Chapter III

On Darkness: An Area of Darkness
V.S. Naipaul

An Area of Darkness

"A MASTERPIECE OF TRAVEL-WRITING ... WISE, ORIGINAL" – Paul Theroux

"The truth about India wasn't what I thought about India; it's what they are living through."
CHAPTER – III

ON DARKNESS: AN AREA OF DARKNESS

V. S. Naipaul once, or often, described his purpose as an author as nothing less than a “commitment to deliver the truth”. Now what is truth in one particular span of time, in one particular sphere, and to a particular community or generation, may alter in a later span of time, in a different part of the world and to a subsequent generation. Thus alteration does not transform the former truth in untruth but in half-truth or tangential-truth. Since the former truth fails in retaining its complete veracity and genuineness, writers should not be keeping themselves abreast to the former established truth but they should be revealing the newly engaged aberrations and discovering the new vicissitudes. The world being mobile and not stasis is assuming each new day a new fact, and negating its yesterday. So this world is always new and infinite. This newness and infinity is always a favourite among writers, so it is with Naipaul. He asserts:

How much of the modern world does his work contain? You should be able to see the lineament of today’s society in the work of a good writer.... I just felt that we are living in such an interesting world. One must capture all the interest of this period. I don’t believe that all the world has all been written about. The world is so new. (NT 251)

This realization came to Naipaul only in the 1970’s and An Area of Darkness subtitled as ‘Experience of India’ had already been published in 1962. This book is the first of his reputed trilogy on India and it charts out the writer’s first hand impression about India. India shocked Naipaul because it challenged his
idea of himself. The contradiction between the imagined India of Trinidad and the actual country was too overwhelming to be confronted. The only immediate solution available was that of escape. That is why An Area of Darkness begins with 'A Resting Place for the Imagination' and ends in 'Flight' - a metaphoric fleeing away from his reality. 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 also existed around Naipaul in the various domestic articles that his grandfather had brought from India:

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

Although he lived within the India created by his grandfather, he could not inherit the unity of his grandfather's world. His grandfather had carried his village with him and in his re-creation of this village he had denied Trinidad completely. Therefore his world remained whole. Naipaul recollects memory in his Nobel lecture:

In Trinidad, bright boy though I was, I was surround by areas of darkness... With my limited social background it was hard for me imaginatively to enter into other societies or societies that were far away. (Two Worlds 7)

Naipaul's generation could not replicate that sense of complete self sufficiency; it could not deny Trinidad. As he grew, India slipped further and
further away. It belonged to his grandfather’s world, a world which the younger
generations had no access to. The rituals and ceremonies of their private world
survived but the corresponding knowledge was lost: “our elders expected that our
understanding would be instinctive- and no one explained the prayer or ritual”
(32).

Naipaul expected India to be a land of his fairytale. His communication
with his sister Kamala (who studied in India) ought to have prepared him for
disillusionment but strangely, it did not. In An Area of Darkness, ‘A Resting
Place for Imagination’, two distinct personas of Naipaul emerge. One is the
persona of a totally self-aware non-believer with an actual distaste for rituals. The
other is one who is outraged to hear that candles and electric bulbs had replaced
clay lamps for Diwali in Bombay. Simultaneously, the Brahmin self is disturbed
on the breaking of tradition,

I had rejected tradition, yet how can I explain my feeling of
outrage when I heard that in Bombay they used candles and
electric light for the Diwali festival, and the rustic clay lamps, of
immemorial design which in Trinidad we still used. (AAD 36)

These two separate selves had stayed together as long as Naipaul was in
Trinidad or in England. The direct experience of India tore these two selves apart.
His life was broken into two. So as an ‘unbeliever’ he cannot believe in the rites
and ceremonies. To name one in particular is the ‘thread ceremony’ which is a
‘theatre’ to Naipaul and again as a Brahmin, somewhere lurking within him, he
cannot approve the changes and alterations in traditional cult. With such a split in
his personality he tries to adjudge the India of 1962 and consequently fails in
rendering a complete satisfactory picture of India. To say that An Area of Darkness is about India, is to miss the point altogether. It is a desperate attempt to preserve the unity of a sensibility shattered beyond repair. The method employed is one of dismissal, rejection and flight. The ‘Flight’ marked the beginning of a series of journeys to India.

He came to visit India with certain preconceived notions which had been shaped in his psyche since his boyhood. His explicit intention as stated in his book is to discover his identity and his roots from which he had been alienated culturally, emotionally and also by birth. His acquaintance with India was only through what he had heard about it from his parents. From his childhood he had romanticized India and on his visit sought to realize the romanticized images of the land of his forefathers. He writes in ‘A Resting Place for Imagination’ in An Area of Darkness:

And India had in a special way been the background of my childhood. It was the country from which my grand father came, a country never physically described and therefore never real, a country out in the void beyond the dot of Trinidad....it was a country suspended in time, it couldn’t be related to the country discovered later... (AAD27)

This happened because the India of his dreams has been superseded by an India teeming with “the children, the dirt, the disease, the undernourishment, the cries of baksheesh, the hawkers, the tout etc.”(11)

This feeling resulted in disillusionment. Memory of his past and the result of his experience in time and place, Naipaul couldn’t appreciate India in the way
she was appreciated and highlighted in the books he had read. India had always been in his thoughts but gradually it faded and became an area of darkness, with no promises to fulfill. An Area of Darkness has been accepted by critics as Naipaul’s most cogent and spontaneous comment on India. It is a record of Naipaul’s stay in India for an entire year. The ambiguity of the title resonates both with the urge to explore that land which the conscious mind knows to exist, namely India; and also in the title is the implicit judgment of the systems of life in India. In the texts these twin perspectives rub against each other. 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 time when the transference was made as a period of darkness, 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. (AAD 30)

‘Degree’ stands for what an Indian understands of himself. String cots and wooden blocks had lain unused in his Trinidad home for the lack of people of that “caste skill” (29). But that was not so in India. This knowledge of degree which Naipaul finds in the bones of Indians make it difficult for them to combat the social confusion and disorder of caste (55). Rammath, the steno, refused to type because that was not his job. Malhotra with an English university education does not recognize such job divisions. Rammath’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 Jeevan. He rises from an odd job boy in a printing business to an office clerk with a side
business that earns him as much money as the English university educated
Malhotra, but Jeevan continues to sleep on pavements. Vasant begins as a
telegram agent and becomes an established stockbroker, but he keeps his habit of
skipping lunch- a habit that belong to his days of austerity. The two Brahmin
brothers in the south had risked their caste and started a leather business but were
“anxious to protect their children against caste contamination” (55). Naipaul finds
the incongruities of the “imported mechanics of the new world” being
“incorporated into the rule of degree” (56). People like Malik and Malhotra who
do not recognize this “degree” were exceptional and their rejection of “degree”
leaves them rejected. Then there is Bunty, Andy brand of Indian who sleepwalks
through life and delights in its “new closeness to power” (60). It is this category
of sleepwalkers that Naipaul wants to “shake” up by “the shoulder” (60-61). Their
static nature, their inability to respond to their situation leaves Naipaul puzzled.
He ends with an analysis of Manohar Malgaonkar’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’ 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 “automatic reverence to
God, like the offering of a candle or a spin of the prayer –wheel” (68-69). 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. Naipaul attempts
an analysis and defecation is not presented in novels, stories, films and in
documentaries not because of the “pretting intention” on the part of the people of India but because “Indians do not see these squatters.” Naipaul calls it “a collective blindness” that arises out of “the Indian fear of pollution” (70). Indians refuse to see the existence of the 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 (73). Sanitation in India was linked to caste-designated roles and a break up of the caste system had filled the country with filth. Gandhi saw the maladies of India. He tried to dignify labour, and he tried to delink the caste moulds from a man’s function in society. He united a diverse nation as no one else could have done. But in the end, he himself was absorbed into the great Indian symbolism. He was dignified but his message was lost. The India that he sought to change placed him on the pedestal, and continued on its own way.

