

V.S. NAIPAUL: AN AREA OF DARKNESS: SHIVA HAS CEASED TO DANCE

Adina PAICU
Assistant Lecturer
University “Constantin Brancusi”, Tg-Jiu Romania,
paicu.adina@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

IN THE LAST THIRTY YEARS OR SO, THEORETICAL WRITING ON AUTOBIOGRAPHY HAS BLOSSOMED, AUTOBIOGRAPHIES WRITTEN FROM A SPECIFICALLY FEMALE PERSPECTIVE OR FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MEMBERS OF ETHNIC MINORITIES HAVE PROLIFERATED, AND THE GENRE HAS BEEN A FERTILE GROUND FOR EXPERIMENTAL WRITING. BY CAPTURING AND ADDRESSING CONTEMPORARY CONCERNS – SUCH AS (1) THE STATUS OF THE SUBJECT; (2) THE RELATIONS AND REPRESENTATIONS OF ETHNICITY AND GENDER, AND (3) THE INDIVIDUAL'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PAST, AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING CAN REFLECT SOME OF THE MAIN PREOCCUPATIONS OF POSTMODERNISM, WHICH HAS OFTEN BEEN DEFINED IN TERMS OF QUESTIONS ABOUT OUR KNOWLEDGE OF THE PAST AND THE DIFFICULTY OF ARTICULATING OUR RELATIONSHIP TO IT. SUCH ISSUES ABOUND IN RECENT LIFE-WRITING. WITH TRAVEL WRITING WE SITUATE OURSELVES IN THE MUCH LARGER FIELD OF LIFE-WRITING, WITH ITS NUMEROUS AVENUES FOR EXPLORATION. THE ETHNO-HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE AND THE NARRATIVE PROBLEMATICS CONFER TRAVEL WRITING A PRIVILEGED STATUS, MUCH ENHANCED DURING RECENT DECADES, AND THE REPUTATION OF A HITHERTO NEGLECTED GENRE ROSE CONSIDERABLY. BOOKSHOPS ABOUND IN TRAVEL GUIDES, TRAVEL BOOKS – DUTIFULLY ACCOMPANIED BY CONVERSATION BOOKS IN AS MANY FOREIGN LANGUAGES – AND THE MORE HISTORY-CONSCIOUS CUSTOMERS WOULD LOOK FOR THE ANCIENT GREEK AND ROMAN TRAVELOGUES WITH AN OBVIOUS RISE IN THE REPUTATION OF TRAVEL WRITING TOWARDS THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY. PAUL THEROUX, BRUCE CHARWIN, RYSZARD KAPUCINSKI AND ROBYN DAVIDSON ARE WIDELY ACCLAIMED AUTHORS, TO WHOM NAIPAUL SHOULD BE DUTIFULLY ADDED. ASSESSING HIS OWN WRITING, NAIPAUL STRESSES THE SPECIFICITY OF HIS KIND OF 'TRAVEL WRITING' IN WHICH DOES MORE THAN DESCRIBE THE ROUTS HE FOLLOWS IN HIS TRAVELS.

KEY WORDS: VS NAIPAUL, AN AREA OF DARKNESS, COLONIAL MIMICRY, RELIGION AND CASTE, VS NAIPAUL'S IDENTITY

Introduction:

It is almost impossible to approach Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness* – his first extensive voyage to the heart of India – without drawing a parallel with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The first striking similitude is that both writers represent the margin, or the fringe: Conrad (the Ukrainian-born Polish expat and sailor of Russian citizenship, who learned English during his sea voyages, and later naturalized a subject of Queen Victoria, and who was rebuked for his alleged racism in *Heart of Africa*) and Naipaul (the Trinidad-

born descendent of a Hindu Brahmin family, a subject of Queen Elizabeth II, similarly rebuked for his views on many of the nations visited). Both writers appropriated the language of the British Empire and used it as a vehicle for their feelings; their writings cover the British Empire at its best (Conrad), and the aftermath of the Empire (Naipaul).

