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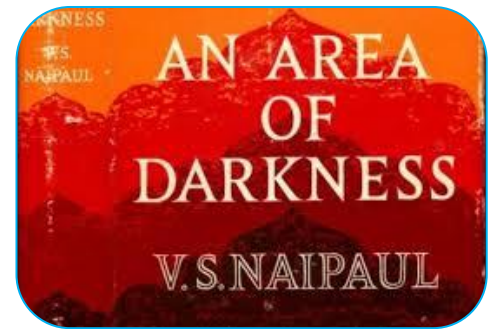
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF V.S. NAIPAUL'S : "AN AREAS OF DARKNESS"

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ABSTRACT:

V.S. Naipaul's "An Area of Darkness" is a seminal work that offers a critical examination of India through the lens of the author's personal experiences and perceptions. Published in 1964, the book presents Naipaul's observations and reflections during his first visit to India, exploring themes of identity, colonial legacy, disillusionment, and societal critique. Naipaul's narrative style is highly subjective, infusing the text with his own emotions and biases. Despite generating controversy upon its publication, the book remains influential in the fields of travel literature and post-colonial studies, sparking debates about cultural authenticity and the legacy of colonialism. This abstract provides a concise overview of the key themes and impact of "An Area of Darkness."



KEYWORDS: *V.S. Naipaul's, Darkness, colonial legacy, disillusionment, and societal critique.*

INTRODUCTION:

"An Area of Darkness" is a highly introspective and controversial work by V.S. Naipaul, offering a critical examination of India through the lens of its author's personal experiences and perceptions. Published in 1964, the book presents Naipaul's observations and reflections during his first visit to India, the land of his ancestors. V.S. Naipaul's "An Area of Darkness" stands as a seminal work in the realm of travel literature and post-colonial studies, offering a penetrating exploration of India's social, cultural, and psychological landscape. Published in 1964, the book documents Naipaul's first visit to India, the land of his ancestors, and presents his observations, reflections, and critiques of the country he encounters. Through a highly subjective narrative lens, Naipaul delves into the complexities of post-colonial identity, grappling with questions of belonging, disillusionment, and cultural alienation.

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. But the experience of India does not end with the crossing over of its geo-political boundaries. In far off Madrid, with India twenty-four hours behind him, Naipaul reflects: " It was a journey that ought not to have been made; it had broken my life in two" (AD 265)". This paper focuses on the latter half of the statement and sees in it an explanation for the first half. It attempts to read An Area of Darkness as the first phase of a diasporic writer's engagement with the land of his origin; a phase that must essentially

begin with an 'imagined' idea of the land. Although this paper discusses the body of criticism that followed the publication of *An Area of Darkness*, specially in India, the stress is not on the truth/bias of Naipaul's vision. The paper presents an exposition of the first phase in a diasporic writer's imagination and an assimilation and explanation of the process of his coming to terms with his diasporic status.

DISCUSSIONS:

Discussions surrounding V.S. Naipaul's "An Area of Darkness" are multifaceted, reflecting the book's complex themes and the diverse reactions it has elicited from readers, scholars, and critics. Some key points of discussion include:

Representation and Authenticity: One of the central debates surrounding the book revolves around questions of representation and authenticity. Critics have questioned Naipaul's portrayal of India, arguing that his perspective is tainted by personal biases and cultural alienation. Others defend Naipaul's right to offer a subjective account of his experiences and argue that his outsider status provides valuable insights into the complexities of Indian society.

Post-Colonial Identity: "An Area of Darkness" raises important questions about post-colonial identity and the lingering effects of colonialism on individual and collective psyches. Naipaul's exploration of India's struggle to define itself in the wake of British rule invites discussions about the complexities of cultural hybridity, national identity, and the legacy of colonial trauma.

Literary Style and Narrative Voice: Naipaul's distinctive literary style and narrative voice are subjects of discussion among scholars and readers. Some praise his vivid prose and introspective storytelling, while others critique his perceived arrogance and lack of empathy. Discussions about Naipaul's narrative technique often intersect with debates about the ethics of representation in travel literature and the role of the author in shaping readers' perceptions.

Impact and Influence: The enduring impact of "An Area of Darkness" on literature, academia, and public discourse is a topic of ongoing interest. Scholars continue to explore the book's influence on subsequent writers and its role in shaping perceptions of India in the Western imagination. Additionally, discussions about Naipaul's broader literary legacy, including his Nobel Prize-winning body of work, intersect with debates about his portrayal of India in "An Area of Darkness."

Ethics of Critique: Naipaul's uncompromising critique of Indian society raises ethical questions about the responsibility of writers to their subjects. Some argue that Naipaul's critical perspective serves as a necessary catalyst for social change, while others contend that his portrayal of India perpetuates negative stereotypes and reinforces colonial power dynamics.

