CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

V.S. Naipaul’s religious vision is an atheist’s vision. Religion and atheism are contradictory terms. For an atheist cannot be supposed to have a religious vision at all. Naipaul as a professed atheist cannot claim to have a vision characterized by religious experience. Nevertheless, he can claim a world vision in which religion occupies a prominent place. Obviously Naipaul’s world-vision is defined by existentialism which is concerned not with the ontological problems of human destiny and the psychological problems of human nature but mainly with the problems which deal with human condition. However, in Naipaul’s existential vision, religion does not suffer eclipse; rather it makes its presence felt in a big way, surfacing frequently as a defining principle of his mentality. As such religion cannot be dismissed as a peripheral element of his creative consciousness.

Indeed, Naipaul is a born atheist but with a pronounced Brahminic streak, a streak which defines his mind, determines his angle of vision, and shapes his ideas. This streak like a subterranean current energises most of his creative work. However, it does not have a free flow, since it is circumscribed by Naipaul’s experiences as a colonial subject, British citizen and the traveller.

As a colonial subject as his books reveal, Naipaul shares the Trinidadian Hindu sensibility, the sensibility of the expatriates who came to Trinidad as indentured labourers and who are now stranded in the Island. Unable to return to their motherland, they feel frustrated. They have no option but to accept their
present condition. Like most of the Indian expatriates, Naipaul also wants to settle in the land of his Indian ancestors but he changes his mind in view of dirt, abject poverty, and trying living conditions in India. Subsequently, he develops a feeling of anguish which leads him to brood over the causes of the backwardness of India that drove his predecessors to Trinidad and does not allow him to return to his mother country. He locates these causes in Hinduism and in Indian habit of sticking to the past. Naturally, Naipaul turns again Hinduism, holding it responsible not only for his hopeless condition but also of other expatriates. It is this anguish which becomes responsible for Naipaul’s antagonism to Hinduism.

Furthermore, the Trinidadian experience of Naipaul is crucial to his Brahminic sensibility in another way. It sows the seeds of his Brahminism, which demands a pure and virtuous life of intellectual pursuits, devotion to truth and purity of rituals, scientific temperament etc. But at the same time, he also becomes critical of the Trinidadian Hinduism, its rites and rituals performed without understanding their meaning. He also looses his patience with the Hindus for their refusal to adapt themselves to the modern conditions. He likes only the Hindus who are ready to face the challenges of modernity and to assimilate the elements of other religions. Naipaul is keen to monitor the winds of change in Trinidad. His protagonists of the Trinidadian novels – Ganesh in The Mystic Masseur, Pandit Dhaniram in The Suffrage of Elvira, and Mr. Biswas in A House for Mr. Biswas – are eager to absorb the central values of other religions. Likewise he finds that the persons of old generation – Surjatpat Harbans, Baksh, Preacher, Lorkhoor, Mr. Cuffy – are quite prepared to attune themselves to modern democracy. Naipaul
mentions that persons belonging to younger generation – Chittaranjan, Foam, Nelly, Iqbal, Zilla, Carol – do not hesitate to reject the old superstitious ways and to take the road to modernism. Evidently Naipaul wishes that if Brahminism or Hinduism is to survive, it has to modernise itself.

Naipaul’s Trinidadian experience is instrumental in shaping his attitude towards Muslims. In his very childhood, he comes to realize that the Muslims are different from the Hindus and that they cannot be trusted. Subsequently, he develops a prejudice against them and their religion. This prejudice influences his view of Islam which he considers a threat to the Western civilization. For the most part of his life, Naipaul remains suspicious of Muslims. However, late in his life he develops a feeling of empathy for the Muslims as a minority community. Naipaul becomes sympathetic to them, since he knows the predicaments of a minority community from his childhood experience. He remembers the difficulties faced by Hindus as a minority community in Trinidad.

