An Apology for Sir Vidia as a Traveller and Writer

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Abstract

This paper aims to highlight the elements of ambivalence that mark the Naipaul persona, both as a man and a writer. V.S. Naipaul has been the centre of numerous controversies for quite some time and critics are divided in their opinions about this Nobel Prize winning writer. Although revered for his fictional masterpieces especially written during the early part of his career, he became more famous because of his later non-fictional works, especially the travel narratives. It suggests that Naipaul had already become a 'traveller' in the metaphoric sense when he started to travel across the colonial spaces that constitute the routes of his colonial displacement. His narratives on these travels are the sights where the problematic of identity or identification of the writer/narrator is mostly noticeable in the subject positions available and adopted. V.S. Naipaul, often known for his rather daring observations, also appears not as an unified self but as unstable and shifting one, giving the impression of more than one self at the same moment, claiming, and jostling for attention.

Key Words: Ambivalence, postcolonial travel, exile, displacement, girmitiya, universal civilization, cosmopolitanism

It appears that everything has been said about Sir Vidia. Someone who has been in the international literary arena for quite too long with his iconic stature, his Nobel Prize (2001) appears to be the pinnacle of success and recognition. Producing books at regular intervals for the last half century, throwing up new challenges with every new book, Naipaul has remained the bone of contention for admittedly a long time. Often acclaimed as a master prose writer, even out-Englishing the English, he is celebrated for the economy and expressiveness of style. On the other hand, within the critical world of postcolonial study he has been often accused of not falling in line with those who profess "political correctness" regarding the politics of representation of the people and places with long history of colonial subjugation. It is often noticed that readers and critics violently express disagreement with the categories of analysis or knowledge he employs. They also disagree with his interpretation of situations and ideas, and question the license he enjoys while giving a personalized views in his writing whether fiction and non-fiction. That is, the master artist is accused of betraying his insincerity, prejudices or personal idiosyncrasies, along with attitudes that are not necessarily best examples of anti-colonial rhetoric. In the face of strong accusations as well as celebrations, it seems that there remains hardly anything new to be said about him than to take an obvious side as the only way out.

Against this trend, this paper attempts to view Naipaul from a fresh angle without taking the two obvious sides, or, putting him in some transparent image. For someone who had earlier declared the death of the 'novel' and started concentrating on non-fictions like travel narratives, it appears that it is possible to figure out the possible identities that are available for and used by Naipaul, which, of course, do not provide one final or stable image. The impossibility of finding the "originary" and independent identity in the postcolonial world for the colonial subjects leads to the conviction that

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Naipaul would, inevitably, be seen in terms of his shifting masks as he resolves to become a traveller in addition to his role as a writer of fiction. The role of a traveller without a home to start his travel from and return to, is itself a carefully chosen mask that Naipaul uses to negotiate the challenges thrown by the colonial discursive space that he finds himself in while trying to become a writer. And throughout his career this traveller will be seen trying to come to terms with many of the spaces that are the literal grounds of colonial creation, violence and disruption.

Even before he becomes a traveller in the literal sense of the term, Naipaul appears as a traveller in another sense. That is, as a colonial subject from Trinidad (in the "New World"), he has had to make his maiden travel to the then "centre" of the colonial world, England, to become a writer. This, of course, is part of his being already a traveller in the sense of the colonial displacement. And in doing so, he has had to abandon all the "givens" of traditional identity markers such as emotional attachment to his (home)island Trinidad in particular and the West Indies in general, or to any over-determined sense of racial identity. Given his interest in finding out his own place and the often declared positions, it becomes an interesting case to read Naipaul's travel writing as an act of wearing different masks at different moments and different sites. In other words, he ceases to appear as anything other than those very masks. What is contended, then, is that the Naipaul phenomenon can be explained if his position is problematized as a postcolonial "traveller" with marked traces of "belatedness" and "unstableness" – a clear case of impossibility to belong. That is, the very question of identity for Naipaul brings to the fore the displacement, spatial as well as temporal, inherent to the world shaped by hundreds of years of colonial intervention. Consequently, it appears imperative to take Naipaul's positioning himself as a literal as well as metaphorical traveller in the face value – that is, it is in the guise of a traveller that he can be understood in a "world" already "displaced" by European colonialism. This traveller, thus, is one who is difficult to be categorized in the available tropes of displaced people, and more so in his guise of a literal traveller and travel writer. The traditional mode of identity politics that is predicated upon taking sides, i.e. for or against a stated position appears to be incapable of taking proper care of the Naipaul phenomenon. Considering the period covering his career as a traveller, the repeated travels to the same sites on many occasions, and the changes noted in his ideas of self and others, it can be said that there can hardly be a singular truth regarding Naipaul as a traveller.

