



## **The Return of the Native: Diasporic Anxiety in, V.S. Naipaul's *India Trilogy***

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### **Abstract:**

The India Trilogy by V. S. Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness* (1964), *India: A Wounded Civilisation* (1977), and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990) is examined in this article as a prolonged literary and psychoanalytic engagement with diasporic concern. By examining these works by means of the theoretical frameworks of Paul Gilroy's idea of routes versus roots, Stuart Hall's definition of diasporic identity, and Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the unhomely, the study contends that Naipaul's fragmented, frequently antagonistic reactions to India represent a symptomatic expression of the postcolonial diasporic subject caught between an adopted colonial metropolis and an inherited homeland. This article reframes Naipaul's infamous negativity as a complex performance of belonging and estrangement, shaped by the epistemological violence of indenture, the nostalgic legacy of a twice-displaced community, and the impossibility of a stable return, rather than dismissing it as simple Eurocentrism or self-hatred. The paper also examines how Naipaul's narrative voice alternates between the longing of the exile and the detachment of the ethnographer, creating a literary space that is both critical and elegiac. The study finds a slow, although incomplete, transition from worry to qualified acceptance by following the development over all three volumes. This transition reflects both Naipaul's personal changing autobiographical consciousness and larger changes in postcolonial discourse. The results add to current discussions on postcolonial identity, diaspora literature, and representation ethics.

**Keywords:** V. S. Naipaul; diasporic anxiety; India trilogy; postcolonial identity; unhomeliness; exile; indenture; return narrative

In 1932, V.S. Naipaul was born in Trinidad into an Indo-Trinidadian family whose origins were in the indenture system that, between 1845 and 1917, transported thousands of Indians to the Caribbean. Understanding this narrative of twofold displacement—from India to the Caribbean under colonial labour contract, and then from Trinidad to metropolitan England—is essential to comprehending the deep and unique kind of diasporic angst that permeates his works about India. Naipaul came in India as a stranger to a hometown he had only encountered through the fractured oral traditions and diluted cultural practices of a twice-removed people, in contrast to the immediate postcolonial migrant who bears new, embodied memories of home. —India had always been an area of darkness for me (AAD, 30).

Despite being classified as travel writing, the India trilogy functions in a more nuanced register, combining postcolonial polemic, autobiography, cultural criticism, and psychic witness. This article contends that rather than being simple ideological stances, the trilogy's rhetorical violence, oscillation between fascination and disgust, posture of detached superiority, and barely disguised longing are best understood as symptoms of a particularly diasporic anxiety, an affective and



epistemological condition brought on by the impossible desire to belong to a place one has never truly inhabited. —I had come to find the India of my childhood... but it did not exist! (AAD 2). V. S. Naipaul's three nonfiction works about India, *An Area of Darkness* (1964), *India: A Wounded Civilisation* (1977), and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990), represent one of the most comprehensive and difficult attempts by a writer from the diaspora to reconcile with an original motherland.

The article moves further by closely examining each of the three volumes and placing them within frameworks derived from critical travel writing studies, postcolonial psychoanalysis, and diaspora theory. From the raw, wounded rejection of *An Area of Darkness* to the depressing civilisational thesis of *India: A Wounded Civilisation* to the more nuanced, if still conflicted, recognition of India's vitality in *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, it charts the development of Naipaul's diasporic concern. By doing this, the article hopes to advance a more nuanced comprehension of Naipaul's writings about India and, consequently, raise more general issues regarding the poetics and politics of diasporic return.

This article's use of the notion of diasporic anxiety draws upon and synthesises a number of postcolonial and diaspora theory streams. Homi K. Bhabha's notion of unhomeliness, first presented in *The Location of Culture* (1994) as an archetypal state of postcolonial living, lies at the heart of the analysis. According to Bhabha, the unhomely is more than just homesickness or the lack of a place to call home; rather, it is a deeper uncanniness that develops when the lines between private and public, domestic and historical, are blurred. The unhomely subject experiences both cultures as intimate and foreign at the same time, being in a transitional place between them. Naipaul's relationship with India demonstrates exactly this structure: India is the place that should feel like home but doesn't a place that is both intensely foreign and intimate due to lineage, cultural remnants, and physical similarities.

Equally important here is Stuart Hall's seminal definition of diasporic identity as being formed by placement rather than essence—that is, by the relations of difference and similarity through which persons negotiate their identities across numerous cultural contexts. In his seminal essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1990), Hall makes a distinction between two conceptions of cultural identity: one that recognises identity as a 'production' that is 'never complete, always in process,' and the other that treats identity as a shared, stable essence rooted in a shared historical experience. It is possible to interpret Naipaul's works about India as a protracted, agonising struggle between these two models: the rising, uneasy realisation that he is unable to find a recoverable, essential Indian identity that would alleviate his experience of displacement.