Among all the writers he got acquainted with even since early childhood, from whose Naipaul Jr. was reading aloud to his son and other children in the family home in Port of Spain, Conrad was the one who definitely contributed to Naipaul's understanding of his particular, not so favourable condition of the colonial exile who suddenly decides to develop as a writer in the postcolonial world, where the directions had already been settled by the Empire. His later reading of *The Heart of Darkness*, though a book about Africa, gave him a first glimpse into the dark continent, that “demoralized land of plunder and licensed cruelty.” Naipaul was deeply impressed by Conrad – the exile, the outsider, the traveller who had been everywhere before him, to the “dark and remote places” of Asia and Africa, where the people “are denied a clear vision of the world.” Here is a very concise and clear-cut explanation of his way of approaching a writer like Conrad:

“To understand Conrad, then, it was necessary to begin to match his experience. It was also necessary to lose one's preconceptions of what the novel should do and, above all, to rid oneself of the subtle corruptions of the novel or comedy of manners. When art copies life, and life in its turn mimics art, a writer's originality can often be obscured. To take an interest in a writer's work is, for me, to take an interest in his life; one interest follows automatically on the other. And to me there is something peculiarly depressing about Conrad's writing life.”[1]

In “A Resting Place for the Imagination,” the first chapter of *India: An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul recounts his childhood years in Trinidad, the featurelessness of his image of India, and his perception of the time when his ancestors were transferred, “*as a period of 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 travelled lucidly over that area which was to me the area of darkness, something of darkness remains, in those attitudes, those ways of thinking and seeing, which are no longer mine.*”

This all-encompassing area of darkness was also an “an area of the imagination,” a virtual space that had nothing to do with the writer's childhood readings and maps he had committed to memory: he had no practical knowledge of Hindi, he was “*without belief or interest in belief, [...] incapable of worship, of God or holy men; and so one whole side of India was closed to me*”. He was coming from the Trinidadian society, where one's belonging to the Indian community was evidence of distinctiveness. The same applied to England, or in Egypt, where he was to go on his way to India. Native Trinidad was a country where caste was meaningless in the Indians' everyday life, nothing more than “an acknowledgement of latent qualities,” while in India caste division resulted in a violent division of labour.

Just like Naipaul's other travelogues, *An Area of Darkness* starts with a voyage – *Traveller's Prelude* – in this case, the slow journey on the liner which transported him from Greece to Egypt, and from Egypt all the way to India. It is the voyage in which he leaves the West behind, and goes to an east he has been looking for all his life. In doing so, Naipaul left behind an India which, until that particular adventure of his life, lay about him in things: in household implements, in items no longer used, or the significance of which

was long forgotten, in the string beds now out of use simply because “there was no one with this caste sill in Trinidad,” in old books, instruments and pictures, and the Hindu cult utensils in the prayer room.

Traveller's Prelude is followed by *A Resting Place for the Imagination*, which opens Part One of his book. It is not clear whether the “resting place” is Trinidad, or India, but the writer takes his time to remember his ancestors coming all the way from India as indentured labourers, and his first encounters with race problems – his Hindu heritage and community, and his Muslim neighbours. Naipaul, the unbeliever – neither Hindu, Christian, or Muslim – once in India, comes to an understanding of the traditional – still observed – caste system, and feels saddened at the decay of old customs and rituals. It is interesting to note his reaction at his first immersion into the Indian society in Bombay, and his sudden, unexpected feeling of invisibility, of facelessness. The shop assistants or waiters in a restaurant have no reaction, do not betray any feelings, and are not impressed by just another Indian entering their premises. There was no special response to his presence:

“I entered a shop or a restaurant and awaited a special quality of response. And there was nothing. It was like being denied part of my reality. Again and again I was caught. I was faceless. I might sink without a trace into that Indian crowd. I had been made by Trinidad and England; recognition of my difference was necessary to me. I felt the need to impose myself, and didn't know how.”

Whether he travelled to India with the declared purpose of discovering and understanding his Indian identity, it seems that Naipaul was almost at a loss, fearful that he would lose it altogether. Quoting from one of Naipaul's speeches, Ajay K. Chaubey stresses the ultimate importance of identity for a writer – traveller, narrator and “gatherer of impressions” – who, in case of an English language writer is “not English but colonial, and carried different pictures in his head” [2].

Naipaul's first impressions on his voyage to India were marked by a profound disillusionment, and disenchantment with the realities he was facing. His attacks on the Indian culture and morality are carried out both “collectively and individually” [3]. The whole experience is overwhelming, meant to change his life and influence his future writing. The realization of the caste system may shock anyone. Naipaul gives us the story of the Indian stenographer, who proudly obtained his position in an Indian company: when asked *to type a letter*, he simply refused because someone else, belonging to a lower caste was supposed to do the job. When he finally accepted the task, he simply kow-towed to his boss, and thus accepted a humiliation which would mark him for his life. Obviously, Naipaul is deeply disturbed by the Indian caste system, whose rigid hierarchy he finds disturbing.