‘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. 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.

‘A Doll’s House on Dal Lake’ is the make-believe world of Mr. Butt, Aziz and Khansamah: “Snow White’s own men” trying to survive long after ‘Snow White’ had left” (140). These men have no idea of themselves. They continually
seek to make commercial benefits. Their concern, hospitality and friendliness have theatrical dimensions. They all want typewritten certificates from Naipaul because they think that these would add to their credibility. The Khansamah’s anger and the almost simultaneous “recognition of his own weakness” made him “tormented man”. Naipaul felt himself to be as inadequate as the khansamah:

I suffered with him...and I was surprised by the rise within myself to that deep anger which unhangs judgment and almost physically limits vision...the moment of anger is a moment of exalted, shrinking lucidity from which recovery is slow and shattering.

(AAD 117)

‘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 (125). The details of “the man” who had brought the Hazzratbal relic were not known: “Religion...was life and the law...” (128). 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 interests...” (129). 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. (AAD 129)
‘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. (AAD 154)

The poor sense of sanitation on the part of the yatris had irked Naipaul but the pilgrim Larain scarcely noticed this.

Himalayas, the next prominent feature had a special place in Naipaul’s childhood memory:

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. (AAD 167)

But when he encountered the actual Himalayas, they seemed to him “as the Indian symbol of loss” (167). They were at once near and far: near in the imagination but almost inaccessible to the vast populace which could seek them only in “pilgrimages, legends and pictures.” (167).

‘Fantasy and Ruin’ is Naipaul’s direct confrontation with his imagination. He digs up the roots of his imagination and 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 unprepared to accept in England what he saw in India:

This confirmation 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. (AAD 187)

He sees in India’s acceptance of England, the typical Indian ability “to retreat, the ability genuinely not to see what was obvious” (188). Ironically, this is what India kept whole. Naipaul saw that this ability “to retreat,” first lead to “passivity”, then to “detachment” and finally to “acceptance” (188). He realizes that he had been very close to this pattern of survival during his stay in England. But then, nothing could prepare him for the experience of India. Of the reminders of England in India, he writes:

I ought to have been calm. But they revealed one type of self-deception as self-deception; and though this was lodged in that part of the mind where fantasy was permissible, the revelation was painful. It was an encounter with a humiliation I had never before experienced, and perhaps more so to me than to those Indians who hurried about streets with unlikely English names… (AAD 188)
He compares and contrasts the British Empires in the West Indies and in India in an attempt to account for the difference in his response to the England that he saw in India, he sees India living with the Raj that was long dead. India thus becomes for Naipaul a country that lived amongst incongruous, “alien ruins” (190) because in India “every thing is inherited, nothing is abolished” (194).

Naipaul remarks that it is a concept of “Englishness” that has outlived the Empire. In India, it exists in unending mimicry of the Raj. The Raj itself being a classical case of imitation of all that was thought to be “English”, the inheritors of the Raj followed the same pattern. India goes on living with the ruins of the Empire. There are other kinds of ruins that lie across the length and breadth of the country: the ruins of Vijaynagar, the ravages of Muslim rule in the North, and the disjointed idea of history in the minds of the people. The creation in India is built on destruction. There is no continuity and plunder is the main predecessor of creation. With the coming of the British, this continuity became most prominent. Art sought to imitate. The Raj sought to express “an idea” of itself as “English”. Nationalist India accepted this as an established pattern. It too sought to express “an idea” of itself (207). In the process, art was lost. The beauty, the originality of art was lost, “somewhere something has snapped”, says Naipaul (207). The British were responsible for the death of Indian art, for the break in continuity.

Hindu India had faced other conquerors in the past but they had been absorbed into the mainstream. “Hindu India met conquerors half-way and had always been able to absorb them” (209). This continuity was broken with the coming of the British:
The British refused to be absorbed into India; they did not proclaim, like the Mogul, that if there was a paradise on earth, it was this, it was this, and it was this. While dominating India they expressed their contempt for it, and projected England; and Indians were forced into nationalism... (AAD 211)

The rejection of India and projection of England created chaos. Indians found them “in a new world whose forms they could see but whose spirit eluded them. In the acquiring of an identity in their own land they become displaced” (212).

Naipaul has steadily worked towards laying bare the ultimate damage caused to the Indian psyche during the colonial rule. He explains that “Indian sentimentality” is India’s way of turning away, of diluting the pain of its reality.

Naipaul finds India to be a victim of its capacity to endure, of its acceptance of everything in order to maintain a sense of continuity which in reality, is just an illusion. On the other hand, he finds that India survived the colonial experience only on account of its ability to accept its predicament as an unexamined continuity. The contradiction is fatal. It froze India and made it static. None of the conquerors before the coming of the British had forced India into such a sterile state.

The picture that emerges in ‘The Garland on my Pillow’ is that of an India in conflict. It is a conflict that arises out of ignorance. An Inspector of Form and Stationary in the Northern Railway is non-existence for a Railway officer busy with his “presidential tours” (220). The cigarette smoking Sikh has a violent hatred for Dravidians. He is proud of his Aryan lineage and regards non-Aryans
with contempt. He is vociferous in his impatience with India. The figure of the Sikh at the beginning seems to emerge as an extension of Naipaul's response to the pain, squalor and poverty of India.

'Emergency' presents the Indian response to the Chinese attack on India. The attack had caught India unawares and the Emergency only meant more speeches, more statutes of law. The common man and the politician both were feeding on words. The elite casually discussed the war as if it were something totally remote from them and calmly returned to their routine of their dinner and discussions.

