

**Depiction of India and Hinduism in V.S. Naipaul's
'An Area of Darkness'**

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Abstract:

This research paper aims to analyze V. S. Naipaul's views on India critically, and Hinduism expressed in his nonfiction novel 'An Area of Darkness' subtitled 'An Experience of India.' Naipaul's portrayals of Indians and Hinduism are often nuanced and critical. Naipaul's depiction of Indians and Hinduism in his fiction often highlights the challenges and complexities individuals face trying to navigate their cultural heritage in a rapidly changing world. In this book, Naipaul's depiction of India relies heavily on his Western preconceptions and his initial, overwhelming encounter with Indian society. The book exposes his troubled psyche and the profound shock he experienced in India, which hinders an unbiased view despite his journalistic approach. While it may provoke controversy among Indian readers, the book's strength lies in its compelling style and narrative technique. In this book, Naipaul criticized India's backwardness, superstitions, caste system, poverty, illiteracy, and unhygienic conditions, portraying what he considered the dark side of Indian culture. However, his work also reflects respect for human values and traditions upheld by older generations, contrasting them with the modern India he saw as wounded by ignorance, poverty, corruption, and a decline in old values. Naipaul's views cannot be neatly categorized as either anti or pro-India. They reflect his journey and understanding of India's postcolonial identity.

Keywords: India, Hinduism, culture, religion, backwardness, superstitions, caste system, poverty, illiteracy, Karma,

Introduction:

V. S. Naipaul, a Nobel Laureate known for his sharp observations and controversial views, has been both criticized and praised for his comments on Hinduism and India. Naipaul's views on these two subjects are complex and multifaceted, reflecting his journey and understanding of Indian history and culture. It is important to note that Naipaul's views have evolved, and his writings offer a complex, often contradictory, perspective on Hinduism and India. His work continues to spark discussions and debates, highlighting the diverse and sometimes conflicting interpretations of culture, religion, and identity in the postcolonial context.

Naipaul's portrayal of India and Hinduism is often nuanced and critical, reflecting his experiences as a Trinidad-born writer of Indian descent. Naipaul's depiction of Indians and Hinduism in his fiction often highlights the challenges and complexities individuals face trying to navigate their cultural heritage in a rapidly changing world. In Naipaul's fiction, Indian characters are often portrayed as torn between their traditional cultural values and the influence of Western modernity. They struggle to find their place within a society that values progress and development while also grappling with the pressures of tradition and the expectations their families and communities placed upon them. Naipaul's portrayal of Hinduism in his fiction is equally complex. He delves into the rich religious traditions and rituals of Hinduism and examines the flaws and contradictions within the religion. Naipaul's depiction of Hinduism often explores themes of superstition, caste discrimination, and the commodification of spirituality. In Naipaul's fiction, Hinduism is not

idealized or romanticized but presented as a social and cultural force with both positive and negative aspects.

Naipaul's observations often stirred controversy for their perceived negativity towards India. He criticized India's backwardness, superstitions, caste system, poverty, illiteracy, and unhygienic conditions, portraying what he considered the dark side of Indian culture. However, his work also reflects respect for human values and traditions upheld by older generations, contrasting them with the modern India he saw as wounded by ignorance, poverty, corruption, and a decline in old values.

Despite the criticism, Naipaul did not hate India but resented certain aspects of it. His complex relationship with the country was shaped by his position as a stateless person, which influenced his perspective on India's efforts to create a modern nation. Naipaul's critical voice has been an important part of the discourse on India's postcolonial journey, offering a perspective that challenges readers to reflect on the nation's history and path forward.

V.S. Naipaul's literary journey through India is captured in his evocative works "An Area of Darkness" and "India: A Wounded Civilization." These books transcend the traditional travelogue genre, blending personal narrative with the artistry of fiction to create compelling nonfiction novels. Naipaul delves into the intricate tapestry of India's social, cultural, and political landscapes through his keen journalistic eye, offering a unique perspective that has sparked both acclaim and controversy.