An Area of Darkness is divided into three parts and eleven sub-parts. It also has a prologue-'Traveller's Prelude: A Little Paperwork' and an epilogue-'Flight.' The sub-parts are closely linked patterns of his experiences and their examinations. 'A Resting Place for the Imagination' provides the background for Naipaul's understanding of India. 'Degree,' 'The Romancers' and 'The Colonial' are three major aspects of India that he encounters. 'Degree' for Naipaul stands as an Indian's understanding of himself. String-cots and wooden blocks had lain unused in his Trinidad home for the lack of people of that "caste skill" (AD 29). But that was not so in India. People had accepted work outside the realm of their and in doing so, they had not forgotten their "caste-skill" "degree."

"The Colonial" is a chapter which takes up another view of post-independence India. It records the split in the eastern and the western mindset through the example of beggary in India. Naipaul notes that a foreigner cannot understand "the function of the beggar in India" which makes the act of charity an "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.

'Romancers' is about the dilution of the real to create the imaginary. Mrs. Mahindra with her "craze for foreign" and Mrs. M. Mehta, Secretary of Women's League, attempt to escape from their traditional roles. There is new money and the freedom that it brings. Naipaul is sympathetic towards the plight of Mrs. Mahindra but he is critical of her response to her situation which, to use a favourite Naipaulian word is only a "mimicry," a misplaced sense of romance.

The first part is the body from which Naipaul's responses in the second part and the third part of the book are derived. It marks the first phase in Naipaul's search for a response to India. The result of this search was the discovery of his being an outsider to the realm of responses that could only be either English or Indian.

The second part is an exploration. Naipaul offered himself to the experience of India. This part is filled with conversations through which Naipaul attempts to carve out a picture of India.

The third part begins with 'Fantasy and Ruins.' It 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 the England that 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. (187)"

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).

Throughout the chapter 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. It is the use of selective amnesia to preserve an idea of unity that no longer exists. It is India's defence mechanism:

"It is well that Indians are unable to look at their country directly, for the distress they would see would drive them mad...which Indian would be able to read the history of his country for the last thousand years without anger and pain? It is better to retreat into fantasy and fatalism.... (210)"

In 'The Garland on my Pillow' Naipaul records his meetings with various people. The picture that emerges is that of an India in conflict. It is a conflict that arises out of ignorance. An Inspector of Forms and Stationery in the Northern Railway is non-existent for a Railway officer busy with his "presidential tours" (220). The cigarette smoking Sikh has a violent hatred for Dravidians.

The 'Emergency' presents Indian responses 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 the routine of their dinners and discussions, The lectures at the Theosophical Society were monotonous.

The 'Village of the Dubes,' is the last chapter in the book. 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.

An Area of Darkness has been a classical case of misinterpretation in the West as well as in India. Immediately after its publication, the then Indian government imposed a ban on it. In the West it was hailed as a scathing but truthful vision. The critics on both sides failed to read the book for what it was. It was neither "A masterpiece of travel-writing...wise, original" as Paul Theroux declares on the cover of its Penguin edition nor was it "darkness...people, packed with a kind of life which is death, a negation, distortion and degradation from which he is glad finally to escape." An Area of Darkness is to be read as a meeting ground for the homeland and the Diaspora, and therefore, a brief assessment needs to be made of the criticism and applause that the book evoked. In India the criticism was vitriolic. C.D. Narasimhaiah's essay 'Somewhere something has snapped' is a systematic attack on the book. At

the beginning of the essay Narasimhaiah 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 of action...our neglect of our great art...unless...approved by European scholars. our endless mimicry....?"¹ "

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.² 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. Gail Minault sees Naipaul as a novelist "who has also developed the travel account into a finely honed instrument of personal expression. His attitude sceptical, his vision of human nature sardonic, he cultivates detachment. He is the perpetual, the professional outsider."³ Sara Suleri found *An Area of Darkness* to be a "fascinating record of delusion."

For Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness* was 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 unravelled. 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.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, V.S. Naipaul's "An Area of Darkness" offers a penetrating exploration of India's post-colonial condition, blending personal narrative with critical analysis to present a nuanced portrait of the country. Naipaul's unflinching critique of Indian society, coupled with his reflections on identity and disillusionment, challenges romanticized notions of India while inviting readers to engage with the complexities of its social, cultural, and historical landscape. Despite controversy, the book endures as a significant contribution to literature and post-colonial studies, provoking ongoing discussions about representation, cultural encounter, and the enduring legacies of colonialism. "An Area of Darkness" remains a powerful testament to the transformative potential of literature in illuminating the complexities of human experience and societal change.

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