

V.S. Naipaul
Agony and Ecstasy of a Literary Giant

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Abstract

The nobel laureate V.S. Naipaul remains one of the most widely read and admired literary figures of the contemporary world. He has never been afraid to discuss the pains to his own position as we in 'Reading and Writing' (2000) or complacent about the responsibilities of his craft. Most of the modern literary artists assert that it is writer's duty to expose the ugliness of life as well the complexities of the system. V.S. Naipaul accepts this theory and yet remains the supporter of democratic socialism, secularism, a written constitution, democratic units, fundamental rights and free press. After getting higher education in Oxford he travels to various parts of the world so as to find his 'centre' and roots. Quite often he feels that he too is leading half a life and ethical values as discussed by him in his works, As a democrat he hates the dictator who exploits the citizens of the country. As a humanist he does not relish the persons who create gap between man and man on the basis of caste, colour and creed.

Whenever he studied the authors of the past, he felt elevated and delighted. As mentioned in Finding the Centre he had an inner urge to write about the people of different ages and areas.

His grandfather and father used to discuss a lot about Indian traditions and festivals. Naturally he developed interest in the life of India. When he was studying in Oxford, his sister inspired him to read Pt. Nehru's autobiography. Wherever he went he failed to tolerate anarchy and lawlessness. He asks - Why do the authorities neglect the demands of the people?

He liked Communist Lebrun and not Marxism. However, he supported the concept of liberty for the country. Like Tagore, he hoped that the people of Trinidad would lead a life of dignity soon. Yet he felt tense as the people had not been awakened by the leaders. The other writers painted various pictures of Indian people and even exposed the poverty of India in their works. But V.S. Naipaul finds anarchy and chaos everywhere. His picture of India appears gloomy as if there is no hope of improvement here. Most of the Indians are closely associated with their religion. Quite often they add their religion with the names. Most of the Muslims offer prayers five times a day and enjoy fasting during Ramzan . Just like R.K. Narayan, V.S. Naipaul accepts that India goes on inspite of poverty, unemployment, superstitions, orthodox people, clay houses, illiteracy, prostitutions, deserted and broken roads. The gaps between the Haves and Have-Nots have widened .This article brings out the agony and pain of V.S. Naipaul. He strongly feels that every Indian is a complex person or rather an island in himself. He appreciates the bravery of Sikhs as they could fight for their land for a long time. The journey to Amritsar reminds him of the Jallianwalla Bagh. However, most of the schemes meant for social welfare exist on paper only. He is agonized to see that women are mere puppets in the hands of men as they don't learn new chapters on modern civilization – every woman is a goddess behind the veil. Women aspire to offer prayers in the mosque but alas, they are not allowed to do so. The miseries of uneducated and tribal women had increased like anything. The literary works of Naipaul fully reflect the chaos he absorbs through his travels.

Keywords: Agony, Pain

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul is Trinidadian of Indian descent and has been to India many times during the 20th century. He is better known as V.S. Naipaul, a British novelist of Hindu heritage and Indo-Trinidadian ethnicity. At one point during the book “India: A million Mutinies Now”, a character says “you have to live in India a long time before you can write about it. So many things are different here”. V.S. Naipaul remains one of the most widely read and admired literary figures of the contemporary world. He has never been afraid to discuss the pains to his own position as we in ‘Reading and Writing’ (2000) or complacent about the responsibilities of his craft.

Most of the modern literary artists assert that it is writer’s duty to expose the ugliness of life as well the complexities of the system. V.S. Naipaul accepts this theory and yet remains the supporter of democratic socialism, secularism, a written constitution, democratic units, fundamental rights and free press. After getting higher education in Oxford he travels to various parts of the world so as to find his ‘centre’ and roots. Quite often he feels that he too is leading half a life and ethical values as discussed by him in his works, As a democrat he hates the dictator who exploits the citizens of the country. As a humanist he does not relish the persons who create gap between man and man on the basis of caste, colour and creed. As a supporter of public joy he remarks:-

In the square, romantic with its lights and shadows,
they talked of history and the new constitution and
rights; but what had been generated was more like
religion.....