To begin, then, is to accept the fact that Naipaul is already a traveller for whom there is no "going back". Being a colonial, that is, finding oneself in one of those historic "colonies" can mean being far away from one's "home", displaced and transplanted by and in history. He is far from anywhere, and what he can do at best is to keep going, not to any home, but away from the very possibility of the same. Articulated in most of his writing, most clearly in the autobiographical fiction *The Enigma of Arrival,* (1987)he claims that he is always on transit, moving in the periphery, far away from the centre which itself is a place where he remains a foreigner. This position that resembles the modernist "exile" favoured so much by Edward Said (Reflections on Exile, 2001. p. 404)), is problematized by the literalness of Naipaul's travels across the regions mapped by European colonialism. The modernist image of

a traveller as one away from, and nostalgic about a home, has been pushed to the extreme by Naipaul's deliberate and conscious refusal to be enamoured of the same. He refuses to belong to any place of the present time, but in the impossible past that is an unhealable "wound", and chooses, at the same time, to travel through those spaces of the past as a retour, and thus deciding to dwell in the itinerary. Naipaul's insistence on this motion, with no place to guard and no frontier to defend (Said, 2001, 404), eagerness to cross borders and abandonment of fixed positions all the time: all these give him the guise of the Saidian traveller. But the irony is that instead of reading the different idioms, disguises, masks and rhetorics Naipaul uses in his travel writing, Said positions himself as one of the most vocal critics of Naipaul, accusing him of using one fixed "view" – thereby flattening his opinions on the places he visits. And this is precisely what this paper intends to resist, and to claim that Naipaul's traveller "eyes" are not "flat" or "fixed". A profound ambivalence shrouds most of his writing, more so his travel narratives. Even the often noticed positioning as "the colonial Hindu" self, is itself marked by ambivalence, inauthenticity and displacement.

This inauthenticity is significant in the construction of the colonial Naipaul. The "completely colonial" society of Trinidad is often seen by Naipaul as an artificial creation of colonialism, the result of the depopulating and repopulating for colonial exploitation and plunder. It was the result of the numerous "middle passages" of different people whose identity is inseparable from that infamous historic travel as well as the moments of the departures from the known worlds of their "homes" to the unknown island "colonies". But in reality, the islands remain, for most of the colonials, only transit points. And if there is anything called culture, it is the "hybrid" and translated remnants of those of these transplanted people, the debris of colonialism. Naipaul talks of the beauty of the hybrid or Creole dialect i.e. Trinidadian English and the Calypso as representative of Trinidadian culture in The Middle Passage (1962). But this hybridity of Naipaul is not always synonymous with Bhabha's hybridity (1990, 1994) as the latter is more or less synonymous with "mimicry". Naipaul is well known for his opposition to mimicry as he feels it is based more on the supposed inferiority of one's own self than on the attraction to the other that is supposed to be superior. Hybridity as a way of life is based on the tacit acceptance of the unavailability of something uncontaminated or pure or essential, on the plurality of influences, or the plural and endlessly shifting nature of the self. Mimicry, on the other hand, is a role playing that both imitates and mocks the same. Hybridity is based on acceptance, mimicry on rejection. While Naipaul's early career in travel writing is seen to have begun as mimicry (in Bhabha's sense) of the imperial travel writing, later he appears to have relied more on the hybridized colonial figure. But he has, of course, his own ideas of mimicry that are predicated upon the presence of a superior "other" and inferior "self". In fact, in many cases, he appears as a harsh critic of such mimicry among the colonized people in their blind imitation of most of the dated assumptions of the colonizers. But ironically Naipaul is accused of exactly being the same mimic man as "almost white, but not quite" by most of his detractors for his alleged blind adherence to the "borrowed" dialectics of the erstwhile colonizers.