In 'The Village of the Dubes' Naipaul records his visit to the ancestral village of his maternal grandfather. He was afraid of what he might find. He was afraid that the final unity of his world in his grandmother's house might be shattered. In the beginning he was reassured to see the mango groves that surrounded the village giving it a pastoral effect and at the same time differentiating it from the dust engulfed villages he had seen en route. He was glad to see the spires of the shrines that his grandfather had built. He saw that the women were unveiled. The IAS man accompanying him explained: "Brahmin Women" the IAS man whispered, "very fearless" (254). He met Jussodra, the woman who had come with his grandfather from Trinidad. From her, he heard the story of his grandfather's success in Trinidad. He heard how his grandfather had re-established the family; he saw the photographs taken in Trinidad. It ought to have been a final homecoming for Naipaul, but it was not. He says, "In a year I had not learned acceptance. I had learned my separateness from India, and was content to be colonial, without a past, without ancestors" (202). This was once
again, a very Indian response. In an attempt to escape the pain of his situation; fearing the loss of unity of his world, Naipaul was ready to flee. He was ready to reject his roots. This is how his visit to his village ends. His meeting with Ramchandra, the head of the family leaves him impatient. He finds himself being pressed for money to pay for a litigation to preserve the nineteen acres of his grandfather’s land. Naipaul does not offer any financial help. He wishes to sever all connection and to flee from the village. This is what he eventually does. He leaves the village, refuses to take on a boy who wanted a lift. It was his final attempt at retreat: “So it ended, in futility and impatience, a gratuitous act of cruelty, self-reproach and flight” (263). The epilogue titled ‘Flight’ explains it more fully. Naipaul’s distance from India was too great to be bridged. Naipaul fled from India. In London, he tried “in vain to summon up a positive response to this city where I had lived and worked…” (266).

The India in its physical reality strictly creates an adverse effect on the man who has come to seek his identity with his roots, but nothing in India seems to him as a part of his personality. It is entirely a different and new India. He writes:

And in India, I was to see that so many of the things newer and now perhaps truer side of my nature kicked against the smugness as it seemed to me, the imperviousness to criticism, the refusal to see, the double talk and double think had an answer in that side of myself which I had thought buried and which India revived as a faint memory. (AAD 35)
This causes a kind of psychological turmoil in Naipaul. He is a ‘born unbeliever’ and keeps an outsider’s approach but he cannot help his ‘Brahmin sensibility’ constantly working all the time consciously or unconsciously. Nissim Ezekiel in his article ‘Naipaul’s India and Mine’ asserts:

But even before the questioning began, a temperamental advantage was already secure. Mr. Naipaul “was born an unbeliever” and in addition “remained almost totally ignorant of Hinduism.”

Examining himself with that peculiar honesty of his, he writes that what survived of Hinduism in him was a “sense of the difference of people... a vaguer sense of caste, and a horror of the unclean”.

(1-5)

He is doubly in pain, doubly in rage and consequently his churlishness. The western approach within him criticizes the India of 1962 when nothing useful had been done and no advancement was made. In fact Naipaul’s vision of India is based, colored and defined by too much of the western assumptions which obviously give him a feeling of repulsion rather than attraction for his ancestral homeland. Moreover, Naipaul as a traveler, on his first visit to India was passing through a very transitional period. He was therefore, unable to get a real insight into India or to arrive at the real truth about India. Hence at the end of the book, he almost confesses his failure at grasping the very essence of India. He feels he can never adequately express his brief grasp of India. The philosophical spirit of India with which he is momentarily touched, evades expression.

It was only now, as my experience of India defined itself properly against my homelessness, that I saw how close in the past year I
had been to the total Indian negation, how much it had become the basis of thought and feeling. And already with, this awareness, in a world where illusion could only be a concept and not something felt in the bones, it was slipping away from me. I felt it as something true which I could never adequately express and seize again. (AAD 266)

When he comes near to India, a queer sort of fear engulfs him. All his life and his experiences in London had taught him a lot, but the feeling of reaching India, the mythical land of his childhood, makes him slightly uneasy and he holds back. On one level, he himself knows that now he would not be able to identify himself with India. In Bombay, he finds himself lost:

And for the first time in my life I was one of the crowds. There was nothing in my appearance or dress to distinguish me from the crowd, eternally hurrying into Church Gate station. .. It was like being denied part of my reality. (AAD 43)

With this disturbance Naipaul expresses his views on India which are considered by critics as his attack or criticism of India. This criticism has manifold forms. The hierarchial division of labor occasioned by the caste system, India’s lack of a sense of history and the conflict between Hindu tenets on cleanliness and the excremental reality are all particular objects of his sardonic irony, which is revealed in remarks as follows:

It is well that Indians are unable to look at their country directly, for the distress they would see, would drive them mad. Indians defecate everywhere. They defecate mostly, beside the railway
tracks. But they also defecate on the beaches; they defecate on the hill... (AAD 210)

This is again a kind of failure on Naipaul’s part. He is trying to discover the underlying beauty and glory in the external and physical lineaments of India. Not only this he negates the entire Indian intelligentsia by revealing the paradoxes between the professed actuality and the practiced reality, between the pure immaculate form of Hinduism or Indian civilization, for which Naipaul has certainly some predilections, and its distorted form in the present. Dennis Waller expresses similar views in his critically acclaimed V. S. Naipaul’s India:

His failure to settle in India brought with it from the start a realization that what he found instead of a land of achievement based on a whole living and long standing traditional culture was another fracture or at least ‘wounded’ culture, lost in a double fantasy a mixture of mimicry of the west and oriental resignation. (192)

Naipaul produces somewhat similar notion in India: A Wounded Civilization, the second of the reputed trilogy, “But increasingly I understand that my Indian memories, the memories of that India which lived on into my childhood in Trinidad, are like trapdoors into a bottomless past” (IWC xii).

The note of dismay is more lucid and echoes in India: A Million Mutinies Now, “With its layer below layer of distress and cruelty, it had to come as disturbances. It had to come as revolt and rage. India was now a country of a million little mutinies” (517).
Naipaul’s problem is that he confines himself only to the external and visible reality and to the psychological constructions of his childhood. He does not try to know the real myth or what the scriptures say but he prefers to give his own interpretation which is at times ludicrous and unintelligible. For instance Naipaul refers to Goddess Kali in *India: A Wounded Civilization*:

Kali, the black one, the coal black aboriginal Goddess, surviving in Hinduism as the emblem of female destructiveness, garlanded with human skulls, tongue forever out for fresh blood, eternally sacrificed to but insatiable. (IWC 81)

The Goddess Kali, as the ‘Shiva Purana’ and other scriptures say is not garlanded with human skull but with demons and evils. Her tongue is not out for fresh blood but because of her blunder, as she unknowingly keeps her foot on the chest of Lord Shiva who in order to pacify her rage lays himself on her path. The sudden revelation gives her a shock because she is his wife Parvati transformed as Kali to annihilate evil from the world.