Naipaul might have been accused of sensationalism, of a strong urge to impress his (Western) readers. Nevertheless, his comments on the Indian practice of job reservation show a surprisingly Brahmanic way of thinking: *“Land reform does not convince the Brahmin that he can put his hand to the plough without disgrace. Making awards to children for bravery does not lessen the feeling that it is unpardonable to risk one's life to save another. Reserving government jobs for untouchables helps nobody. It places responsibility in the hands of the unqualified; and the position of untouchable civil servants, whose reputations always go before them, is intolerable”*.

Later in the text, when Naipaul observes that India's “Hindu experience of conquerors was great; Hindu India met conquerors half-way and had always been able to

absorb them”, he firmly implies that mimicry is the path to this desired synthesis. Mimicry, according to him, is more than just vulgar imitation; it exists at a fundamental level in the Indian psyche and has enabled the Indians to please their masters for centuries. The entire project of Indian nationalism, Naipaul does not hesitate to declare, began as “mimicry of the British”.

CORPUS OF THE PAPER

His stance as a colonial mimic was repeatedly mentioned by his reviewers who did not hesitate in stressing his image as a colonial guru and prophet, able to predict the destinies of India and Trinidad. Here is his comment on the issue of mimicry: *“The outer and inner worlds do not have the physical separateness which they had for us in Trinidad. They coexist; the society only pretends to be colonial; and for this reason its absurdities are at once apparent. Its mimicry is both less and more than a colonial mimicry. It is the special mimicry of an old country which has been without a native aristocracy for a thousand years and has learned to make room for outsiders, but only at the top. The mimicry changes, the inner world remains constant: this is the secret of survival. And so it happens that, to one whole area of India, a late seventeenth-century traveller like Ovington remains in many ways a reliable guide. Yesterday the mimicry was Mogul; tomorrow it might be Russian or American; today it is English”.*

Anyway, Naipaul himself confesses that the particular meanings of the term *mimicry* might not be appropriate for “what appears so comprehensive and profound: buildings, railways, a system of administration, the intellectual discipline of the civil servant and the economist”. He goes deeper into the analysis of the concept, and accepts the use of mimicry, which he surprisingly associates with schizophrenia, *“... but mimicry must be used because so much has been acquired that the schizophrenia is often concealed; because so much of what is seen remains simple mimicry, incongruous and absurd; and because no people, by their varied physical endowments, are as capable of mimicry as the Indians”.*

On the other hand, Naipaul finds an explanation to his assertion: *“[Indian] mimicry is both less and more than a colonial mimicry. It is the special mimicry of an old country which has been without a native aristocracy for a thousand years and has learned to make room for outsiders, but only at the top. The mimicry changes, the inner world remains constant: this is the secret of survival.”*

Mimicry becomes almost a trope with Naipaul, and it is present in all his writings on India. He sees it as a characteristic feature of the higher levels of Indian society, for which the mimicry of the past and of the colonial past is typical. And Naipaul finds an explanation to it: the Indians’ inability to function, and even to exist without external guidance. Mimicry means imitation, and it reveals itself in numerous stances of everyday life; be it the imitation of ancient artistic techniques in painting, architecture, and crafts. It is as if India cannot distance itself from its past. It results in pathetic attempts to resurrect bygone Indian glory. Having been conquered by the Muslim Moguls and later by the English, Indians continue to imitate their former rulers, and their imitation of the English is, more than often, pathetic. Even their proclaimed knowledge of the English language is far from satisfactory, as it is the case with other borrowed tendencies, customs, and ideas: *“The Indian Army officer is at a first meeting a complete English army officer. He even manages to look English; his gait and bearing are English; his mannerisms, his tastes in drink are English; his slang is English. In the Indian setting this Indian English mimicry is*

like fantasy. It is an undiminishing absurdity; and it is only slowly that one formulates what was sensed from the first day: this is a mimicry not of England, a real country, but of the fairy-tale land of Anglo-India, of clubs and sahibs and syces and bearers”.