Anjali Gera, in her Strange Moves: Girmitya Turns Cosmopolitan (2003) proposes to look at Naipaul in the figure somewhat resembling the Saidian "exile" while tracing

the specific case of the Indian diaspora in the West Indies. She has termed the diasporic experience of the people of Indian origin like those in the West Indies as the Girmitiya ideology, a term taken from the corruption of the term "agreement" between the British planters and the Indian indentured labourers. According to her, Naipaul's problem regarding the place of Trinidad in his life can be understood if one takes into consideration the Girmitya ideology held by most of the Indians till the independence of the island nation. The Girmitya was, then, still enamoured of the myth of origin, the homeland out there in India. Trinidad or the West Indies remained only a transit camp in the form of a mini-replica of India. The promise of a "passage back to India" of the agreements remained in the psyche of most of the Indians and there was the hope of an eventual return to the "homeland". In the West Indies they were still travellers waiting to move. The only problem was that India as the old centre became less and less attractive for most of them, and the only remaining centre available to travel to was England, the mother country of the colonial system they were in. For Naipaul, with his colonial education and the fantasy it had provided of becoming a writer in the fashion of the imperial ones, England held the ultimate centre where he could build his career as a writer. Gera finds that Naipaul has outgrown the Girmitya philosophy of hoping to return to the place of origin. Instead, in a strange move, she contends, he has become a cosmopolitan with his insistence on elective identity, delinking "belonging" from language, birthplace, race, nationality ("Strange Moves"). She also notes that he had chosen to "write the master script of his identity free of all given, stable identities". This transnational community, she comes to the conclusion, "is a complete possibility in the new global space". And for this he needed to travel out of the colonial Trinidad to the centre of things where he could mould a career of letters.

But cosmopolitanism without the marks of colonial displacement is another delusion. The England he had hoped to see when he "travelled to become a writer" was the England of the English texts, of advertisements, the romantic England. In his attempts at replacing the old centre of the frozen memory of the mythical Hindu India with the new centre of the colony, Naipaul finds himself a latecomer, or a belated traveller – his idea of a colonial centre outdated, his idea of the Englishness no longer tenable. This enigma of belatedness is the major theme of his Enigma of Arrival where he notes:

> How sad it was to lose that sense of width and space! It caused me pain. But already I had grown to live with the idea that things changed; already I lived with the idea of decay. (I had always lived with this idea. It was like my curse: the idea, which I had had even as a child in Trinidad, that I had come into a world past its peak.) Already I lived with the idea of death, the idea, impossible for a young person to possess, to hold in his heart, that one's time on earth, one's life, was a short thing. These ideas, of a world in decay, a world subject to constant change, and of shortness of human life, made many things bearable. (23)

If a return to India was impossible, going to England too "led to a similar feeling of wrongness". In Trinidad, he notes, feeling himself far away, he had held himself back, as it were, for "life at the centre of things." And the romantic world of the advertisements, of colonial textbooks (the classics), all these made him keep waiting for the life at the "centre". But the London he found himself in is less than perfect, less

romantic than the "centre" of his imagination. Now, what he can do at best is to "put this perfect world at another time, an earlier time". His London of the classics, of his "fantasy" that had been shattered. Now, instead of the dreamer, he becomes a critic. And the fable he has imagined and made his private mythology while seeing the painting of the antique ship by Giorgio de Chirico is emblematic of that loss of any hope of finding the centre of his life:

> Gradually there would come to him a feeling that he was getting nowhere; he would lose his sense of mission; he would begin to know only that he was lost. His feeling of adventure would give way to panic. He would want to escape, to get back to the quayside and his ship. But he wouldn't know how. I imagined some religious ritual in which, led on by kindly people, he would unwittingly take part and find himself the intended victim. At the moment of crisis he would come upon a door, open it, and find himself back on the quayside of arrival. He has been saved; the world is as he remembered it. Only one thing is missing now. Above the cut-out walls and buildings there is no mast, no sail. The antique ship has gone. The traveller has lived out his life. (*Enigma of Arrival* 106)