Indian civilization, indeed, has always been at the peak of the world civilization. Its enormity, its extensiveness, certainly has been responsible for some of the apparent paradoxes which Naipaul is an expert in manifesting. Let us consider his conviction about Gandhi, his autobiography and some of his practices in his personal, political and social life. Naipaul’s conception of Gandhi is not the conventional one but innovative. Gandhi has been criticized for a lack of the aesthetic sense which disables him from appreciating the external beauty of nature on his first voyage:
That is the voyage an internal adventure of anxieties felt and good eaten, with not a word of anything seen or heard....the inward concentration is fierce, the self absorption complete. Southampton is lost in that embarrassment about the white flannel....Though Gandhi spent three years in England, there is nothing in his autobiography about the climate or season.... (IWC 86)

In the introductory part of his autobiography, Gandhiji has clearly stated his purpose:

"It is not my real purpose to attempt a real autobiography. I simply want to tell the story of my numerous experiments with truth, and as my life consists of nothing but those experiments; it is true that the story will take the shape of an autobiography. (MET, ii)"

Gandhiji has further added that he was not planning to write a book about the external world. So such a proposition that the autobiographer in his self absorption forgets completely about the climate, external nature or the foreign ambience can be made only by one who has not read the introduction of the book. It is possible that Naipaul left out the beginning of Gandhi’s autobiography. In his Reading and Writing: A Personal Account Naipaul wrote about his father – “He read many books at once, finishing none, looking not for the story or the argument in any book but for the special qualities... (31)” Like his father, it seems, Naipaul also has the habit of reading in fragments. Then while dealing with Gandhi’s days in South Africa he accuses him as fighting for racialism. Gandhi, he further adds, was not fighting as a social reformer and for the native inhabitants – “South
Africa offered direct racial hostility and Gandhi, obstinate as always, was immeasurably fortified as a Hindu and an Indian.” (MET 43)

South Africa appeared rarely in Gandhi’s adventures in South Africa. Gandhi in order to invest his body and soul completely in the service of Indian community took the Hindu vow of ‘brahmacharya’ which to Naipaul is only a ‘vow of life long sexual abstinence’. So the Africans vanished in Gandhi’s heart searching, they are the motive of a vow and thereafter disappear.

It is all Naipaul’s vision but the ‘Autobiography’ lucidly acquaints the reader with the real motive of Gandhiji’s visit to South Africa. He went there for litigation on behalf of Dada Abdullah & Co. and not for encouraging any racial hostility. It was the Indians who were deprived of many human conditions and not the native Africans who were of the same color as that of English people. The main problem was the black color of Indians and not with the South Africans. Gandhiji was so moved by the life of humiliation lived by the Indians there that most of his time he was immersed in their problem: “should I fight for my rights or go back to India or should I go on to Pretoria without minding the insult and return to India after finishing the fact?” (MET 25)

Referring to the pitiable conditions of Indians, Gandhi wrote:

In the Orange Free State the Indians were deprived of all their rights by a special law enacted in 1888 or even earlier. Indian might not walk on public footpath; and might not move out of doors after 9:00 pm.... They had no franchise. (MET 45)

In stark contradiction, the British authorities were less hostile to South Africans. When an opportunity came to Gandhi, he did not care about the danger
hovering over his life. When he was asked to offer his ambulance unit within the firing range during the Boer war, he offered his body and soul.

Naipaul incomparably, connects Gandhi’s vow of brahmacharya as a corollary of Gandhi not doing anything important for South Africans. Whereas in his autobiography Gandhiji has clearly stated that his month long service at Johannesburg kept him away from his wife and he thought it was a proper time to take the vow:

Within one month of offering my services I had to give up the house during the difficult marches that had then to be performed, the idea flashed upon me, that if I wanted to devote myself to the service of the community. I must relinquish the desire for children and wealth and live the life of a Vanprastha, of one retired from household cares. (MET 76)

Brahmacharya is not simply a ‘vow of lifelong sexual abstinence’, but the concept of brahmacharya in Hindu civilization is much greater than this. It is an attempt to live an extremely restrained life. All the five senses should restrict its extra ordinary practices in life. One is not allowed to live in society and work as an ordinary human being. So only a fleeting comment from Naipaul about Hindu customs shows that he has certain information about them but not a complete knowledge about them. Gandhiji himself has commented upon it in the same book:

The knowledge that a perfect observance of a brahmacharya means – realization of Brahman. In brahmacharya lies the protection of the body, the mind, the soul... control of the palate is the first
essential, the brahmacharis food should be limited, simple, spice
less and if possible uncooked...brahmacharya means control of the
senses in thought, word and deed... (MET 88)

And the ultimate truth about brahmacharya is to feel a divine presence within.
Thus in his studies and analysis Naipaul appears to make skeptical remarks
regarding Gandhi's program as well as activities. And much of the failure of
Gandhi he attributes to the narrow vision of the Indian people as he says that India
undid him as he became a Mahatma. Such skeptical views towards modern Indian
swamis and sadhus (like Bhave) in general and Gandhiji in particular have raised
great doubts and have also invited scathing criticism against Naipaul. Foremost
among these critics are Nissim Ezekiel and C. D. Narsimhaiah. Nissim Ezekiel in
his frequently read Naipaul's India and Mine criticizes much of Naipaulian
attitude:

The newer and truer side of his nature kicked against what he
noticed in India, a multitude of evils flowing from smugness...the
imperviousness to criticism, the refusal to see, the double talk and
double think. (71-90)

According to Ezekiel, Naipaul has eyes only for the seamy. Though one
doesn't exactly doubt the accuracy of his reportage, his books nevertheless give
one the feeling that events are being unconsciously distorted. Such a view is
supported by Nissim Ezekiel. He has pointed out a number of errors which
Naipaul makes as he generalizes from specific stances, which in some cases he
misinterprets. Ezekiel demonstrates in particular how some of Naipaul's remarks
on the absurdity of the hierarchial division of labor which are underpinned by the caste system are based on misconceptions.

Apart from these Naipaul also discusses the concept of Karma, Dharma and Moksha, although he applies these concepts in their most limited senses. He traces the fact that Hindus internalize these concepts. His study of Karma is disconnected. He reacts strongly as he records it as a paralyzing, defeatist philosophy which prevents the western style individual self realization process. In his analysis of the various Hindu failings and shortcomings which he documents in *An Area Of Darkness*, he is found to have attributed these failings of the Indian people to the influence of Karma. He, thus, holds Karma responsible for keeping sweepers always in the position of sweepers, ensuring degrees of degradation, through its emphasis on the fundamental justice of the caste system. It is Karma that enmeshes Indians in a cyclic view of history which Naipaul sees as medieval and which he illustrates by reference to Manohar Malgonkar’s novel *The Prince* (1963). It is karma that reinforces the inequities of post – independence society by implying that they are part of the divinely ordained scheme of things not exactly the best of all possible worlds. It is Karma that leaves Hindu discussing abstract metaphysical issues as the Chinese invade the northern part of the country.