Whenever he studied the authors of the past, he felt elevated and delighted. As mentioned in Finding the Centre he had an inner urge to write about the people of different ages and areas. Hence he started travelling in Asian and African countries. Like Oliver Goldsmith and George Orwell, each journey to a new country inspired him to think about his adventures. Often he felt that he would be a matured writer after writing six books. Yet he never lived in the world of imagination as he knew that ‘Fancy can’t cheat so well’. As a realist he needed the support of his experiences :

A story shaped in my mind, over some years. But it never clothed itself in detail, in the ‘business’ necessary to a narrative, even though this business fades as the narrative moves on.....

His grandfather and father used to discuss a lot about Indian traditions and festivals. Naturally he developed interest in the life of India. When he was studying in Oxford, his sister inspired him to study Pt. Nehru’s autobiography. Wherever he goes he fails to tolerate anarchy and lawlessness. He asks - Why do the authorities neglect the demands of the people?

.....in Port of Spain where homeless people lived. Most of these people were Indians. Many of them would have been indentured immigrants from India who had served out their indentures on the sugar estates and then for one reason or another — perhaps they had become drinkers; perhaps they hadn’t been given their promised passage back to India; perhaps they had quarreled with their families — had found themselves with nowhere to live.....

Since childhood he observed the life of Trinidad as it gave him immense pleasure. Forster Morris too had written on Trinidad. He liked Communist Lebrun and not Marxism. However, he supported the concept of liberty for the country. Like Tagore, he hoped that the people of Trinidad would lead a life of dignity soon. Yet he felt tense as the people had not been awakened by the leaders. People often fail to support a rebel and don’t admire the language of the call for’ revolution, he remarks:

Thinking of the ironies in Lebrun’s life, that at the end he should have been like the people he had written about in his first book, and feeling almost superstitiously that there was a circularity in human lives.....

Rudyard Kipling, E.M. Forster, Pt. Nehru, R.N. Tagore, Gandhi, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Shashi Tharoor etc. painted various pictures of Indian people and even exposed the poverty of India in their works. But V.S. Naipaul finds anarchy and chaos everywhere. His picture of India appears gloomy as if there is no hope of improvement here. There is no denying the fact that Indian political authorities prepared various projects for economic progress of the country. The Planning Commission was formed to frame policies for the same purpose. The leaders of the opposition parties were given right of expression and form their political units. Pt. Nehru was an advocate of the freedom of press and many newspapers were published without the interference of government. Many schools were established in the rural areas. The University Grants Commission was established to frame rules and regulations for the advancement of learning in all the states. Yet V.S. Naipaul remains agitated and feels hurt. Namrata Rathore Mohanta remarks:

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.....

Most of the Indians are closely associated with their religion. Quite often they add their religion with the names. They visit temples regularly and they have full faith in Brahma, Vishnu, Shiv. Lord Rama, Lord Krishna and other gods. But V .S. Naipaul fails to admire this faith of the Indian people. Most of the Muslims offer prayers five times a day and enjoy fasting during Ramzan. But he does not enjoy visiting temples and sarcastically remarks:

But the shrines, they would show me the shrines. They would show me how well they had been kept; they would show my grandfather's name carved on the shrines.....

Actually, he had no respect for Indian gods and goddesses and fails to follow the dictates of The Ramayana and The Mahabharata When he visits Jammu and Kashmir, he feels no need to visit the cave to see the Shivlingam, so popular among the Hindus! Max Muller

asked his British students to visit Indian villages if they want to see real India. Then the learned German scholar admires Indian culture, Indian history, Indian civilization, Indian music etc. as he regarded India, the most cultured nation of the world. But V.S. Naipaul's dreams are shattered when he reaches here. He even ridiculed Gandhian approach to keep India clean and the manual labour.

Pt. Nehru established large-scale industries no doubt but didn't dare to ignore the cottage industries as suggested by Gandhi. The Panchyat Raj system was accepted by Pt. Nehru and it still continues in the whole country. But V.S. Naipaul is not prepared to accept Gandhian economy and Gandhi's concept of rural regeneration: When he reached India, his bottles of wine were not given to him as permit was required to obtain them. He had to contact many clerks for the same and he found it quite troublesome. In the offices he found Indian files lying unsystematically bound in dirty red cloth. The steno was not ready to type one letter only for this which he was not ready to type. The steno asserted that it was not his duty to do so. Such incidents do happen in Indian offices but they are not the final things to be taken for granted. Actually rules and methods of administration are the same that Indian government adopted from the Britishers. The Britishers adopted the policy of divide and rule. V.S. Naipaul aptly says that the junior clerks are jealous of their seniors as the Britishers are paid well. But the senior clerks and section officers are jealous of I.A.S. officers as they are paid well and enjoy a luxurious life. Quite a few I.A.S. and I.P.S. officers render useful service to the citizens and help them in days of misery and natural calamities.