The traveller, now in another land that is not his home, is only a stranger, neither a friend nor an enemy, or for that matter could be equally called both; always unclassified, unidentifiable. This hybrid position could only be made sense of if Naipaul decides to map the travel he had made as a colonial traveller, and that needed a retour through the colonial map – thus becoming a belated traveller. That is, the spatial displacement can become bearable if it is extended to a temporal displacement. This belatedness will enable him only to live, to borrow Fawzia Mustafa's (1995) words, in the "areas of the past" through the "condition of the present". And the possible discrepancies that can arise out of the clubbing of the two – past and present – is there for Naipaul to see, just as we the readers do, when he travelled to Trinidad after a gap of about twenty years when he had come to a clear understanding of the island history. In *Enigma*, he notes:

> In Trinidad on my return now that rawness of nerves among the black people had become like a communal festering. It couldn't be ignored. And so to return to my island in the Orinoco, after the twenty years of writing that had taken me to a romantic vision of the place, was to return to a place that was no longer mine, in the way that it had been mine when I was a child, when I never thought it was mine or not. (174)

While Naipaul is both "here" and "somewhere else", and "now" and at some "other" time (i.e. the past), his absence for twenty years has blocked the move towards the future. Trinidad, with the newly acquired past, can serve only as a private romance for him. In the mean time Trinidad was full of unrest with the rise of racial politics that was unheard of during his childhood:

> The island meant other things to other people. There were other ways of responding to a knowledge of the world or an idea of the past, other ways of asserting the self. The Negro in Puerto Rico hanger and the man in the *Columbia* had asserted propriety, their wish to live within an old order, their wish to be treated as others. Twenty years later the Negroes of Trinidad, following those of the United States, were asserting their separateness. They simplified and sentimentalized the past; they did not, like me, wish to possess it for its romance. (ibidem)

The reference to the Trinidadians with the pronoun "they" points to a significant move on Naipaul's part, i.e., resisting the natural desire and expectations to identify with the people from his place of birth. The process of "othering" does not appear to dwell on a sentimental fellow feeling with the Trinidadians. Unlike him, they did not have the liberty to dwell in the "romance" of the past and their "present" is predicated upon the tacit acceptance of the island as their ultimate destination. By the time Naipaul succeeds in coming to an understanding of the past of the West Indies, it becomes too late for him to relate to the present West Indies with the developments of racial tensions resulting from the competing communities asserting their separateness based on a "simplified and sentimentalized past".

Naipaul talks of a "separation" of the two elements of himself, the writer and the man, while recounting his "colonial fantasy" of early career as a writer. He admits that only during the first phase of his travelling career he did start attempting their integration. The professional writer becomes a person representing the colonized people. But it should be kept in mind that "the man" referred to is not the man in his biological form. And that is why, according to him, none of his writings can be called "autobiography". In *Enigma*, Naipaul is particular about this separation when he started his travel to England with the ambition of becoming a writer:

> .... But the nature of the experience of the day encouraged a separation of the two elements in my personality. The writing, or the boy travelling to be a writer, was educated; he had a formal school education; he had a high idea of the nobility of the calling to which he was travelling to dedicate himself. But the man, of whom the writer was just a part (if a major, impelling part), the man was in the profoundest way – as a social being – untutored. (120)

His unwillingness to acknowledge his own colonial status, just like the other colonials he meets in the journey, is part of that fantasy, or the colonized mind. The realization was that a postcolonial is destined to remain attached to the colonial history, geography as well as the dynamics of movement. It is here that a comparison can be made with the proposal of a postcolonial identity put forward by John Phillips. In his "Lagging Behind" (1999) he notes that –

> Neither the identity nor the destination of the post-colonial traveller exists in advance of the diverse narratives of displacement, disorientation and alienation that emerge in the wake of European expansion. This has to do with the false or failed dialectic of colonialism in which territorial annexation and economic exploitation are justified by the sense that imperialism is basically a mission of civilization. The inevitable consequences of colonialism on the colonized, including the advantages of modernization ... also involve the production of a colonized subject in terms of retarded political, economic and social development, habits of dependency and, crucially, lack of self-confidence or at the very least a confused and deracinated cultural identity. .. For post-colonialism, the very notion of home is undecidable, at best an opening to an uncertain future. (66)