Naipaul’s cutting ironical remarks on caste system, corruption and incompetence are made in connection with the Chinese invasion and Gandhi. Through the examples of businessmen and civil servants he shows the defect in the thought process of Indians. They lack the Seeing Eye and very soon take refuge in The Gita’s philosophy of selfless action, or even adopt an ascetic attitude in a strange fashion:
Class is a system of rewards. Caste imprisons a man in his function. From this it follows since there are no rewards, those duties and responsibilities become irrelevant to position...beggars whine. Holy men give us all. Politicians are grave and unsmiling....service is not an Indian concept and the providing of services has long ceased to be a concept of caste. The function of business is to make money. He might wish to sell shoes to Russia. He therefore sends good samples; the order obtained, he sends a ship load of shoes with cardboard soles. (AAD 75)

Naipaul realizes correctly, that the Gita's selfless action is converted into symbolic actions only, not fruitful but only persisting as rituals. Naipaul despises such symbolic actions of Indians and through many ironical remarks he blames the Indian for inaction and attacks the caste system heavily:

Symbolic action: tree planting week (seventy percent of the trees are planted die from the lack of attention after the speeches), smallpox eradication week (one central minister is reported to have refused to be vaccinated for religious reasons)...when a crises occurs, as during the Chinese invasion, the symbolic nature of the structure is made plain. Speeches are made and reported at length... the British dug trenches. So they dig trenches in Delhi..... The trenches answer the insatiable need for the open air latrines. And, needless to say, supplies for the army, symbolically armed, find their way to the Calcutta open market. (AAD 78)
Nevertheless Naipaul's approach is unique. He shows the stern realities of India and it saves him from being completely castigated. His notions about Gandhi or Hindu ideals may be far from complete truth but it also points out his honest concern for India. Philosophy or high sounding ideas are useful only when they are put in action, but in India Gandhian philosophy has become either an opportunistic propaganda or just ostentation:

Symbolic action was the curse of India yet Gandhi was Indian enough to deal in symbols.... His failure is there in his writings, he is still the best guide to India. It is as if, in England, Florence Nightingale had become a saint, honored by statues everywhere, her name on every lip; and the hospitals had remained as she had described them. (AAD 81)

Throughout *An Area of Darkness* there is a sense of humiliation, of a personal frustration that the India of his sacred imagination and longings, of his imagined origins, is just another oriental third world country, despite its size and ancient history. He is irate at whatever he sees in India and in the end declares his year in India as "a journey that ought not to have been made; it had broken my life in two" (265). This implies that he is not going to revisit India in subsequent years, to write about India is out of question. Yet he remains ambivalent, when with oneself 'contented least', it is friendship that offers consolations and self knowledge. He thinks of an architect, he had met in India, the 'affection and loyalty' they had professed. "This was the part of the sweetness of India, it went with everything else" (266). Later he dreams about a gift his friend has given him, Indian cloth for a jacket.
By questioning the identity of India beyond geography and place, the point of view of the emigrant helps to broaden the framework within which India is defined. Through a reading of V. S. Naipaul’s *An Area of Darkness*, it is evident that Naipaul’s world-view strikes an ambivalent relationship with his experiences in India. It is a matter of study how emotions of tenderness and pleasure vie with the zeal and short-sightedness of a colonialist. Speaking about the writings of Afro-Caribbean women in the U.S., Carole Boyce Davies identifies this urge in her book *Black Women Writing and Identity*:

Migration creates the desire for home, which in turn produces the rewriting of home. Homesickness or homelessness, the rejection of home or the longing for home become motivating factor in this rewriting. Home can only have meaning once one experiences a level of disparagement from it. (113)

A certain sense of both nostalgia and pain accompany a migrant’s thought of home. In the case of migrant writers, a journey back to the country one’s ancestor came from holds the key to some answers about their own identity. But just as the unchangeability of tradition is mere fallacy, so also the reconstruction of one’s homeland depends on subjective analysis. Critical focus is brought to it, among other things, by distance and foreign influences of an emigrant’s view. In the process some “universal” truths about nations may risk being questioned, given new dimensions and even changed. In the world after colonialism it is consistently seen that all definitions of home, tradition, identity, and past history have a concrete relationship with the migrant’s experiences. The construction of
“nation” from emigrant’s perspectives is in turn, a result of these multi-dimensional experiences.

It is Naipaul’s involvement with the third world that has categorized his writings as Indian or Caribbean. Place forms an important backdrop to almost all his musings, and “place” for Naipaul is not only a depiction of objective realities, but a subtle emotion which involves him and moves him even to the pain of anger:

I like London. For all the reason I have given it is the best place to write in. The problem for me is that it is not a place I can write about. Not as yet. Unless I am able to refresh myself by travel- to Trinidad, to India - I fear that living here will eventually lead to my own sterility; and I may have to look for another joke. (The Times Literary Supplement)

Through his journeys to the various corners of the country he will have to see exactly where and how his world-view strikes a relationship with his experiences in India. Naipaul’s method is that of travel and discovery, and his preliminary strategy is to beware of non-attachment. Attachment to India is triggered off on the one hand by scraps of Indianness that formed part of his racial memory, and on the other hand by encounters and observations that lead him to understand the place India will hold in his creative imagination.

Naipaul’s early regret in this book is that he lacks the solid unchanging allegiance of his grandfather to a simple pure idea of India. On the one hand this “idea” of India was a strong reality within the house, whereas outside the “difference” from India asserted itself in the social interaction which Naipaul’s
and other Indian families had with those living in Trinidad. The picture of India and its decay were seen as simultaneous with the obvious reality of multi-racial existence, where Muslim neighbors were concerned, the idea of difference limited the idea of the Indian nation. “Indianness” began to be defined by how it was unlike the “others”.

The minimization of India that young Naipaul experienced and the cosmopolitan world which hedged in were the impetus to decide about his representation of Indian cultural forms. So it is not sufficient to frame Naipaul’s writings into the “quest for identity” formula alone. Although the building of an India from reminiscences, personal decisions and actual interaction with Indian people creates the concept of the country in Naipaul’s mind, he brings to India the colonial experience of Trinidad and London, a western vision with a distinct Indian ancestry. The mingling of the two visions have made his first travel book on India both a record of a sense of belonging and an assertion of eternal homelessness. Seeing life in its lowest forms, Naipaul is led to judge the absurdity of people who could ever be proud to wield power over such creatures. The anger of the emigrant turns to “a later self-disgust” (16). For Naipaul sees India from the point of view of his own responses.

Having gone through the book An Area of Darkness, it seems that when Naipaul had come to India as a traveler, India was passing through a transitional period and was, therefore, unable to project itself properly. It did not help Naipaul to arrive at the real truth about India. An objective reading of the book reveals that Naipaul forms an impression of India, and it gives him both pain and pleasure, particularly because the vision of independent India of his youthful days appears
to be completely shattered from a close angle. What Naipaul’s writing on India
reveals is that a Brahmin sensibility has been over-laid with a western vision. It
disturbs him when he observes the real India without the western lens. It thereby
makes Naipaul feel that there is no home for him in India. It is the Indian
acceptance of the British that challenges Naipaul’s perceptions most. By
analyzing British India and its remnants in India today, Naipaul sees not the
humiliation of a people who doggedly follow British customs and keep Kipling’s
India alive. Naipaul calls a section of his travelogue ‘Fantasy and Ruin’. Here he
distinguishes between the artificiality of British India, and the squalor of India
where ruins of numerous conquerors from the Aryans to the Muslims gave India a
distasteful vision of past and present Indianness. Naipaul ignores the fact that this
is a very different and destructive history, where creativity was preserved in the
mind only. The material wealth and the political amorphousness of India invited
conquest after conquest which drained the resources of the country, crippling her
and making the idea of building unthinkable. It is impractical for Naipaul to
expect a beautiful India rising from British or other ruins. His observation that the
India-England encounter was fruitless is not wholly true. If India lost her
creativity in the process, it is because of the British exploitation of India, it is
something of a miracle that the spirit of India survived at all. Due to the contact
with the British, the industrial revolution and the technologies came to us, with or
without the intentions of the British. The technological revolution would have
come to India even otherwise because it was a global phenomenon, but because of
the contact with the British, its beginning was made a little earlier.
Naipaul’s view may be relevant in the present context but not in the context of the past. The ancestral place of Sir Naipaul’s forefathers, Gorakhpur, U. P., was always a sensitive area. All the districts near Gorakhpur were full of hidden activities for freedom fighters. Naipaul’s remark seems futile when he asserts:

> It remained a special, isolated area of ground which had produced my grandfather and others I knew who had been born in India and had come to Trinidad as indentured laborers, though that past too had fallen into the void into which India had fallen... (AAD 27).