This research paper aims to critically analyze V. S. Naipaul's views on India and Hinduism expressed in his nonfiction novel 'An Area of Darkness.'

Pilgrimages:

'An Area of Darkness' chronicles Naipaul's 1962 pilgrimage to his ancestral land. It is a profoundly personal account of a

Trinidadian returning to his roots, seeking the India of his imagination. Naipaul's odyssey takes him across diverse regions and into the heart of various communities, where he meticulously observes the caste system, religious practices, and the people's daily lives. His exploration includes an immersive stay in Srinagar and a traditional pilgrimage to the Amarnath cave, sanctified by a natural ice lingam symbolizing Lord Shiva. Naipaul's reflections on this pilgrimage are profound. He writes:

"And in the cave, the god, the massive ice phallus. Hindu speculation soared so high that its ritual remained so elemental. There was no link between the conception of the world as an illusion and the veneration of the phallus; they derived from different starts of responses. However, Hinduism discarded nothing, and it was perhaps right not to. The phallus endured, unrecognized as such, recognized only as Shiva, as continuity; it was doubly the symbol of India."

On arrival at the cave of Amarnath, he is so taken aback by the jostling crowd that he decides not to go into the god's inner sanctum. He remains in the outer cave while his Muslim companion Aziz, from the Srinagar hotel where he is staying, joins the crowd of devout Hindu pilgrims. When Aziz re-emerges, it is to report that no lingam has formed this year. Another pilgrim says that this does not matter since it is the 'spirit of the thing' that is all-important; both the physical and spiritual ambiance overcomes Naipaul:

"... The spirit of the thing! Squatting in the cave had grown light-headed. Physical growth, because it was extraordinary, was a spiritual symbol. In this spiraling, deliquescing logic, I felt I might drown. I went outside into the light."

While Naipaul's journey is shared with fellow pilgrims, his approach is less devotional and more journalistic, driven by a longing to fulfill the fantasies of his youth. His observations on Indian society—its religions, castes, creeds, and lifestyles—offer a

tapestry of insights that have stirred debate, notably as Naipaul's perspective diverges from the quintessential Indian viewpoint.

Naipaul's portrayal as a traveler is marked by irritability and hypersensitivity, particularly during the Amarnath pilgrimage. His focus on the lack of sanitation among pilgrims and his disdain for their practices reflect a broader critical view of India. This perspective leads to a confrontation with a young American who challenges Naipaul's discontent with the pilgrimage.

This work demands a thorough examination to discern the truths within Naipaul's narratives and to understand the author's perspective on India—a land that, for him, is both a cherished heritage and a subject of critical contemplation.

Hinduism, Brahminism, and Caste System

V.S. Naipaul's introspective exploration of Brahminism and Hinduism offers a candid glimpse into his upbringing and the broader religious landscape of India. Born into a family wealthy in punditry, Naipaul confesses to an innate skepticism that distanced him from the rituals and ceremonies of his orthodox Hindu household. His memoirs reveal a childhood detached from religious fervor, marked by a lack of understanding and interest in the significance of sacred rites.

Naipaul himself comes from a Brahmin family, and as such, he records his conscious probing into Brahminism and his deep-rooted upbringing from which one gets a good account of his Hindu childhood:

"I came from a family that abounded with pundits. However, I had been born an unbeliever. I took no pleasure in religious ceremonies. They were too long, and the food came only at the end. I needed to understand the language- it was as if our elders expected our understanding to be instinctive, and no one explained the prayers or the ritual. One ceremony was like another. The images did not interest me: I never sought

to learn their significance. So it happened that, though growing up in an orthodox family. I remained almost ignorant of Hinduism.”

As Naipaul delves deeper into his reflections on Hinduism, he acknowledges a residual sense of caste and a profound aversion to impurity—vestiges of his Hindu upbringing. His narrative traverses Hindu society's complexities, scrutinizing caste's enduring influence across layers of Westernization and Anglicization. Through his critical lens, Naipaul examines the works of Manohar Malgonkar, particularly “The Princes,” to highlight the detrimental effects of caste on religious integrity.

