range of seemingly objective writings about the Orient.

Earlier travel writings were the products of travel undertaken for reasons of work, as soldier, traveller, scientist or perhaps for education. But in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, it has come out of travel undertaken specifically for the sake of writing about it. As Michel Butor puts it: “they travel in order to write, they travel while writing, because for them, travel is writing” (67). The most important travel writers in this period of imperial expansion are Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling, R.L. Stevenson, Jack London, Somerset Maugham, D.H. Lawrence, E.M. Forster, Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh. They incorporated their travel experiences in fiction and travel writings. It was
during this period that travel writing emerged as the more literary and autonomous genre that we understand it to be today.

In *Orientalism*, from which so much of postcolonial critical writing takes its cue, Said argues that it was in and through such travel writings and other forms of literature that Europeans learned to think of themselves as basically different from the rest of the world. Many other writers continue the work done by Said, most notably, Mary Louise Pratt, Sara Mills, Peter Hulme, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayathri Spivak and others. They uphold the view that travel writings are essentially an instrument within colonial expansion and serve to reinforce colonial rule once in place. Describing the ideas of colonial discourse in this regard, Peter Hulme writes that: “There is the presumption that during the colonial period large parts of the non-European world were *produced* for Europe through a discourse that imbricated sets of questions and assumptions, methods of procedure and analysis, and kinds of writings and imagery” (2).

Edward Said writes about a wide range of texts which were written about the Orient during the colonial period. He argues that the Western writers, especially since the eighteenth century, have constructed the Orient as the ‘Other’ and by doing so, have attempted to contain and make
the inhabitants of the colonized countries powerless by fixing them in an object position and by giving a powerful position for the Westerners. Said elaborates:

Everyone who writes about the Orient must locate himself in vis-à-vis the Orient; translated in his text, this location includes the kind of narrative voice he adopts, the type of structure he builds, the kinds of images, themes, motifs that circulate in his text all of which add up to the liberate ways of addressing the reader, canting the Orient and finally, representing it or speaking in its behalf. (20)

Said further emphasizes that Orientalism is manifested in textual features which can be traced in a wide variety of texts. There is the denigration of other nations by textual means. Said, in describing texts as Orientalist, concentrates on the ‘objective’ writings of philology, history and ethnography, where the professed aim is to comprehend the phenomena in the East and to explain them to a Western audience. This type of writing uses various strategies, like making generalization and valorised statements, fixing the people in an unchanging past or present and making them very much a textual entity. So Said considers Orientalist discourse to
be ‘disregarding, essentialising, denuding the humanity of another culture, people or geographical region’ (108). It is this dehumanizing element in many texts which constructs the Orient and other nations as the ‘Other’ of Europe.

Sara Mills, in her book *Discourse of Difference: An Analysis of Women’s Travel Writing and Colonialism*, analyses the process of ‘othering’ in the colonial discourse and the role played by travel writings in this regard. She refers to Michel Foucault’s works and says that they pose questions which are of relevance to any study that involves an analysis of discourses and power. And furthermore, his analyses embody a certain productive scepticism which is useful for readings of all kinds of works. Sara Mills describes the range of discourses brought into play in colonial texts and writes:

Foucault says of eighteenth-century travel writers that they had ‘schema’ for collecting their data. Whilst posting themselves as objective, they were, in fact, describing people and events from a particular position which had been constructed mainly by colonial discourses and hence from the demands of colonial power. Most travel writing presents
a clear notion of the difference between the British as a race, of whom the narrator is a representative, and the nation which inhabits the country which is being described. As Said has shown, this ‘Othering’ process is essential for Europe to regard European behavior as the norm and hence to assert itself as a superior race. (87-88)

‘Othering’ is further illustrated by Mary Louis Pratt, the author of *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992). The book examines how travel and exploration writing has produced “the rest of the world for European readerships at particular points in Europe’s expansionist trajectory?” (5). She also looks into how travel writing has produced Europe’s differentiated consumptions of itself in relation to something it became possible to call ‘the rest of the world’. Pratt draws attention to the fact that Eurocentricism was engendered by a peculiarly ‘planetary consciousness’, which as an ideological construct, “makes a picture of the planet appropriated and redeployed from a unified, European perspective” (36). Pratt asserts that ‘Othering’ is one of the ways in which the conquering nation organizes thoughts and actions towards the colonized and it is achieved through language choices. She puts her argument in an
article in *Critical Inquiry* (1985) and writes that: “the people to be othered are homogenized into a collective ‘they’ which is distilled even further in to an iconic ‘he’ (the standardized adult male specimen). This abstracted ‘he’/ ‘they’ is the subject of verbs in a timeless present tense, which characterises anything ‘he’ is or does, not as a particular historical event but as an instance of pregiven custom or trait” (120). So, instead of being an ‘objective’ description of the way the nation is, these descriptions are largely influenced by the socio-historical context, i.e., colonialism, and the needs, the colonial powers have for these peoples.

Wimal Dissanayake and Carmen Wickramagamage also point out that Western travel writing is geared to notions of colonial narratives and its quest for representing the ‘other’. They hold the view that: “the distinction between fiction (created) and travel writing (factual) is a false one but also points to the misrepresentation, distortion and Orientalisms, and search for cheap effects that characterise much travel writing” (2). The general view that the travel narratives are objective and scientific and that they faithfully represent geographical, historical, cultural and social reality, is questioned. They point out three different types of travel writings, employed by writers in the past.
The Information – Oriented travel writing is the first category of travel writing that tries to be more scientific and objective. It gives information about geography, agriculture, ecology, ethnography etc. The authorial voice is minimized in the narration. Importance is given to the landscape with all its description and documentation. The second type of travel writing is the Experiential (Sentimentalising) which deals with emotional sentiment and involvement. The traveller becomes the ‘main character’, who goes into highly personal and emotional displays. It is mostly experiential in nature. The experiential mode of travel writing places the author/traveller as a representative of the metropolitan centre and the ‘natives’ in the role of the ‘cultural other’. Intellectual-Analytic is the third category which, according to Dissayanake and Wickramagamage, is the most subjective and controversial of the travel modes. The author emerges as an intellectual social commentator with an authorial voice. He first sells himself, his name and reputation, then his travelogue with his own views and analysis. Naipaul seems to fall in to the second and third category of travel writings.

The real objective of travel writing is the faithful portrayal and representation of the ‘other’. The ‘other’ includes the third world, marginal
groups like ethnic and racial minorities, either from the developing nations or from the developed nations. The techniques of ‘objectivity’ and ‘relativity’ are to be adopted by writers for faithful representations. But a critical examination of Naipaul’s travelogues reveals the fact that it is with a ‘colonial gaze’ that he looks down on these people and their culture. They are observed as ‘primitive’ and ‘backward’. The ‘textualizing’ of these travel experiences is conditioned by the colonizer/neocolonizer and colonized paradigm.