The conceptual division between 'roots' and 'routes' in Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) sheds more light on the unique nature of Indo-Caribbean diasporic consciousness. According to Gilroy, diasporic identities are created by the many paths of migration, translation, and metamorphosis that make up diaspora as a cultural creation rather than by unbroken ties to a place of origin. The Indo-Trinidadian population from which Naipaul originated was characterised



by paths that had completely altered whatever roots they claimed, creating a culture that was new and hybrid rather than strictly Indian or Caribbean. One of the main expressions of Naipaul's diasporic angst is his rejection of this hybridity, his insistence on finding true identity either in a Western metropolitan modernity he uncomfortably lives or in a pure Indianness he cannot reach.

Of the three volumes, Naipaul's description of his first year in India, *An Area of Darkness*, is arguably the most blatantly nervous. The term itself indicates a failure: India is set up as obscurity, opacity, and disarray rather as illumination or homecoming. The articulation of diasporic expectancy and its quick frustration in the book's first pages is noteworthy. When Naipaul arrives in Bombay, India, he claims to have an inheritance of aspirations and memories, believing that India is 'the real world' and that his life in Trinidad is a shrunken, provincial replica of it. This fantasy is almost instantly destroyed by what he comes across. —I felt I had been misled about India all my life! (AAD 43).

The well-known and frequently referenced remark about excrement in public areas has been denounced as Orientalist disdain and praised as truthful reporting. —Indians defecate everywhere... They do not see it as a problem! (AAD 74). However, seeing it through the lens of diasporic fear reveals a more nuanced interaction. Naipaul's expression of visceral disgust is not just the response of a Westernised witness to an alien cultural practice; rather, it is the response of someone whose sense of self is endangered by what he observes. India's apparent poverty and imagined chaos not only shock his sensibilities but also threaten the fundamental framework of meaning that underpins his diasporic identity if India is the origin, the source of authentic identity that should anchor his relocated existence.

Anxiety is also necessary to comprehend Naipaul's criticism of Indian political culture in *An Area of Darkness*, especially his disdain for what he perceives as India's unwillingness to face its own shortcomings and his rejection of Nehru's modernisation agenda as shallow. In addition to being a sign of his internalisation of colonial hierarchies, his emphasis on holding India to a strict, critical standard that is specifically derived from Western liberal modernity serves as a protection mechanism against the prospect of identification. Naipaul doesn't have to lament his split from India if it is harshly condemned and shown to be lacking; the inability to fit in becomes an escape rather than a loss.

In *India: A Wounded Civilisation*, Naipaul primarily relies on a dichotomy between the active, world-changing rationalism he equates with modernity and the meditative retreat he associates with Hindu philosophy. —India is a wounded civilization that has not recovered from its past! (*India: AWC* 11). He interprets the Emergency as the inevitable manifestation of a societal propensity to suspend critical judgement in the face of charismatic authority rather than as a political anomaly. However, Naipaul's civilisational thesis is just as important from the standpoint of diaspora theory as a mental development. In terms of diasporic worry, the idea of a 'wounded civilisation' serves a particular purpose: it shifts the wound from the diasporic subject, where it more accurately dwells, to India itself. Naipaul can project the sense of harm and



inadequacy that the diasporic condition itself creates by portraying India as the site of historical trauma and failure. In this interpretation, the wound is Naipaul's own, externalised and ascribed to the motherland; it is the wound of indenture, relocation, colonial education, and the impossibility of belonging. *India: A Million Mutinies Now* is organised around a long series of interviews with Indians from a wide range of backgrounds, including trade unionists and industrialists, Sikh activists and Hindu nationalists, Brahmin priests and Bombay underworld figures, Dalit community organisers and Tamil separatists. —A million mutinies now were breaking out in India (*India: AMMN* 13). In *India: A Million Mutinies*, Naipaul more consistently lets India speak, marking a break from the monological certainties of the former volumes. —People were beginning to speak for themselves (*India: AMMN* 515). In *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, the narrative's autobiographical element is also more overt than in the previous volumes. Naipaul frequently revisits his own family history, the tale of his grandfather's indentured journey from India, and the Indo-Trinidadian community's culture as he currently perceives it. The attention to detail in these sections is noteworthy, but perhaps more so is the lack of the defensive disdain that defined his previous self-presentation. Although diasporic anxiety is still present in times of estrangement and detachment, it is now accompanied by a feeling of acceptance and even thankfulness.