There is an explanation of the Indians’ mimicry of anything non-Indian, Western, colonial: this is a phenomenon which has only manifested itself in India in those domains of activity where traditional India cannot possibly offer solutions, or substitutes, or replacements. Naipaul reaches the conclusion that India – completely unequipped for modern developments – can only accept guidance from others, a guidance she unconsciously longs for.

In his Nobel Lecture, Naipaul comments on one of his early novels, *The Mimic Men* which, he says, “was not about mimics. It was about colonial men *mimicking the condition of manhood, men who had grown to distrust everything about themselves*” (*Nobel Lecture*, my emphasis). This is just another stance of Naipaul’s deliberate developments on the concept.

It has long been considered that a close connection exists between *An Area of Darkness* and Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Indeed, Naipaul’s travelogue captures the author’s acute sense of disillusionment, which finally captures the whole spectrum of India. The fringe becomes an obsession with Naipaul, who is obviously treated as a star by the centre, while the countries on the fringe saw him as “a turn-coat postcolonial”.

But, above or beyond all this theoretical interpretations, what mostly strikes the reader is the visualization of India’s poverty. Despite his Indian descent, he cannot possibly overlook the country’s dirty neighbourhoods, populated with starving, sick, poor beggars. To Naipaul, the experience of poverty to its extremes is more than painful. The Indian environment is, for him, an unbearable collection of squatting people in the streets, of sleeping homeless, and of decrepit beggars impossible to avoid. Naipaul did not need much to realize that “*India is the poorest country in the world. Therefore, to see its poverty is to make an observation of no value; a thousand newcomers to the country before you have seen and said as you. And not only newcomers. Our own sons and daughters, when they return from Europe and America, have spoken in your very words...*”

and to finally conclude that beggary in India will never be properly understood by Europeans. All those beggars asking for *baksheesh* are an unavoidable reality of India, for the simple reason that, once you give to a beggar, you perform an “automatic act of charity, which is an automatic reverence to God”.

We find ourselves in an unusual situation: Naipaul, the Indian, is totally repressed by his Western self. The India he sees is disgusting, the Indians are simply blind to their realities, and he is more than ready to accuse the Indians for their blindness to their own realities, so striking to the Westerners, Naipaul included. During his first Indian voyage, Naipaul found Kashmir as an unexpected, unique oasis of comfort, and rest, and peace: “*Kashmir was coolness and colour: the yellow mustard fields, the mountains, snow-capped, the milky blue sky in which we rediscovered the drama of clouds. It was men wrapped in brown blankets against the morning mist, and barefooted shepherd boys with caps and covered ears on steep wet rocky slopes.*”

The stay at the hotel and the subsequent pilgrimage offered him ample opportunities for self-discovery and also to a better understanding of the Indian individuality. The second section of this book looks like a novel in a nutshell. As it is always the case with Naipaul’s travelogues, we are dealing with a number of characters,

besides the protagonist – Naipaul himself, and, though not explicitly mentioned, his wife, Pat.

It is there that Naipaul “recaptures the idyllic world of his childhood”. He remembers the pictures of the Himalayas that he saw in his grandmother’s house in Trinidad. The Himalayas belong to the India of his “fantasy” world. They serve as his jumping-off point in the world of chaos and twists. It is something static and peaceful; his only childhood vision that has been fulfilled: Naipaul’s personal feelings are more than conclusive: “[...] in that valley, India had become all symbol. [...] The god existed: the faces and cries of the returning pilgrims carried this reassurance. I wished I was of their spirit. I wished that something of their joy awaited me at the end. Yet a special joy had been with me throughout the pilgrimage and during all my time in Kashmir. It was the joy of being among mountains; it was the special joy of being among the Himalayas. I felt linked to them: I liked speaking the name. 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 part of the India of my fantasy.”

Whatever he does, wherever he goes, Naipaul is not away from understanding the realities of contemporary India: broken lanes, mud houses, animals and people finding understanding in filth, starved children, and more than that. And Kashmir deserves a special treatment, not only because the Kashmiri adventure is almost a short novel, in which Naipaul gets involved in the life of the hotel community but, most surprising, because he alludes to his female companion during that trip. These are details which testify to the peculiar nature of the first book in the trilogy: it is both autobiography and travelogue. It has often been considered that *An Area of Darkness* concentrates more on the author/narrator/traveller, rather than on the country travelled into. Farhad B. Idris is one of the reviewers who mentioned that dutifully observes that “the travelling narrator’s self centres as the text’s primary focus where India is merely a setting, a proving ground to test the self’s strengths and weaknesses”. It looks as if Naipaul willingly leaves behind all the other characters, to be able to express his own opinions only. Even before reading Idris’s essay, I was shocked by the occasional use of the ‘we’ personal pronoun, especially in Chapter four, *Romancers*. The explanation was found by Patrick French who, in his *Authorized Biography*, identifies the anonymous, invisible, and marginalised presence with Naipaul’s first wife, Patricia Hall [4].