Likewise Naipaul’s experience as a British subject or rather as an adherent of Christian values is crucial in many ways. Surprisingly, Naipaul equates Christianity with capitalism, the emerging order of the day and Hinduism with feudalism, the relic of the old world, which is in the process of dying. He is so dazzled with the civilization produced by Christianity that he cannot see even the nascent spirit of Hinduism. This prejudiced view produces a conflict which surfaces in his works every now and then. It is said that Naipaul understands neither Hinduism nor Christianity. His journalistic approach does not allow him to penetrate into the deeper recesses of religious experience. He remains content
only with the surfaces. This observation is not far from truth. Naipaul’s sense of
religion can be realised in his reaction to the pilgrimage to the cave of Amarnath
that he undertakes during his first Indian visit. He goes there not for some
religious purpose but for understanding the mystery of lingam. To him it is a
mystery like Delphi of the older world. At this time Naipaul goes on to state that
he does not regard Hinduism even as a religion. Discussing lingam, he states:

    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.¹

In this pilgrimage, his journalistic approach makes him impervious to the
religious fervour which a pilgrimage is bound to produce. While Karan Singh, the
head of the Jammu and Kashmir states, experience religious fervour, Naipaul’s
experience remains confined to the surfaces:

    Karan Singh had gone to the cave some years before, though not
with the traditional pilgrimage, and he had published a vivid account
of the journey. I could not share his religious fervour, but I relished
his exact descriptions of snowclad mountains, icy green lakes and
changing weather. To me the true mystery of the cave lay in its
situation.

    (An Area of Darkness 163)

Likewise, Naipaul remains confined to the surfaces of Christianity. He
views Christianity only a source of energy to modernity, only as a power which
originates and sustains capitalism. In his earlier works, Naipaul seldom, if ever
mentions religious values as the instrument of individual transformation. In The
Mystic Masseur, he refers only to Christian ways of worship and superstitious
practices which Ganesh accepts. In The Suffrage of Elvira, he mentions
Dhaniram’s Missionary education and chanting of Christian hymns. In another
novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, he tells how Tulsi comes to observe Christian festivals and to adopt some of the Christian ways and rituals. In these early books, Naipaul does not try to delve deeper into Christianity and to explore its central values.

It is only in *A Turn in the South* that he comes to touch the core of Christianity, feeling "the pleasures of the religious meeting: the pleasures of brotherhood, union, formality, ritual, clothes, music, all combining to create a possibility of ecstasy." It is only during his trip to the American States that he comes to know the work of the Holy Spirit who produces, "love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, meekness, and self-control" (*A Turn in the South* 74). During this journey he comes to understand the value of grief, history and politics in shaping religion. Though he describes many Christian sects, he remains silent on the central tenets of Christianity. Obviously, Christian dogmas remains out of his vision.

Interestingly, Naipaul examines the veracity of his religious vision, during his visit to India, Islamic countries and the Southern States. As for India, he travels the country several times, and expresses his experience in as many as three books. In the first book *An Area of Darkness*, he finds India as a country engulfed in the darkness of ignorance, poverty, and backwardness, resulting from its religious beliefs. In the second book, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, he envisions India as a wounded civilization, the wounds being inflicted by the Muslim invaders and the British colonizers. Here again the main culprit is Hinduism. The

In all the Indian books, Naipaul’s attitude towards Hinduism is marked by a peculiar ambivalence. Obviously, his mind swings between fascination and repulsion as well as acceptance and rejection. While his Brahmin streak urges him to identify him with the Brahminic sensibility, his adherence to modern values goads him to reject it. Naipaul finds himself on the horns of dilemma. In reality, in Naipaul, there are three kinds of Hinduism, the ancient, the medieval, and the modern. While he is fascinated by the ancient Hinduism of the Aryan Horsemen and cf the scientists like Arya Bhatt, and Bhaskara, remarkable for their political and scientific achievements, he is repulsed by the medieval Hinduism which allowed the alien invaders to overrun and rule the country for hundreds of years. This medieval Hinduism is subdued, passive, and stultified. But at the same time, he develops a fancy for modern Hinduism or rather Brahminism of Subramaniam, Pravas, and Dr. Srinivasan who are attuned to the rhythms of modern scientific culture which is energized by their Brahminical values.