Indian spiritual leaders

Naipaul's critique extends to contemporary Indian spiritual leaders, notably Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, whose Western disciples and brand of spirituality draw Naipaul's ire for their detachment from worldly concerns. He perceives this as a diversion from the pressing issues of life, steering individuals toward an abstract 'infinite' rather than addressing tangible problems.

The concepts of Karma, Dharma, and Moksha are also scrutinized by Naipaul, who applies them narrowly, viewing Karma as a doctrine that stifles individual progress and perpetuates societal inequities. He argues that this philosophy cements the caste hierarchy, fosters a cyclical perception of history, and diverts attention from pressing matters, such as national security, in favor of metaphysical contemplation.

Naipaul's incisive commentary on Hinduism and its societal implications invites readers to ponder the intersection of religion, caste, and personal identity. His observations challenge the status quo, prompting a re-evaluation of traditional beliefs and their role in shaping the modern Indian ethos. Through his literary journey, Naipaul becomes both a chronicler of and commentator on India's evolving spiritual and social fabric.

Views on Karma:

In "An Area of Darkness," V.S. Naipaul perceives Karma as a pervasive force shaping Indian behavior, evident in the complacency of royalty, the persistence of poverty, historical perspectives, and literary works from R.K. Narayan's novels to Vijay Tendulkar's plays and U.R. Anantha Murthy's "Samskara." Naipaul argues that Karma hinders progress and solidifies the stagnation of a self-destructing civilization.

Naipaul critiques Indian fiction, claiming the novel, as a tool for social scrutiny, is foreign to Indian tradition. He believes Karma and the Hindu concept of continuity contradict the novel's focus on human conditions and present-day relevance. However, this perspective needs to be revised, overlooking the evolution of the novel beyond 19th-century social realism to include myth and fantasy. The English novel's rise paralleled deterministic religious beliefs similar to Karma, with early authors like Defoe and Richardson influenced by Calvinism's focus on predestination. For example, Robinson Crusoe's discovery of barley sprouting on his island symbolizes divine favor, aligning with the Puritan ethic that worldly success indicates spiritual salvation and motivates active self-improvement.

Naipaul's view of Karma suggests it promotes passive acceptance of one's fate as just recompense for past actions. However, Karma can also be seen as motivation to accumulate spiritual merit, carrying a positive balance into future lives. This dual aspect of Karma reflects both resignation and proactive effort, challenging Naipaul's singular interpretation.

On Mahatma Gandhi

V.S. Naipaul's literary voyage through the landscape of Indian philosophy and religion culminates in a profound examination of influential figures, with Mahatma Gandhi taking center stage. A

blend of deep fascination and critical analysis marks Naipaul's engagement with Gandhism. He approached Gandhi's legacy with a skeptic's eye, dissecting the programs and activities that defined the Mahatma's life's work.

In his contemplative narrative, Naipaul suggests that Gandhi's perceived shortcomings were, in part, a reflection of the limitations imposed by the collective vision of the Indian populace. He posits that the very fabric of India, with its intricate weave of beliefs and expectations, shaped and unraveled Gandhi, transforming him into the revered Mahatma.

Naipaul's insights into Gandhi's journey offer a nuanced perspective that challenges readers to consider the interplay between a leader's vision and the societal context in which it unfolds. Naipaul invites us to re-evaluate the complexities of Gandhi's impact and the transformative power of India's spirit on one of its most iconic sons through this lens.

Internal Quest:

In 'An Area of Darkness,' V.S. Naipaul embarks on a journey that is as much an internal quest as it is a physical traversal of India. His narrative weaves a complex tapestry of emotions, where the India of his youthful idealism clashes with the stark realities he encounters. Despite his privileged access through Indian ancestry and a Brahmin sensibility, Naipaul finds himself adrift, unable to reconcile the dissonance between his inherited beliefs and the Western perspective that has colored his worldview.

