Chapter VI

Summing up and Conclusion

Postcolonialism questions the very faith in Western rationality and a postcolonial text emerges out of the grit and specificity of indigenous culture or history that may not be acceptable and comprehensible to foreign travellers. Naipaul seems to have failed in understanding the implications of the understandable cultural ethos and rich traditions of the Indian social life. It might be his expatriate sensibilities that make him dissociated with the tradition of his forefathers bound by custom and tradition. He forgets the truth that the Indian social life is inextricably attached to their customs, traditions and rich heritage that have enabled this ancient civilization to tide over the perils of cultural domination by centuries of foreign rule. Boehmer remarks that: “as a writer enamoured of British culture, the scornful of formerly colonized societies, Naipaul is central to any discussion of assimilation and duality of postcolonial identity” (106).

Naipaul makes an attempt to present himself as a self-made persona of the globally rootless, ideologically aloof, objective interpreter of the postcolonial condition. But his non-fictional works can be situated within the nineteenth century English tradition of travel writing. A postcolonial
reading of his travel writings reveals a narrow, myopic vision of the writer, selectively projected from an imperial vantage point and aggressively articulated in supremacist terms that describe the Third World societies in a bundle of stereotype label such as ‘simple’, ‘static’, ‘primitive’, ‘parasitic’ and ‘barbaric’. Naipaul’s obsessional fascination with Conradian atavism and his concept of mimic dependency are also explored. His negative responses to India and other Third World nations, and his lack of sympathy and concern for the people are subjected to scrutiny in the travelogues taken for the present study. It is seen that his travel writings register significant tonal and conceptual shift. His discourse is found to be biased, reductive, deterministic and pessimistic.

As his travelogues reveal, Naipaul has an expressed loathing for the cultures and political aspirations of many third world societies, be they Indian, Caribbean, or African. To the delight of neo-colonial politicians and cultural ambassadors, he has reserved his inimitable brand of satire for Islam. His two texts on Islam which are taken for study in this work testify to that. They offer an account of his travel in these non-Arab nations and his judgement on Islam that it offers no practical solution to the political issues it raises. His assertions claim an authority and receive an
exceptionally wide circulation in Western media. To him, Islam exists as a kind of standing religio – cultural challenge. It is made to cover everything disapproved from the standpoint of Western rationality. He explores Islamic fundamentalism and, other issues of global import, through non-fiction reportage and, makes categorical presumptions about a complex culture like Islam’s. He extrapolates whatever contradictions he gleefully spots in the Muslim individuals he interviews in these countries, toward totalizing assumptions about the whole societies to which those individuals belong. Islamic fundamentalism is a mirror image of Western colonialism and neocolonialism, provoked by the latter. So his critique of the non-Western societies including the Muslim worlds seems to have ministered to a metropolitan market for reactionary cultural commentary. The argument in the thesis is that Naipaul takes a strategy to endorse the European views of the Islamic world that makes him identify with the Orientalists. The second text is more controversial as it regards Islam as an alien religion imposed on other peoples. For Naipaul, Islam has been, and continues to be, a worse colonizer than the West.

Naipaul adopts the perception of an Orientalist in the presentation of the marginalized world, and people. He makes a misrepresentation of the
Orient in all his non-fictional writings. To him, the land of his ancestry and the place of his birth are culturally inferior and irrational. They are considered to be static, and incapable of defining themselves. He always keeps a safe distance from these land and people. Boehmer elaborates this strategy of Naipaul as follows:

“From the time he arrived in Britain all his effort was to distance himself from the West Indies. His work, however is rarely set in Britain. Most of his novels and travel writings are devoted to minute dissections of the cultural paralysis (recalling Conrad) of once colonized nations. His willed alienation, though often singularly hostile, bears the symptoms of a first generation colonial seeking distance from origins and the freedom of self-expression”. (168)