Naipaul’s ambivalence towards Hinduism is paradoxical. Most of his critics are puzzled over his attitude. Undoubtedly Hinduism, as Suman Gupta believes, remains a-priori in Naipaul’s thinking or rather world vision. But surprisingly he does not possess a precise idea of Hindu dogma. His idea of Hinduism revolves round only Indian epics, which he satirizes in his early writings, and notions like liberation karam, dharma which he tends to misunderstand. He is also confused about Gandhism which embodies most of the
central values of the Brahmin culture. Naipaul appreciates Gandhi for his fusion of the Eastern and the Western spirits, for his idea of salvation through public service, but rejects him squarely for his rural economics. Bruce King goes on to point out his continuous flirtation with Brahmin and Hindu revivalism. What he actually desires, as Pankaj Mishra observes, a completely traditional society inclined to adapt, "to the painful freedoms of modernity." Naipaul stands for an ordered instinctive life which he hopes to find in India. Even though opposed to Muslim fundamentalism, he supports Hindu revivalism because he believes that, "Hindu nationalists... are quite unlike religious revivalists in the Muslim world in that they not only do not challenge the West...but are more than eager to ally India, both politically and economically, with the Western world."

Naipaul most probably believes that it is in this nascent Hinduism that India can find her centre. For modern Hinduism is capable of adjusting itself to the demands of the contemporary world. During his visits of 1988 and 1989, Naipaul has a personal experience of the Hindu society, successfully adapting itself to the requirements of the science, politics, and domestic life. He also finds Hinduism on the verge of reinterpreting Indian history. "On the basis" writes Lillian Feder, "of his own experience and his growing knowledge of India, he has provided reason to believe that, despite persistent inequalities, contradictions, and political venality, through 'self-awareness,' freedom and democracy can thrive. India is finding its center." Naipaul's Indian experiences ultimately persuades him to accept the dynamic nature of Hinduism. However, he is still far from the core of real
Hinduism which is remarkable for its spirituality. His materialistic vision does not allow him to see reality behind appearances.

Likewise, Naipaul’s visit to Islamic countries suffers from his mental inhibitions. He has a jaundiced vision which presents Muslims as mimics, parasites, fundamentalists and bigots, impervious to change, blind to their real history, and so on and so forth. Interestingly, Naipaul is different to some extent to the positive contributions made by Muslims in different walks of life. In spite of an indifferent attitude, he evinces keen interest in the idea of the Islamic state. Naipaul quotes an excerpt from the Tehran Times which explains this idea, “With reformation and adaptation to present needs in full conformity with the holy Koran and Sunnah (the old, right way), Iran and Pakistan with a clarity of purpose and sincere cooperation can establish the truth that Islam is a complete way of life.”

Furthermore, Naipaul goes on to reproduce the ideas of Iqbal who enunciates the concept of Islamic state. Iqbal believes that Islam is a collective religion which has a precise idea of state:

Iqbal’s argument was like this. Islam is not only an ethical ideal; it is also ‘a certain kind of polity.’ Religion for a Muslim is not a matter of private conscience or private practice, as Christianity can be for the man in Europe. There never was, Iqbal says, a specifically Christian polity; and in Europe after Luther the ‘universal ethics of Jesus’ was ‘displaced by national systems of ethics and polity.’

(Among the Believers 85)

Although Naipaul rejects Islamic fundamentalism, he is not critical of sufism or the spiritual Islam. In spite of his atheism, he does not hesitate to visit holy shrines whenever he finds an occasion. Besides, he gives lively descriptions
of these visits in *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples*. In *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey*, he goes to visit Shah Chiragh, a famous shrine near the town of Hyderabad. However, he feels much amused how the two types of religions are mixed by the Muslims. He wonders whether, “the religion of revelation and rules, the religion of asceticism and unconfined meditation didn’t diminish both” (*Among the Believers* 147).

However, Naipaul’s visit to the Christian states does not suffer from only from his mental inhibitions. He goes there with an open mind. It is during this visit, he discovers the true Christianity. Now he comes to understand Christianity as a way of life. With his encounters with religious persons, he realizes the efficacy of religious meetings, the power of the Holy Ghost, the Christian rituals, and festivals celebrated by different sects. During this travel, Naipaul discovers the value of grief in Christianity as well as Islam. Moreover, he visualizes how history and politics can be wedded to religion, and how nostalgia can produce a quasi-religious experience. In *A Turn in the South*, Naipaul develops not only his Christian views but also his views on religion as such.