Naipaul's India is one of the contrasts—where pain and pleasure intertwine, and the vision of an independent India he once cherished seems to crumble upon closer scrutiny. This dichotomy is poignantly captured by Walsh, who notes the friction between the dual aspects of Naipaul's identity, leading to a profound sense of despair, not warmth.

The author's pilgrimage is marked by a transitional phase, a

time of personal and cultural upheaval that prevents him from grasping the true essence of India. Naipaul's writings lay bare a struggle to find a sense of belonging in a land that is simultaneously home and foreign, a place that beckons with its rich heritage yet repels the weight of its contradictions. This very struggle defines Naipaul's poignant and introspective portrayal of India—a land that eludes simple truths and easy definitions. Hence, at the end of the book, he almost confesses his failure at grasping the very essence of India; he feels he can never adequately express his briefly grasped essence of India, its philosophical spirit, which he is momentarily in touch with:

"It was only now, as my experience of India defined itself properly against my 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. Moreover, 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 as something true I could never adequately express and never seize again."

Portrayal of Filth and Dirt in India:

V.S. Naipaul's portrayal of India, as seen through his disquiet and ambiguity lens, has led to a series of observations that critics have interpreted as a critique of the nation. In "An Area of Darkness," Naipaul's commentary on India manifests in various ways. He scrutinizes the hierarchical division of labor entrenched by the caste system, the perceived absence of historical awareness among Indians, and the juxtaposition of Hindu principles of purity against the tangible presence of filth. These subjects become the focal points of his biting irony, a reflection of his complex relationship with a deeply familiar and profoundly alien land.

Naipaul's incisive words are not merely criticisms but part of a broader dialogue with India that grapples with the nation's intricacies

and contradictions. It is this nuanced conversation that Naipaul invites his readers to join, offering a perspective that is as challenging as it is enlightening. He says:

"It is well that Indians are unable to look at their country directly, for the distress they would see would drive them mad. Indians defecate everywhere. They defecate, mostly beside the railway tracks. But they also defecate on the beaches; they defecate on the hills; they defecate on the river banks; they defecate on the streets; they never look over for cover."

Throughout *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul reveals himself to be an irritable and hypersensitive traveler, and the Amarnath pilgrimage, too, is no exception. As in his accounts of other parts of India, he once again dwells on the defecating crowds which he finds everywhere, and such scatological vision blinds him to almost everything else. So, predictably, when he comes across a young American who is enthusing about the yatra (or pilgrimage), he reacts by giving vent to his own feelings:

"No, I said; I wasn't thrilled by the yatra. I thought the yatrīs had no idea of sanitation; they polluted every river we came to. I wished they would follow Gandhi's advice about the need for a little spade. 'Then you shouldn't have come.' It was the only reply, and it was unanswerable."

Western preconceptions:

V.S. Naipaul's perspective, as seen from a Western logical positivist lens, may seem valid, but within the Indian context, his stance as an impartial observer falls short. He remains detached, a mere spectator of life, trapped in a mental stasis that allows him to maintain a sense of separation by not engaging. Ultimately, his viewpoint is merely a secular iteration of the Karma-driven resignation he criticizes. Naipaul acknowledges this parallel between Indian non-engagement and his own outlook:

“In India, historical facts are neither hidden nor emphasized; they are recognized yet overlooked. This reflects the Indian tendency to withdraw, to overlook the evidence, which in others might indicate neurosis but in Indians is part of a broader philosophy of despair, leading to passivity, detachment, and acceptance. Through writing and self-reflection, I realize how deeply I share this philosophy.”

“An Area of Darkness” is redeemed by Naipaul’s brutally honest introspection. His inner turmoil prevents him from being impartial about India, rendering the book limited in scope—useful mainly to counter overly positive narratives that ignore the grim, corrupt, and chaotic aspects. Despite its limitations, the book’s power lies in its insight into the personal struggle of a complex colonial writer.