In Chapter One, *Traveller’s Prelude*, while trying to obtain a liquor transport permit, his ‘companion’ faints, and Naipaul has his first glimpse at the caste system. Here is an extensive excerpt:

“I managed to complete my application. And at this point my companion slumped forward on her chair, hung her head between her knees and fainted.

‘Water,’ I said to Miss Desai.

She barely paused in her writing and pointed to an empty dusty glass on a shelf.

The head clerk, already frowningly preoccupied with other papers, regarded the figure slumped in front of him.

‘Not feeling well?’ His voice was as mild and even as before. ‘Let her rest.’ He turned the table fan away from him.

‘Where is the water?’

Giggles came from women clerks, hidden behind paper.

‘Water!’ I cried to a male clerk.

He rose, saying nothing, walked to the end of the room and vanished.

Miss Desai finished her writing. Giving me a glance as of terror, she brought her tall bloated pad to the head clerk.

‘The transport permit is ready,’ he said. ‘As soon as you are free you can sign for it.’

The male clerk returned, waterless, and sat down at his desk.

‘Where is the water?’

His eyes distastefully acknowledged my impatience. He neither shrugged nor spoke; he went on with his papers.

It was worse than impatience. It was ill-breeding and ingratitude. For presently, *sporting his uniform as proudly as any officer, a messenger appeared. He carried a tray and on the tray stood a glass of water. I should have known better. A clerk was a clerk; a messenger was a messenger.*

The crisis passed.

I signed three times and received my permit.

The head clerk opened another folder.

‘Nadkarni,’ he called softly to a clerk. ‘I don’t understand this memo.’

I had been forgotten already.”

It was a free lesson, preparing Naipaul for the months ahead. This preliminary, unaccounted for attack on caste finds its sources in the writer’s immersion in the field of Indology, which abounds in accounts of caste. According to Idris, “*Caste seemed to them an extremely abusive practice that denied the vast population of India any prospect of social and economic advancements. Western civilization, in contrast, promised an abundance of such opportunities. This critique of caste proved quite useful not only in the re-educating the natives of colonial societies but also in recruiting personnel for colonial administration in Europe*” [5].

The matter of caste and religion are intertwined. In the Kashmir ‘novel’, Naipaul and his companion join a pilgrimage to the holy cave of Amarnath, the Eternal Lord. The cave is holy due to the five foot ice *lingam*, symbol of Shiva, which forms by itself in the cave during the summer months: “*The lingam, it is believed, waxes and wanes with the moon and reaches its greatest height on the day of the August full moon; on this day, the pilgrimage arrives. 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.*”

Leaving aside the vivid description itself, the pilgrimage ends with an anticlimax: the sacred *lingam* simply melted before the arrival of the pilgrims, and Naipaul could not share their enthusiasm in the absence of the object of their efforts:

“‘*You don’t come for the lingam, one man said. It’s the spirit of the thing.*’”

“*The spirit of the thing! Squatting in the cave, which rang continuously with shouts and shuffling, concentrating on the bazaar litter on the wet floor, glimpsing out of the corner of my eye the ever ascending crowd whose numbers I could less easily grasp than I could the size of the mountains and the valleys, I had grown light-headed. A physical growth, because it was extraordinary, was a spiritual symbol. The growth failed; it became the symbol of a symbol. In this spiraling, deliquescing logic I felt I might drown. I went outside into the light. Pilgrims, their offerings made, were looking up for the two rock pigeons, followers of Lord Shiva once, and doomed forever to live near Him, in His cave. I*

did not look up. I went on down the white slope, hopping from rock to rock, and did not stop until I came to the clear stream.”

Indian social structure is determined by Hinduism – the major religious tradition in India, not to mention Buddhism and Islam – and the caste system, which form the very structure of the character of the nation. The main religious conflict – often mentioned in the trilogy – is the conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims. Whenever he describes the living conditions of each group of worshippers, Naipaul does not forget the frequent clashes for reasons not always religious, and the misunderstandings generated by the different dogmas. Kashmir brings about the encounter between Naipaul-the-Hindu and Aziz-the-Muslim. Minor conflicts arise from misapprehension.