Brah's distinction between 'homing desire' and 'homeland desire' can be used to map the evolution of the three volumes onto the theoretical trajectory. In *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul is consumed by the unattainable desire for homeland—a return to his origins that will end his displacement. This yearning has been transformed into its opposite in *India: A Wounded Civilisation*, a hostile rejection of India that is the exact opposite of the desire it hides. There is a tentative trend in *India: A Million Mutinies Now* toward the more modest, more attainable homing desire, which is the creation of a more livable relationship to one of multiple cultural homes rather than the restoration of a lost origin. This is a more constructive way to deal with diasporic anxiety rather than a solution to it.

Though in a peculiarly contradictory sense, V. S. Naipaul's *India Trilogy* is firmly rooted in the postcolonial condition. Born into an indentured Indo-Caribbean family in Trinidad, educated at Oxford, and influenced by the cultural norms of the former coloniser, Naipaul is himself a postcolonial subject. Because of this construction, he is situated at the crossroads of several postcolonial conflicts, such as those between the worldviews of the colonised and the coloniser, between the adopted metropolis and the ancestral country, and between insider authority and outsider alienation. In *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul replicates what Edward Said called Orientalism—the propensity to portray the non-Western world as backward, illogical, and in need of reform—by using a framework mostly derived from Western civilisation to evaluate India. However, Naipaul's viewpoint is that of a colonial subject who has internalised the standards of the coloniser and applied them to his own ancestral culture, demonstrating Orientalism from inside. This directly relates to Frantz Fanon's concept of colonial alienation, which is the psychological harm experienced by colonised individuals who internalise colonial values.



Despite its critical aims, Naipaul's diagnosis of India's post-independence problems in *India: A Wounded Civilisation* reflects colonial developmental thought. Naipaul's situation is well captured by Ashis Nandy's concept of the 'intimate enemy'—the coloniser assimilated into the colonised subject's psyche—since his most critical analysis of India is carried out using the identical intellectual instruments that colonialism imposed upon him. But by *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, a trend away from colonialism is apparent. Instead of viewing India's social and political changes as chaos, Naipaul starts to see them as the rise of postcolonial self-assertion, or the reclaiming of voice, agency, and identity by disadvantaged populations. This is consistent with the idea put forth by Homi Bhabha that postcolonial resistance arises from the periphery of imperial discourse.

This article has argued that the best way to interpret V. S. Naipaul's India trilogy is as a prolonged engagement with diasporic anxiety, an affective and epistemological condition brought on by the unique historical experience of Indo-Caribbean indenture and double displacement as well as the unattainable longing for an original homeland that can stabilise and reconcile a fractured identity. The paper has followed the development of Naipaul's relationship with India from the raw wound of *An Area of Darkness* through the defensive intellectualism of *India: A Wounded Civilisation* to the qualified, ambivalent acceptance of *India: A Million Mutinies Now* by reading the trilogy through the frameworks of Bhabha's unhomeliness, Hall's processual model of diasporic identity, Gilroy's routes/roots distinction, and Brah's homing desire.

This reading's importance goes beyond how one author's work is interpreted. It addresses more general issues regarding the politics and poetics of diasporic literature, such as the ethical obligations and epistemological limitations that influence the writing of return, the relationship between critical judgement and autobiographical investment, and the ways in which the historical violence of colonial labour migration continues to shape literary and cultural production across generations. Naipaul's writings from India are hardly perfect examples of diasporic literature; they are, in many ways, seriously defective and ideologically compromised works. However, they continue to be essential resources for considering the state of displacement and the unachievable yearning for home that is its most enduring legacy, precisely because of their shortcomings and the transparency with which they register the contradictions and costs of the diasporic subject position.

By comparing Naipaul's India trilogy to other diasporic return narratives, such as those of Indo-Caribbean authors like David Dabydeen and Shani Mootoo or those of South Asian diasporic writers in Britain and North America, future research could effectively expand the comparative aspects of this analysis. In addition to shedding light on the particulars of Naipaul's diasporic formation, such comparative research would advance a more distinct and geographically nuanced understanding of the variety of postcolonial diasporic experience and its literary manifestations. Thus, the trilogy shows a shift from mindless replication of colonial epistemology to a more authentically postcolonial recognition of India's vitality and the author's own involvement in the systems he criticizes. When taken as a whole, the trilogy is a postcolonial work because it enacts



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the inconsistencies, traumas, and ambivalences that colonialism and its aftermath leave in the subjectivity of people it displaced on every page, rather than because it presents a cogent anticolonial thesis.

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