It becomes easy, then, to come to terms with Naipaul's claim as a "traveller" in the metaphorical sense. Before that, of course, one must take note of what again Naipaul claims about his writing career, that everything about him is to be found in his books; or that his life is a sequel of books, each book following the last one,

containing all the previous ones, improvising or even revising them. That is, his career as a writer could be read as a long "buildungsroman", a novel recording each and every development. These claims apart, any serious reader can detect the profound autobiographical nature of his writing, whether fiction or non-fiction. The travel writings can be seen to be profoundly invested with the metanarrative of his development as a man and a writer. And curiously, towards the later part of his career, Naipaul is seen to have "vulcanized" the various genres, thereby writing a fiction using mainly autobiographical materials in the form of a travel narrative – *An Enigma of Arrival* (1986), and another novel - *A Way in the World* (1994) with a mixture of travel narratives, autobiography and history based on his own findings through his travels and research, creating a new genre "travelon" or "novelogue" as coined by Serafin Roldan Santiago (2001). This "vulcanization" is the new way of problematizing the very nature of writing as both fictitious and non-fictitious. And what is more significant is that *The Enigma* takes the form of a novel that contains many of Naipaul's own formulation of his "traveller" persona that can well be considered helpful in understanding him as a traveller in both the literal and metaphorical senses.

Naipaul's travels following the map drawn by the spread of European colonialism can be seen as the travelling out of the same map, not by denying the existence of such a map, nor by refusing to examine that map out of protest or anger. The incessant and even repeated travels to the same spaces become a necessity for him not to recreate the map of the "colonial world" but to see the possibility of rewriting or remapping the same from the angles that were never taken into account. It can be said to be a stupendous task on his part to undertake this project of re-travelling to those colonial sites of several centuries within the short span of his lifetime. It can be argued that Naipaul has taken the task of making himself the representative of the "ex-colonized" through his re-tours through the path of colonial expansion and a re-examination of the "suppressed" histories of the colonized. These travels can be taken, then, as the dramatization of the travels made long back; his writing as the rewriting of those travels into history that is not necessarily the anti-history of the colonizers. And once the whole affair of colonial displacement is metaphorized as a form of travel, it becomes necessary to take the "mask" of a traveller than that of a "placed" man. Writing the past in the idiom of the present, following the traces of the past is itself a textual process needing extreme caution; the transient passage and tales of the traveller, then, becomes the ideal mode of representation for Naipaul.

And this approach has led him to realize that the colonial past of his ancestors was that of a profoundly dependant community, along with the Blacks, on the institution of the British empire in Trinidad. In India this leads to the discovery of the ancestry to a class of "camp followers" – following the British conquest of the Indian princely states, an already impoverished and alienated peasantry far removed from the despotic ruling classes, a people for whom the British, to some extent, were their liberators from an already crumbling but more suppressing political system. The irony of a people consciously or unconsciously accepting an aggressor as liberator from itself is a major theme often not pursued while studying Naipaul's writing. His "truce with irrationality" of the colonial history is not done with equal irrationality but with

rationality, not by "negation" but "negotiation", by taking into consideration both the positives and negatives of a history that cannot simply be reversed or undone.

His strategy, it is seen, is to live in a version of the West that represents a "universal civilization" – a civilization that exists despite the claims of a so-called totalizing colonial discourse. This universal civilization is one where "writing as a vocation" is possible even for those whose history has been profoundly disturbed by the same colonizing discourse; this vocation allows Naipaul to narrate the unspeakable history through writing, for, history is, after all, writing and textual and can be bent to ones needs. What is to be noted, however, is that writing as part of meaning making is neither a colonial privilege nor unknown to the "colonized" world. Behind Naipaul's decision to become a writer was, as he has made clear time and again, was his own father who, although, was an unsuccessful writer as well as a part time journalist. Naipaul recounts how his father gave him the writing ambition as a legacy of the "pundit's vocation (Prologue to an Autobiography). Playing with words is not necessarily a Western practice, nor is it impossible to transform the Pundit's vocation into a modern writer's profession. At the same time, the books of Joseph Conrad that his father had given him provided him with the idea that there are "other" ways of narrating the colonial history. The traces of an ancient practice, of the marginal existence in the ancient 'homeland', reliance on the colonial 'masters' for sustenance, and the existence of the 'others' within – all these have made Naipaul what he is, the ambivalent postcolonial.

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