But to Naipaul – the unbeliever – religion is a spectacle which answered every simple mood: *“It was life and the law, and its forms could admit of no change or query, since change and query would throw the whole system, would throw life itself, in danger”*. Nevertheless, he is not very much interested in the inter-confessional relations in the India surrounding him, directing his searching mind to the very essence of Hinduism, which he strives to understand. This interest in Hinduism is a recurrent motif in most of his books, despite his apparent ambiguity in terms of his religious affiliation, and his declared ignorance of Hinduism.

In all the three books on India, and also in *The Writer and the World* and *A Writer’s People* we find ample references to Mahatma Gandhi – “the observer, the failed reformer” – and his overwhelming influence on twentieth-century India, with his philosophy of nonviolence, and his historic attempt at reforming India, “great-souled” Mahatma, the father of the Indian nation, and “the least Indian of the Indian leaders”. *An Area of Darkness* offers a bright image of Gandhi, who used his experience gained in England and South Africa in order to trigger a nation-wide movement of reform on the Indian sub-continent. According to Sudha Rai, Gandhi’s experience in South Africa may be regarded “as crucial in moulding Gandhi’s identity in positive fashion” [6]. It is not surprising that Gandhi, after having spent almost a quarter of a century outside India, in close contact with the realities of the Western world, could correctly perceive the poverty and dirtiness around him – which the others failed to see: the dung-hills, the dirt and the smell that meet the visitor to any Indian village. And Gandhi even offers a solution: learning the “science of municipal sanitation” from the West, and penalties for those who spoil the environment: *“By our bad habits we spoil our sacred river banks and furnish excellent breeding grounds for flies. [...] Leaving night-soil, cleaning the nose, or spitting on the road is a sin against God as well as humanity, and betrays a sad want of consideration for others. The man who does not cover his waste deserves a heavy penalty even if he lives in a forest.”*

Gandhi, according to Naipaul, *“looked at India as no Indian was able to; his vision was direct, and this directness, was, and is, revolutionary”*. *To him, the squalor and inadvertences of India were obvious realities which led to the necessity of reform – the only way to help his country survive the challenges of the modern world at large – and was in favour of many western ideas and principles, which made Naipaul describe him as “a colonial blend of East and West”*.

“He sees exactly what the visitor sees; he does not ignore the obvious. He sees the beggars and the shameless pundits and the filth of Banaras; he sees the atrocious sanitary habits of doctors, lawyers and journalists. He sees the Indian callousness, the

Indian refusal to see. No Indian attitude escapes him, no Indian problem; he looks down to the roots of the static decayed society.”

One of the main issues of the Indian trilogy is identity – not only the identity of India, but the writer’s identity: *“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.”*

Naipaul’s perception of India is informed by the writer’s ambiguity in terms of national appurtenance: born and educated in an Indian family in Trinidad, he completed his studies in England, never to permanently relocate on his native island, and remained detached from his grandfather’s country, India. The two geographical entities, Trinidad and India, were separated by a century-long indenture policy, and the precipice between the Trinidadian Indians and the Indians in India grew wider than ever, and we can now safely talk about distinct cultures. The India which Naipaul encounters is shockingly different from the India of his imagination, the India of his Trinidadian childhood, that “area of the imagination” revealed through the religious ceremonies, carried out in a language he did not understand. This is how he explains the extent of his Hindu heritage on his arrival to India: *“So it happened that, though growing up in an orthodox family, I remained almost totally ignorant of Hinduism. What, then, survived of Hinduism in me? Perhaps I had received a certain supporting philosophy. I cannot say; my uncle often put it to me that my denial was an admissible type of Hinduism. Examining myself, I found only that sense of the difference of people, which I have tried to explain, a vaguer sense of caste, and a horror of the unclean”*.

The general mood of the book is given by Naipaul’s efforts to overcome the shock of his realizing the differences. It is the reason which turns *An Area of Darkness* into a book not only about India’s inability to rise to the standards of the Western world, but also about the incapacity of the writer to pursue a childhood myth. The writer’s imaginary world defines his identity. However hard he tries, he cannot identify with the people around him: *“In India I had so far felt myself a visitor. Its size, its temperatures, its crowds: I had prepared myself for these, but in its very extremes the country was alien. Looking for the familiar, I had again, in spite of myself, become an islander: I was looking for the small and manageable”*.