The religious vision of Naipaul can be viewed from a chronological perceptive as well. But before embarking upon this venture, let us remember that Naipaul’s vision is not theistic with a personal God as its centre. It is rather an inclusive vision which accepts religion not only as a way of worship but also as a way of life. As such it is not confined to matters of religion, but extends its area to cover moral, social, economic, political fields of experience as well. It means that Naipaul’s religion is multi-dimensional. However, Naipaul arrives at this inclusive
visions in a slow process. His religious consciousness begins with his Brahminic upbringing, which with the passage of time becomes central to his mental make up. However, the Brahminic elements clashes with his inborn atheism which eventually compels him to question the relevance of rites and rituals. From the very outset, Naipaul has to undergo a double conflict of faith and scepticism, as well as of Hindu sensibility and Christian proclivity. Naipaul’s initial response to this inner conflict is reconciliatory.

This spirit of reconciliation is exemplified first of all by The Mystic Masseur (1957) in which Naipaul reconciles Hinduism and Christianity on the basis of the Gandhian philosophy of salvation through public service. The protagonist of the novel, Ganesh believes that the Hindu ideal of salvation can be achieved through the Christian ideal of public service. Then in The Suffrage of Elvira (1958), Naipaul undertakes to reconcile religion with politics or democracy, pleading that democratic institutions are likely to bring unity of races and religions. Taking a step further in A House for Mr. Biswas (1961), he rejects the old doctrines of preordination related to karma and dharma and pleads for the replacement of the values of sanatan dharma with the modern values of aryasamaj.

In An Area of Darkness (1964), in spite of his firm belief in Brahminic values, Naipaul assumes a bitter tone against Hinduism condemning it as a religion of darkness and utter ignorance. He goes on to declare that such a religion cannot be relevant to the demands of modern humanity. However, the Hinduism which he rejects is the old or medieval Hinduism which still influences Hindus. Naipaul does not reject, as he amply shows in The Mimic Men, (1967), the ancient
Hinduism of Aryans. While writing the stories, included in *A Flag on the Island* (1967), Naipaul returns to his old theme of the conflict between Hinduism and Christianity. For instance in “My Aunt Gold Teeth,” he articulates the incongruous blending of the spiritual forces of two religions. In another story, “A Christmas Story,” he exemplifies the acceptance of Christianity as a sure way to progress and social prestige. Ten years after writing these stories, Naipaul returns to attack the old Hinduism of medieval period, in his opinion, the root of all evils prevalent in Hindu society. He condemns Hinduism and its modern version Gandhism for its timidity and inadequacy to confront the modern experience. Naipaul, overlooking the contributions made by Muslims to the Indian society, criticizes Islam for its plurality and suppression of Hindus.

While visiting the Islamic countries, Naipaul continues to criticize Islam not only for its mimicry, parasitism, and fundamentalism but also for their suppression of histories and Islamization of the state. He examines their claim of Islam as a perfect way of life. It is not sure whether Naipaul concedes their claim but it is sure that he regards Christianity as a perfect way of life. As he shows in his next book *A Turn in the South* (1989), Christianity as a perfect way of life, produces a perfect fusion of his religion, history, and politics a fusion which Naipaul so earnestly desires.

After his next visit to India, Naipaul becomes quite convinced that the nascent Hindu vision is quite capable of developing a new way of dealing with its history. In his *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990), he discovers that the revived Hinduism with its Brahminical values has the vitality and ability to come to terms
with modernity. Nevertheless, he remains suspicious of the power of Islam to tackle modern problems of politics, history, and economics.

In nutshell, Naipaul’s religious vision embodies the totality of human experience which includes everything and excludes nothing. But in spite of its vast scope, it focuses only on the surfaces without paying heed to the ecstasies of religious fervour which are central to all religious traditions. Nevertheless, his vision is significant, since it incorporates the idea of a composite religion relevant to the pluralistic societies like India.
Chapter 7 – Endnotes