Just like R.K. Narayan, V.S. Naipaul accepts that India goes on inspite of poverty, unemployment, superstitions, orthodox people, clay houses, illiteracy, prostitutions, deserted and broken roads. The gaps between the Haves and Have-Nots have widened. A lot of goods are still imported in India. The election scenes in Bihar, U.P. and Rajasthan are often terrible as the muscle power is very important to win the votes. Most of political leaders are worried about their image in the party and forget the national interest.

To V.S. Naipaul, every Indian is a complex person or rather an island in himself. He appreciates the bravery of Sikhs as they could fight for their land for a long time. The journey to Amritsar reminds him of the Jallianwalla Bagh. However, most of the schemes meant for social welfare exist on paper only. The government established family planning department and the figures produced before the officers are false. Tree plantation scheme almost failed as the concerned authorities take it non-seriously. Committees are formed for the eradication of smallpox and yet no real service is rendered by the members of the committee.

In A Passage To India, E.M. Forster describes the Moharrum that creates tension between the Hindus and the Muslims. But V.S. Naipaul fails to admire the lamentation of Shia Community who lament for nearly ten days regularly in the memory of Mohammad Hussain. They are even prepared to die in his memory. But V.S. Naipaul calls it religious vanity. The book An Area of Darkness created a lot of tension in India and many scholars attacked it in many seminars. The famous poet Nissim Ezekiel felt highly disgusted with the impressions of V.S. Naipaul. After all George Orwell also came to India and admired the ways of life of Indians. E.M. Forester wanted to bridge the gulf between Indians and Britishers. The impressions of Aldous Huxley are admired by a lot of scholars. Many scholars come to India from Tibet, Thailand, Malaya, Indonesia, Japan, Germany etc. and pay tributes to the statues of Lord Buddha. But V.S. Naipaul remains tense for the whole year and does not depart with joy. K. Narayan Kutty does not accept Naipaul's picture of India and reacts badly against the same:

One of the few writers that I have read who do not create myths about India is V.S. Naipaul.....

Addison answers many questions regarding life in the brief essay The Vision of Mirza – What is the relation between soul and matter? Why are certain factors mysterious to human beings? Where does soul go after death? How long is the journey of life? What do the vultures stand for? What is the interpretation of the bridge and holes in it? But V.S. Naipaul does not answer such questions in Among The Believers. He does not create any Dr. Aziz, the victim of the whim of Adela Quested in A Passage To India. In

Tehran, Qom and other cities he finds the atmosphere of fear and terror. The shops have no charm for him. Behzad does not dare to discuss Islamic ethics with his guest. Only schemes of public welfare were declared and no hospitals, colleges and universities were established. No effort was made to improve the transport system. Nobody was prepared to grant equal rights to women. Due to terror of public execution, nobody dared to flirt with women. The brothels were banned and the prostitutes and their supporters were killed. Nobody was prepared to respect the Americans as they had cheated Iran so far. The people and merchants of Iran could not grow food grains and yet didn't bother for rice and vegetables as oil money will buy everything for them. Most of the nations established industries in their own land and developed transport system. They manufactured cars, buses and trucks for transport and hence needed oil. The Khomeini knew that oil is the basis of world economy and hence America, England and other nations will have to bow down before them if the former wanted to survive. The racial relations became complicated as V.S. Naipaul remarks:

He hadn't been instructed in the faith by his parents; he hadn't been sent to the mosque. Islam was a complicated religion. It wasn't philosophical or speculative. It was a revealed religion, a Prophet and complete set of rules. To believe, it was necessary to know a lot about the Arabian origins of the religion, and to take this knowledge to heart.....

Even Behzad didn't have faith in the Islamic culture. V.S. Naipaul was shocked to see that drivers of buses didn't care for traffic rules. A lot of people were crushed under the buses in a year. He failed to see anything new in this Islamic nation and yet life continued. Posters of Khomeini were pasted on the walls and propaganda was made to preserve Islam at every cost. People were warned to be alert against the supporters of Shah. Most of the Muslims accepted that their soul would be called for on the Day of Judgment for reward or for punishment. To them, there is nothing beyond The Quran.