Naipaul cannot help feeling a strong, intimate connection to India, despite his feeling of rootlessness and frustration when part of his reality is denied to him. Nevertheless, there is one chapter in this intriguing book which should not be overlooked. It is *The Village of the Dubes* – a location in eastern Uttar Pradesh – in which Naipaul recounts his encounter with Ramachandra Dube, the head of his grandfather’s branch of the Dube family.

There is a lot of drama and disillusionment in the writer’s trip to his grandfather’s village. He feels at a loss with the customs to be observed, and the way in which he should approach his distant relatives. Naipaul announces his last planned trip with a feeling of unexpected anguish: *“One journey remained, and for this I had lost taste. [...] Duty alone had brought me to this town in eastern Uttar Pradesh, not even graced by a ruin, celebrated only for its connexions with the Buddha and its backwardness. And it was duty that, after a few days of indecision, idleness and reading, was taking me along this country road, infested with peasants indifferent to wheeled vehicles, to the village which my mother’s father had left as an indentured labourer more than sixty years before.”*

But, contrary to his expectations, Naipaul seems awed by the pastoral look of the village, which far exceeded his expectations: the spires, “white and clean against the dark green foliage,” the tall mango trees which shaded an artificial pond, and the floor of the grove “spotted with blurred sunshine.” A totally surprised Naipaul resists the welcoming ritual gestures of a village boy and learns that his grandfather’s adventures overseas have fed the village for a century or so – both spiritually and financially. The prosperity of the village takes him by surprise: *“Many of the houses were of brick, some raised off the earth, some with carved wooden doors and tiled roofs. The lanes were paved and clean; there was a concrete cattle-trough. ‘Brahmin village, Brahmin village,’ the IAS man whispered. The women were unveiled and attractive, their saris white and plain. They regarded us frankly, and in their features I could recognize those of the women of my family. ‘Brahmin women,’ the IAS man whispered. ‘Very fearless.’”*

It is Naipaul’s first contact with a Brahmin village, where the rituals are being observed, a prosperous village which seems to contradict all the previous impressions Naipaul had built up. And this where Naipaul hears a first-hand Indian account of his family history, with direct mention to his grandfather’s decision to travel to Trinidad: *“When he was a young man ... my grandfather left this village to go to Banaras to study, as brahmins had immemorially done. But my grandfather was poor, his family poor, and times were hard; there might even have been a famine. One day my grandfather met a man who told him of a country far away called Trinidad... So my grandfather indentured himself for five years and went to Trinidad. He was not, of course, made a teacher; he worked in the sugar factory. He was given a room, he was given food; and in addition he received twelve annas, fourteen pence, a day. It was a lot of money, and even today it was a good wage in this part of India, twice as much as the government paid for relief work in distress areas.”*

The whole story is a good example of an Indo-Trinidadian success story transposed to the nineteenth century, and Naipaul – while listening to the family story which had already acquired an almost mythical dimension to that particular community – can only accept that he “had come to them reluctantly. I had expected little, and I had been afraid. The ugliness is all mine”. Later on, the writer wakes up in his hotel room at the tunes of a forgotten Hindi song he had heard in his youth, and which, “was pure mood.” The Hindi song reminded him of one of the objects in his childhood home, a painful memory of times past: *“And walking that day in the bazaar, I saw the harmoniums, one of which had lain broken and unused, part of the irrecoverable past, in my grandmother’s house, the drums, the printing-blocks, the brass vessels. Again and again I had that sense of dissolving time, that alarming but exhilarating sense of wonder at my physical self”*.

In the end, we witness the writer’s total negation of India: *“the world is an illusion, the Hindus say. We talk of despair, but true despair lies too deep for formulation. It was only now, as my experience of India defined itself more properly against my own 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 was something true which I could never adequately express and never seize again”*.

In 2001, Naipaul was interviewed by Farrukh Dhondy for the *Literary Review*. Commenting on a volume of essays by Nissim Ezekiel, in which the poet criticized *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul confessed that he had not meant the book to be an attack on

India, but “as a record of my unhappiness. I wasn’t knocking anybody, it was a great melancholy experience actually. Mark you, it’s full of flaws: what it says about caste is influenced by ideas I had picked up here, British ideas. I think differently about caste now. I understand the clan feeling, the necessity of that in a big country. And the book was bad about Indian art. I should have understood that art depends on patrons, and that in Independent India, with the disappearance of independent royal courts, the possibility for art had been narrowed – instead of thinking that this was rather terrible, that there was no art. It will nag at me now, it will nag at me for some years” [7].