Sometimes Naipaul shows that he lacks proper knowledge of the history of India; but sometimes he shows an in depth knowledge of the Indian culture:

> The ceremony ends with the initiate, his head shaved his thread new and obvious, taking up his staff and bundle... the initiate insists that he must; a senior member of the family is summoned to plead with the initiate, who at lengths yields and lays down his staff and bundle. (AAD 34)

The conflict between Naipaul’s inner and outer self is evident. Sometimes Naipaul seems stern, a man of words, a man who does not believe in orthodox rituals but sometimes he seems just the opposite:

> I had rejected tradition; yet how can I explain my feelings of outrage when I heard that in Bombay they used candles and electric bulbs for the Diwali festival and not the rustic clay lamps of immemorial design... (AAD 36)
The inner self of Naipaul has sympathy and love for the tradition and culture of India, whereas his outer self is a rebel. It revolts against the practiced and established traditions which seem outdated to him. Here, Nehruji’s view from *The Discovery of India* is worth quoting:

Old established traditions cannot be easily scrapped or dispensed with; in moments of crisis they rise and dominate the minds of men, and often, as we have seen, a deliberate attempt is made to use those traditions to rouse a people to a high pitch of effort and sacrifice. Traditions have to be accepted to a large extent and adapted and transformed to meet new conditions and ways of thought, and at the same time new traditions have to be built up.

(53)

*An Area of Darkness* seems to be the result of Naipaul’s inferiority complex. By his contemptuous feeling for India and its people, Naipaul has tried to feed his false superiority complex. It is accepted that at that time the country was in miserable condition, everywhere development was required, whether it was economical or social, political or industrial, and so on. Naipaul begins his journey from the realm of darkness, with an attitude of ambivalence hoping to fulfill the area of darkness with experience. Naipaul’s darkness is the darkness of his own situation, born out of romantic reverie which cannot stand the glare of the day. Naipaul continually tries to impose his personalized, romantised image of India on reality. When the reality goes against his pre-conceived notions, he allows his narrative to slip into a casual banter, unwarranted moralizing and misplaced criticism:
The India, then, which was the background of my childhood was an area of my imagination. It was not the real country I presently began to read about and whose map I had committed to memory. (AAD 41)

Sometimes it seems that Naipaul has put on sunglasses in the darkness; that is why he could not see the brighter part of India. Sometimes he shows a keen, microscopic insight into India and her people. For example, he asserts:

In India it implied a brutal division of labour; and its center, as I had never realized, lay the degradation of latrine-cleaner. In India caste was unpleasant; I never wished to know what a man’s caste was. (34)

Naipaul had never been to India before the year 1962. He had visited India only in dreams and in his imagination. Trinidad was not a place fit for Naipaul. He had realized in his early age that he could not be a good writer, or at least a writer with a ‘commitment to deliver the truth’ in Trinidad. Therefore he departed for England to fulfill the dreams given to him by his father. He, in Trinidad, was unlike West-Indian, a ‘Real-Brahmin’ with different culture, and different tradition, where he felt alienated. In England also he was not totally Trinidadian, nor he totally belonged to India, and hence was ‘twice removed from reality’. His position was like Gogol in Lahiri’s The Namesake where Gogol feels “ABCD-American Born Confused Deshi. In other words, him” (118). But when Naipaul came to India, he ‘felt more than the usual fear of arrival’ (42). It was ultimately a dream land for Sir Naipaul, a resting place for his imagination, his homeland. Naipaul lost his identity in the crowds of Bombay. He was like each person in the
crowd. He could not be a distinguished personality in the crowd as he thought. He asserts it in such a way:

In Trinidad to be an Indian was to be distinctive. To be anything was distinctive; difference was each man’s attribute. To be an Indian in England was distinctive; in Egypt it was more so. Now in Bombay I entered a shop or a restaurant and awaited a special quality of response. And there was nothing (AAD 43).

There were lots of good movies released in the end of 50’s and the beginning of 60’s when Naipaul visited India. Some big banner movies of Raj Kapoor and Dev Anand had been released, which people admire even now, and like to see even today. Yet it seems Naipaul is under oath to focus only on the negative side, to point out the bad things, and throw light on the vulgar side of the society as his ‘commitment to deliver the truth’. He could not see the posters of good movies, it is unbelievable, he saw only:

The film poster that seemed to derive from a cooler and more luscious world, cooler and more luscious than the film posters of England and America, promising a greater gaiety, an ampler breast and hip, a more fruitful womb(AAD 46).

Naipaul has accepted that such things are also shown in England and America but he has objected to the pose in the posters. Firstly, he chose to visit Bombay, a metropolitan city. Secondly, he talks about only the negative side, like movie posters. Lastly, he expects the posters of adult movies to be shown in a dignified manner, a woman wearing a saree, covered face, having a clay lamp in her hand, going to worship God, which is amply ridiculous.
Probably this narrow minded colonial was not aware of the fact that in India ‘Kamasutra’ by Vatsyayana, is considered as one of the best books ever written since the Gupta age. And the Indian worships the uniting sexes in the form of Yoni and Lingam as in ‘Shivling Puja’. Bombay, a metropolitan city, offers lots of opportunities for everyone who wishes to attain a goal. It is a city where earning money is easy, where getting a meal two times a day is easy. One can achieve his goal according to his caliber but it is difficult to get a roof for living in Bombay. The population of Bombay is more than one crore. It is the capital of Maharashtra, has the biggest and most used railway tracks. It has the highest percentage of people coming and going out of Bombay per day. It is the fourth most expensive city in the world, one of the top ten targets of Pakistan and the place where all the dream cine stars live. It is a place one cannot visit and be satisfied with in a week. It is a mayanagari, which has always attracted people to try their luck. One can find many different people belonging to different religions, having different attitudes, customs, and life styles in Mumbai. Naipaul has rightly depicted them through the characters named Ramnath, Malhotra, Malik, Jivan, Vasant, and Bunty. The theme of ‘A Resting Place for Imagination’, ‘Degree’, ‘The colonial’ and ‘Romancers’ can be summarized in the words poverty, caste, defecation and failure. His language is, for most part, that of a surgeon who feels neither contempt nor pity when he dissects. ‘The Colonial’ depicts the colonial view of India. Incidentally the colonial happens to be Mahatma Gandhi, and Naipaul quotes extensively from Gandhi’s early writing. It starts with a quote just below
the heading: “Well, India is a country of nonsense” (68). Naipaul feels that India undid Gandhi:

He became a Mahatma. He was to be reverenced for what he was; his message was irrelevant; and that his failure is there, in his writings; he is still the best guide to India. It is as if, in England, Florence Nightingale had become a saint, honoured by statues, everywhere, her name on every lip; and the hospitals had remained as she had described them. (AAD 81)

In ‘The Colonial’ Naipaul enjoys throwing mud on a great person like Mahatma Gandhi and tries to satisfy, by this action, his disgust to be an Indian. It is mere absurdity on the part of Naipaul, to connect Gandhi with people’s defecation and The Gita with Gandhi and the excrement. The description of four men washing down the steps of Bombay seedy hotel shows Naipaul’s care for exactness in defining action, but it also implies a moral comment on the Indian caste system:

After they have passed the steps are dirty as before. You cannot complain the hotel is dirty. No Indian will agree with you. Four sweepers are in daily attendance and it is enough in India that the sweepers attend. They are not required to clean. That is subsidiary part of their function which is to be sweepers, degraded beings, to go through the motion of degradation. (AAD 79)

It is this aspect of the caste what is exposed in Naipaul’s irritable but acutely observant study of his travels in India, in An Area of Darkness. Naipaul in spite of his Brahminical background could not understand nor accept the religious
consciousness or religious views of life, surely the consequences of his markedly western background.

*An Area of Darkness* does not just express his anthropological, sociological, historical and ethnographic observations, views and discussions; it is also a book of great introspective reflections. Although Naipaul had never visited India earlier, his first visit was crowded with the notions and stories told by his relatives in the West-Indies. He had also been brought up as a Hindu and his visit to India, it seems that, was motivated by his curiosity and inquisitiveness to know his roots and redefine his position and relation with India.

The alluring and attractive picture of India was settled deep in his consciousness. On the basis of these notions Naipaul had also built up within himself a picture of a ‘dream India’. He had come there with some visions given to him by his immigrant relatives. He had expected to see an India revitalized, rejuvenated, but simultaneously preserving the ancient culture. Naipaul finds that Indians like the people of West Indies, mimic the British. The greatest difference between the two was that the Trinidadian, like Indians, did not have the asset of a rich, ancient, pluralistic culture which was both an asset as well as a handicap in modernization. Mimicry cannot come to Indians that easily because of the strong foundations of the past. Naipaul’s double alienation was complete- the alienation from Trinidad and the one from India.

Naipaul comes to the country with expectations but also with a sense of humiliation that his ancestors had to leave the motherland as indentured labours. To him India was an area of darkness and he had come there with the intention of discovering India. His sojourn through the wide varied land of his forefathers only
confirms his separateness from India. He is content to be a colonial without a past, without ancestors. His visit to his ancestral village, meeting Dube is altogether a disappointing experience. The Brahmin from Trinidad fails to establish any meaningful connection between his Brahmin forebears in India. His anger, frustration and a sense of futility stems from this disinheritance- beneath the frustration there is an agonizing self-awareness admitting neither identity nor bond- a strange homecoming. An Area of Darkness is a deeply disturbing autobiography. It is, at one level, perhaps, the writer’s search for his ethnic roots, and the search undertaken through a journey to the land of his forefathers three generations away. The restlessness of Naipaul as a historical recorder of the cultural sense whether in India or West Indies or England may be traced to his inheritance and the acquired western attitude of mind and temperament.

Naipaul explains the background from which he had come. India was the background of Naipaul’s childhood and ever since then India was the country of his imagination, known through the language he spoke at home, the immigrant Indians among whom he lived there and the books he had read. To him India “was a country out in the void beyond the dot of Trinidad; and from it our journey had been final. It was a country suspended in time; it could not be related to the country discovered later” (27). To him India was surrounded by darkness:

...darkness which also extended to the land, as darkness surrounds a hut at evening, though for a little way around the hut there is still light. The light was the area of my experience, in time and place. And even now, though time has widened, though space has contracted and I have traveled lucidly over that area of darkness,
something of darkness, in those attitudes, those ways of thinking, and seeing, which are no longer mine. (AAD 30)

It was with such a background that Naipaul traveled to India. Like immigrants probably he was also feeling rootless and was in search of roots. He wanted to explore the possibilities of finding his roots in India.

Naipaul is a very severe critic of life in India. For instance, he criticizes the Indian films, the lack of hygiene in India and the religious practices which he finds meaningless. Naipaul is a born non-believer and finds that there is a big difference between the high spirited claims made by people and the low, hollow and bankrupt everyday life in India, which Naipaul seems to have come across and a life which he describes with illustrations. He is very severe in his criticism when he says that the meeting of England and India was not fruitful. “The Indo-British encounter was abortive” writes Naipaul and continues:

It ended in a double fantasy. Their new self-awareness makes it impossible for Indians to go back, their cherishing of Indianness makes it difficult for them to go ahead...the creative urge failed.

Instead of continuity, we have the static. (AAD 216)

He observes that in this colonial experience having lost the creativity, Indian mind only imitated the British and even looked at themselves through British eyes,

It is still through European eyes that India looks at her ruins and her art. Nearly every Indian who writes on Indian art feels bound to quote from the writings of European admirers. (AAD 234)

Even though Naipaul lived in India for a year, he could not understand India at all. He writes:
In a year I had not learned acceptance. I had learned my separateness from India, and was content to be a colonial, without a past, without ancestors. (AAD 252)

India is a country which is full of complexities, different cultures, different traditions, lots of religions, lots of deities, different styles of cooking which changes after every few kilometers; different dress codes in different states, different languages and so on. One cannot claim to understand such a vast and versatile country in a year or in ten years or so. It is a miracle that we find unity in its diversity.

India eludes him and as he flies away from India and reaches Beirut, he observes: “India was part of the night, a dead world, a long journey” (265).

Naipaul’s severe criticism is the result perhaps of his short stay in India. It was too short for the stupendous nature of the enquiry in which Naipaul had engaged himself. A more patient attempt and perhaps more contact with people involved in such a pursuit might have yielded a different and a better picture to Naipaul. He knows no Indian language and his communication with Indians was inadequate. Moreover, he carried his own prejudices as a Trinidad Colonial in his attempt to understand India.

Naipaul views India very much as an outsider. D. J. Enright feels that “Mr. Naipaul is very much the Englishman”.

An Area of Darkness aroused strong and lasting offence in India. Anniah Gowda’s reaction to the book is perhaps representative of many Indian critics who fault Naipaul for giving too partial a view of their country “Naipaul, in his reminiscences, has chosen to shut his eyes to the India which is not defecating”.
Mr. Natwar Singh has this to say about the book:

It is Mr. Naipaul’s unique achievement to have passed that amount of time in India without meeting a single worthwhile human being. He finds fault in almost everything he sees: the people’s habits and their manners, the cities, villages, bureaucracy, railways, army.