Naturally the people were afraid of hell and aspired for heaven. Women are mere puppets in the hands of men as they don't learn new chapters on modern civilization – every woman is a goddess behind the veil. Here V.S. Naipaul refers to the novel Foreigner published in 1978. The heroine Feri is basically from Iran and has settled in U.S.A. After a few years she desires to see her parents and visits Iran. In the first week she is glad as she sees cars and other modern machines in her native land. However, her heart breaks as there is no American grace in Iran. The women lead a pitiable life and the Muslim priests are ignorant of modern education. There is no limit to the problems of Shia heroes too. As Feri wants to return to U.S.A., she needs the permission of her husband. She feels broken as her parents have separated from each other. Now she recollects her past when she felt delighted in the free atmosphere of U.S.A. Ultimately she gets liberty through renunciation.

In a bitter mood, V.S. Naipaul uses the term 'death pact' as there is no hope for healthy survival in Iran after the revolution. Most of the educated people felt choked to death as there was no remedy. If they could manage the resources, they sent their children to U.S.A. and Great Britain for higher education. After all it was the climax of rigidity and orthodoxy. A few doctors of Iran migrated to other countries. The Bahai movement broke out for freedom of expression. But in vain! Every political liberty was suppressed and people could not form political groups and parties. If they dared, they were tortured and finally killed. The signs of the revolution were seen by the artist as he says :

The pavements were broken. Many shop signs were broken or had lost some of their raised letters.

V.S. Naipaul has lived in London for a long time and knows the fundamentals of The Bible too. But here things were different. He had been to India too and had met many Muslims in Kashmir. Such strictness was beyond his tolerance and he fails to admire the achievements of the Iranian revolution. As an observer and traveler, he feels confused if any progress is being made in Iran. How long will it continue? How long will the education be kept away from the masses? Is Quran the final word for all the Iranians?

How long will they hate the Communists? Will people be able to understand the meaning of life? Will the Revolutionary Guards become more powerful in future? Will people like Behzad remain confused? Are cars and air-conditioners and coolers enough in the name of new civilization? He was haunted by all such disgusted questions.

V.S. Naipaul's visit to Pakistan was rather without much of enthusiasm as he had studied the history of the partition of India (1947). He knew that the Hindus of Pakistan left their home for a new country and remained uncertain of future. Similarly most of the Indian Muslims had high hopes of a new life in Pakistan. They were unaware of the violent people who were killing others in the name of racial prejudices. There was terrible bloodshed on the borders and a lot of looting and robbing continued for a long time. Many Indian Muslim leaders reached Pakistan with high hopes of new supporters there. But alas! They were without any roots in the newly formed country and local people had their own political leaders. Indian Muslims were called refugees and Mujahirs and not respected at all. Most of them had no money and hence failed to contest elections. Moreover, political powers were captured by the tricky local people and there was total chaos in the Islamic nation of Sir Jinnah and Liyakat Ali.

People can't raise their voice against the military dictators of Pakistan. Journalists were tortured for their portrayals of truth. Even Mr. Bhutto was badly tortured in the prison and finally hanged. His daughter Benazir Bhutto had been killed (Jan 2008) by unknown killers for political purpose. There is lawlessness in the country. V.S. Naipaul observes the economic growth of the country and feels sad. Human beings are not ready to forget their old animosities and are not prepared to adopt secularism as a national policy. Women aspire to offer prayers in the mosque but unfortunately, they are not allowed to do so. The miseries of uneducated and tribal women have increased like anything. For them Islam is God and God is Islam and there is nothing beyond that. V.S. Naipaul visits Lahore which is called the 'city of sin and splendour'. V.S. Naipaul refers to the poems of Allama Iqbal for creating hatred in the hearts of people. Iqbal wants to establish a separate country for Muslims. Fundamentalism is accepted as the greatest

danger to Pakistan. Unfortunately politics has been united here with religion purposely and the ignorant people are its victims.

This Trinidadian writer of Indian descent was known for his pessimistic novels set in developing countries. For these revelations of what the Swedish Academy called “suppressed histories”, Naipaul won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2001

and knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 1989. Naipaul received amongst many other prizes, the Booker Prize for Fictions in 1971 for in a ‘Free State’. He won the 1993 David Cohen Award for a Lifetime’s achievement as a Living British writer. Sir V.S Naipaul was born on August 17,1932, Trinidad---died on August 11,2018 in London, England. He was 85.

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