Criticism:

Naipaul's views on the unhygienic conditions prevailing in India, well as his skeptical attitude towards the modern Indian swamis or sadhus in general and Gandhiji in particular, have raised great doubts regarding his attitude towards India and have also invited scathing criticism against him. Foremost among these critics are Nissim Ezekiel, C.D. Narasimhaiah, and many others.

Mr. Narasimhaiah takes Naipaul to task when he finds him expressing his dismal sentiments regarding India in his book *An Area of Darkness*:

“I bolted the door, pulled down on all the blinds, trying to shut out the howls of dogs, shutting out intruders, all those staring faces and skeletal bodies. I put on no lights. I required darkens.”

Further, Narasimhaiah analyses Naipaul's observation on India that appears all the more repulsive and loathsome:

“How easy it is to feel power in India. But the fact remains that the ugliness was all mine.”

Critics argue that Naipaul's negative experiences in India may stem from his expatriate viewpoint, which contrasts with the more nuanced understanding of those with closer ties to the country. While Naipaul's observations may be accurate, they are perceived as selective and possibly distorted by his personal biases. Ezekiel highlights errors in Naipaul's generalizations, especially regarding the caste system, indicating a potential misunderstanding of Indian social structures.

Nissim Ezekiel, a prominent Indian poet, expressed his views on V.S. Naipaul's work in an essay titled "Naipaul's India and Mine." In this piece, Ezekiel acknowledged his admiration for Naipaul's novels but took issue with what he considered Naipaul's "excess" in describing India¹. He disagreed with Naipaul's critical voice about India, suggesting that Naipaul's portrayal was overly negative². Ezekiel's own perspective on India was more nuanced, and he believed that the Indian identity could not be simplified or reduced to a single narrative.

The criticisms leveled against Naipaul's work suggest a complex relationship with India, where his personal grievances may cloud his ability to fully appreciate the country's nuances. Despite this, his experiences at significant locations like the Amarnath cave reveal moments of profound impact that challenge his otherwise critical stance.

Conclusion:

In essence, Naipaul's depiction of India in "An Area of Darkness" relies heavily on his Western preconceptions and his initial, overwhelming encounter with Indian society. The book exposes his troubled psyche and the profound shock he experienced in India, which hinders an unbiased view despite his journalistic approach. While it may provoke controversy among Indian readers, the book's strength lies in its compelling style and narrative technique. Naipaul's subsequent work, "India: A Wounded

Civilization,” based on his fourth visit during the 1975 Emergency, echoes and perhaps confirms the themes of his earlier book, addressing issues like Brahminism, Hinduism, and Gandhian philosophy.

The Hindu calm, the notion that we atone in this life for past deeds, suggests that all we witness is fair and balanced, and any suffering observed should be appreciated as a form of religious theater, a reminder of our obligations to ourselves and our future incarnations.

Naipaul's stance on Hindu nationalism and Hindutva has been a subject of debate. While some view his comments as legitimizing Hindu nationalism, others see them as a critique of both Hindu and Islamic fundamentalism. His observations often reflect his broader critique of postcolonial societies and the challenges they face in the modern world. It is observed that His criticism of Hindus often revolves around the themes of historical stagnation and defeat, which he believes have been perpetuated by the religion and its social structures.

V. S. Naipaul's views on Hinduism have been subject to various interpretations. While he has been critical of certain aspects of Hinduism, it would not be accurate to label him as categorically "anti-Hinduism." His criticisms often focus on the historical impacts of religion on Indian society, such as periods of stagnation and defeat. It's important to understand that Naipaul's views are complex and should be considered within the broader context of his work and the themes he explores. His observations on Hinduism are part of his critique of postcolonial societies and their struggles with history and identity. Ultimately, Naipaul's writings on India are characterized by a deep engagement with the country's complexities, and his views cannot be neatly categorized as either anti or pro-India. They reflect his personal journey and understanding of India's postcolonial identity.

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