J. M. Coetzee substantiates his view that Naipaul’s description of Africa has a strongly journalistic flavour and it belongs to a mode of writing “Naipaul has perfected over the years, in which historical reportage, and social analysis flow into and out of autobiographically coloured fiction, and travel memoir: a mixed mode, that may turn out to be Naipaul’s principal legacy to English letters” (10). Within the forty years
between the publication of *In a Free State* (1971) and *The Masque of Africa* (2010), Naipaul’s vision of Africa remains remarkably constant and rigid. The text discussed in this study purveys the myth of Africa as still the Dark Continent. His descriptions are obviously influenced by the books of literary forerunners, especially Conrad and Henry M. Stanley. The travel writers are seldom free from preconceived notions and images of the places they represent and their views have been influenced by earlier travel accounts. Like Conrad, Naipaul represents Africa as a place of darkness and he seems to believe that it will remain dark for an unforeseeable future.

Writers like George Lamming and Ngugi argued that the pen might do the work of the gun. Fanon called for the entire structure of colonial society to be changed from the bottom up and the indigenous be forcibly substituted for the alien, in literature as in life. But Naipaul, a writer from the once colonized Caribbean Island, seems to have played his role in widening the rifts between the world’s ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ with his controversial pronouncements like ‘India, an area of darkness’, ‘Africa has no future’ and ‘Trinidad is unimportant, uncreative and cynical’. He places himself outside these struggling worlds and dissects them fastidiously to arrive at deadly diagnoses. As Spivak said, there is no neutrally created knowledge, and Naipaul cannot be considered neutral in his writings that
represent the people from the ‘other’ world quite dispassionately and with
definite political agenda. Authors and intellectuals like Rushdie, Said and
Amitav Ghosh have expressed their anxiety over the ideological function
that an extremely brilliant author like Naipaul is performing in his
excursions. Many have the opinion that he deserves the Nobel Prize for his
eyearly novels alone, and not for these so-called excursions.

There was a time when the Third World intellectuals and researchers
found the most powerful tools and images of postcolonial representations
and appropriation in Naipaul. But his depiction of India, the Caribbean,
Africa, and the Islamic World frustrated them. Some of them even doubted
whether the Nobel committee’s decision to award him the prize was a
reconciliatory tribute for legitimizing the Western representation of the
Oriental societies and religion as ‘half – made’ and barbaric. The Nobel
committee has rightly taken him as a ‘British novelist and writer’. Horace
Engdahl, the permanent Secretary of The Swedish Academy, while
delivering the Nobel Presentation Speech in 2001, addressed Naipaul as a
writer who ‘praised the West for having recognized the right to individual
endeavour’. According to Engdahl: “the core of his devotion to European
civilization is that it was the only one of the alternative cultures that made it
possible for him to become a writer”. (web) But at the same time Naipaul faces a chorus of dissent from writers and critics who lie outside the dominant, international centers of power. These writers see him as at best a ‘double – agent’ for the colonizer, seeing history through English eyes. To quote a few lines from the poem “At Last” on Naipaul by Walcott:

You spit on your people,
Your people applauded,
Your former oppressors laurel you
The thorns biting your forehead
Are contempt
Disguised as concern

Journeys are often undertaken in search of a new life and identity through which the traveller broadens his understanding of the world. But Naipaul’s mode of travel is limited by various factors, including his focus on a special group of persons through which he sees the country, rather than through direct contact with the native population. In all the travel texts taken for the study, he seems to be repelled by the physical aspects of his journey’s dirt and squalor, bad smell, exploitation by the guides, unreliable
services and he confines himself to luxurious foreign restaurants and hotels. The result is that, his view of the places visited in this way will invariably be a restricted one. Mary Louise Pratt points out that: “in contemporary travel accounts the monarch-of-all-I-survey scene gets repeated, only from the balconies of hotels in big third world cities” (216). Sitting in these balconies, Naipaul views the Third World as representing chaos, instability, irrationality and violence while Europe is considered to be the source of order, progress and stability.