Even the Tajmahal is not spared. (Curtain Raisers)

C. D. Narsimhaiah’s essay ‘Somewhere something has snapped’ is a systematic attack on the book. At the beginning of the essay, Narsimhaiah declares that Naipaul’s assessment of the failings of India cannot be disowned:

Our failings are so many and so varied that the most patriotic of us cannot defend them. Our love of symbols…rather than the action…our neglect of our great art…unless…approved by European scholars…our endless mimicry…

Narsimhaiah goes on to state that his essay is not intended to be a defense of India, that it is “a sign of maturity in individuals as well as nations to see ourselves as others see us…”. He credits Naipaul for his sharp observation of all that is evident but accuses him of being unable to explore the depth of the Indian mind. As the essay progresses, Narsimhaiah himself makes an observation of Naipaul’s error in misinterpretation and misrepresentation but ironically, he is unable to gauge the depth of the darkness or the conflict in the mind of a writer belonging to the diaspora. H. H. Anniah Gowda sees Naipaul as an “expatriate determined to lambaste India”. Helen Tiffin criticizes C. D. Narsimhaiah in which she accuses him of being “intolerant” of any criticism of his country. William
Walsh holds that *An Area of Darkness* is “a kind of metaphysical diary of the effort to shine a Western novelist’s light into an interior area of darkness”.

The main point, which critics on both sides have missed out, is the perspective of vision. Visions cannot be divided into airtight compartments of truths and half-truths. Ezekiel’s India can never be the India that Naipaul sees.

Naipaul’s engagement with India is not a one-way process. It is a complicated case of action and reaction being recorded against a background that is equally complicated. Naipaul has written of his idea of his Hindu-Brahmin self that survived as a small area of “self-deception”. He has also recorded that he had been brought up in a double world: the closed Hindu world of his grandmother’s family and the outside world. Both these worlds were separate and secret from each other. Ezekiel writes in ‘Naipaul’s India and Mine’, “…I am not in fact doubting his veracity, only his approach towards the discovery of the truth. He makes the truth about India seem simple. I don’t believe it is simple.” In India, Naipaul’s two selves separated and each self reacted differently to situations at hand. C. D. Narsimhaiah has recorded instances of this fracture in sensibility but has dismissed these as being willful construction on the part of the author:

Attitudes like these have no meaning in the light of the dominant mood of the book. By the time the reader rubs his eyes to take a good look at a flash and say to his neighbour ‘behold’, the jaws of darkness do devour it. It’s almost a recurring pattern of the book.

Naipaul must be credited for his honesty to his vision, however complicated, however blurred. Naipaul writes of his visit to India to work on *An Area of Darkness*:
This time I left from England. India was special to England; for
two hundred years there had been any number of English traveler’s
accounts and, latterly, novels. I could not be that kind of traveler.
In traveling to India I was traveling to an un-English fantasy, and a
fantasy unknown to Indians of India: I was traveling to the peasant
India that my Indian grandfathers had sought to re-create in
Trinidad, the ‘India’ I had partly grown up in, the India that was
like a loose end in my mind, where our past suddenly stopped.
There was no model for me…to get anywhere in the writing, I had
first of all to define myself very clearly to myself. (EOA 140-141)

For Naipaul, An Area of Darkness was a double struggle. It was a struggle to
establish a perspective to look at the meaning of India; it was also a struggle to
discover the process through which the meaning could be unraveled. The
metaphor of an oblong piece of cloth, which was a gift from an Indian friend,
explains his inability to find an end to his double struggle. The book ends in
ambivalence. There could have been no other possible ending. The book is
dappled all over but the area of darkness and light cannot be interpreted as
belonging to a western or an Eastern sensibility. The area of darkness, as Naipaul
has defined at the onset, is that of aspect of India or that aspect of
Indian sensibility which remains impenetrable for him. The area of the light is the
area of his “experience in time and place” (AD 30). It is clearly a division of
experience into broad categories of what is comprehensible and what is not.
Naipaul, in his own words has accepted that he has been unable to express his
briefly grasped understanding of the philosophy that is at the heart of India: “I felt
it as something true which I could never adequately express and never seize again" (266-67). Eminent writer Ezekiel writes in his frequently read article ‘Naipaul’s India and Mine’:

My quarrel with Mr. Naipaul, which I hope to conduct in a way that will be understandable to him, is not because of these condemnatory judgments of his, so fiercely, so blazingly expressed. My quarrel is that Mr. Naipaul is so often uninvolved and unconcerned. He writes exclusively from the point of view of his own dilemma, his temperamental alienation from his mixed background, his choice and his escape. (194)

Naipaul himself points to his writing style in his famous Nobel lecture ‘Two Worlds’:

I have always moved by intuition alone. I have no system, literary or political. I have no guiding political idea. I think that probably lies with my ancestry... My father, who wrote his stories in a very dark time, and for no reward, had no political idea. Perhaps it is because we have been far from authority for many centuries. It gives us a special point of view. I feel we are more inclined to see the humour and pity of things. (10)

The point that calls for an explanation is the difference in Naipaul’s India and the India of his Indian critics. Numerous writers had written about India before Naipaul did, and not always sympathetically. A Beverly Nicolas and Catherine Mayo could be dismissed for being incapable of understanding India. Their vision could be ignored because they were, after all, foreigners. What did
they know of India? But with Naipaul, Indians felt betrayed. He was expected to know and to understand. The division of experience had occurred three generations ago. Naipaul was an outsider in India. His critics were outsiders to his experience. Naipaul’s perception and portrayal of India, if seen in this light, is a unique record of the division of sensibility that has become a permanent paradigm of our times. Dr. B. Sudipta has this to say in her article ‘V. S. Naipaul and His Magnificent Obsession with India’:

The reformer’s zeal of Naipaul is based on his intimate visualization of India, resulting in despondency. He knew that Hinduism is less aggressive and more enlightening than the European culture, but in a motivated manner the British colonial rulers declared everything Indian as “primitive and ignorant”...

(15)

The value of *An Area of Darkness* is that the book and its critique have documented the confusion and alienation that are the legacies of the empire. Never before has India been presented through a diasporic vision. Never before had the Indians in India been exposed to the pain and agony of such a vision, so much so that within India even the veracity of Naipaul’s experience was very often questioned. *An Area of Darkness* stands today as the first stage of a diasporic writer’s problematic relation with the country of his origin. It abounds in confusions and contradictions. It is no potent thesis about India. There are recurrent notes of the writer’s identification with India at a personal level. He did not want India “to sink”, and so, the writer returns with more books on India, attempts an analysis of its problems, and pens the growth of his experience.
An Area of Darkness is Naipaul's desperate attempt to identify with and understand India. He is not successful. Yet the picture of India painted by him is very thought provoking. It cannot be ignored— one has to read through the work. The reader sometimes sadly agrees with Naipaul; at times he rises outraged in defending India, and at times he silently accepts the bitter truth. Naipaul's work is like a torch that brings to light some dark corners, some frailties and faults of our dear India. Like a good workman the dirt has to be cleared. Introspection to understand and improve the Indian situation is required. An Area of Darkness goads one towards self-analysis and self-improvement. Naipaul thus serves a necessary purpose. By expressing the darkness, he attempts to make us grope for light.
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