Here we have a more reconciliatory Naipaul, in a confessional mood, who does not hesitate to state that the *British* ideas he had picked in England prior to his first voyage to India are at the root of the book’s flaws, especially on the matter of caste. I would venture a further comment: Naipaul’s main flaw is that he has based many of his comments – not only on caste, but also on Indian history and Islam – on British, “picked up” ideas. Nevertheless, we may call *An Area of Darkness* moment as defining for his literary development, the fundamental break with the past that will submerge Naipaul into a dualism: “It was a journey that ought not to have been made; it had broken my life in two”. From 1964 on, Naipaul would continue to fight that dualism by writing and by travelling throughout the world.

The appeal of *An Area of Darkness* has not died out: witnesses are the number of editions and translations all over the world, as well as the scholarly interest in the book. It is praised both for the poetic load of his descriptions – see the trip to Kashmir and the pilgrimage to the holy cave – and for his insight into the various facets of Indian behaviour, traditions and customs. This mixture of autobiographical elements and journalistic enquiry will be encountered in all his subsequent books of nonfiction. It is during this first Indian voyage that Naipaul develops unique modalities of taking in the surrounding reality, be it India, or the “half-made societies” of his other travelogues. It is where he began to find the so often elusive centre of his world – that centre that lay not in any particular place but in the many areas of darkness of his own richly diverse past.

Whatever the pessimistic outlook that Naipaul professed in *An Area of Darkness*, there are two instances in which Naipaul was more optimistic, and the feelings expressed contradict the general mood of the book

The first instance is found in a letter sent to his wife Patricia, who had already left for London to search for new accommodation for the couple. The letter is cited by French, in his *Biography*. The writer openly expresses his admiration for the inhabitants of Gorakhpur – his maternal grandfather’s – village and for his grandfather as well: “[...] *And they are good-looking people; slender, some tall, many well-built, with beautiful brown complexions ... This is where Ma’s family & my sisters get their looks from, without a doubt ... [his grandfather] had been a man of exceptional force of character ... I admire him for his three wives, for his decision to abandon all (however temporarily) for love much more than I have ever done ... As you can imagine, I fell in love with these beautiful people, their so beautiful women who have all the boldness and independence (no coyness) of Brahmin women [...], and their enchanting fairy-tale village*

Back in London, in a letter to Moni Malhoutra, Naipaul did not hesitate to express his feelings for India – a surprising idyllic view which he very soon forgot: “*I suppose I miss India more than I imagined; and I say this without flattering you, I miss Lucknow and Fyzabed [...] more than anything else. I wonder whether I shouldn’t buy some acres in Ranikhet or some part too cold for Indians and run a little farm.*”

CONCLUSION:

To conclude this paper, I should say that the *darkness* metaphor extends to Naipaul's whole work. According to Andrew Martino,

“Naipaul exists in an ‘area of darkness’ that he is constantly trying to penetrate through the agency of writing. As such, he has consciously decided to leave his own past behind because it was not, nor could it have been, the past for which he had been searching. That past belonged to the memory of his grandmother’s house, replete with people, smells, talk, and emotions. The India that Naipaul had been searching for existed (note the past tense – for now it has been tainted by the ‘real’ India) entirely within his imagination.”

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- [4]. Patrick French discusses extensively the Naipauls’ first voyage to India in Chapter four of his biography, “The Homecoming” (p. 219-235), where he resorts to information provided by Pat’s personal diary.
- [5]. Idris, Farhad B. “The Native Returns: Conrad and Orientalism in V.S. Naipaul’s *An Area of Darkness*.” *South Carolina Review* 32.2 (2000): 43-53. Idris adds the following comprehensive note: “Almost every Indological pronouncement on “caste” begins with an explanation of the very etymology of the term itself. Of Portuguese origin, the word, Indologists often point out, is somewhat inaccurate in signifying the social system it wants to signify. The difficulty stems from Indology’s attempt to convey through “caste” the two Indian terms denoting it, *jati* and *varna*, which are not synonymous.”
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