

The Religious Vision of V.S.Naipaul

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Abstract

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, the living legend of the literary realm, is undoubtedly one of the most prominent interpreters of the twentieth century consciousness. Although a man of cosmopolitan mentality, evincing a keen interest in everything existing under the sun, he mainly concentrates on the sad plight of the so called half-made societies of the Third World, living mostly in Asia, Africa, and America. Naipaul prefers to assume the role of a chronicler for writing "suppressed histories" in an impartial, dispassionate, and objective manner. Using his great perceptive powers, he gives us an "incorruptible scrutiny" of half-made societies. Naturally for his tremendous efforts, Naipaul was honored with world's highest literary award, the Nobel Prize in 2001¹.

Keywords: Rituals, cultural universal, secularism, cultural traditions

Introduction

In his "incorruptible scrutiny," Naipaul gives full coverage to every aspect of the cultures of the half-made societies. He considers their history, their social customs, and manners. Since religion is an essential ingredient of culture, he goes on to give an account of their religious beliefs, rites, and rituals and their roles in shaping the life of the people who observe them. But in view of his professed atheism and condemnation of all forms of religion as stifling, sentimentally seduced by the past, irrational, and antiquated, his religious- vision becomes a little problematic. For this reason his vision can hardly be interpreter in orthodox terms. To begin with, religion is an essential ingredient of social life. It is, what William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt phrase as, "a cultural universal."³ No society can exist without it. All societies whether Western or Eastern need a religious system to sustain their values and to solve their human social and psychological problems. Their survival depends on the dynamism of their religious institutions which energize their beliefs and hold together their social structure. However, such a complex phenomenon, central as much to the primitive societies as to the modern ones, cannot be defined in precise terms. Centuries of the use or rather the misuse of the term 'religion' has made its connotation vague. Nevertheless, for a proper understanding of Naipaul's religious vision we have no option but to develop at least a working definition of religion as a term and as a concept. Furthermore, as Naipaul's consciousness embodies the legacies of two different cultural realms, the Occidental and the Oriental, we have to take into account their views on such a subject of paradoxical nature.

Religious Beliefs

Obviously there is a radical difference between the Occidental and Oriental visions. They appear like two currents drifting in opposite directions, the former towards materialism and the latter towards spiritualism. However, it is not the whole truth. In our view the religions of both the worlds tread the same path which fuses the terrestrial and celestial interests. For both of them religion offers a vision of cosmic unity, a way of life, and an adhesive power that binds together and that serves as an anchor and steadies the boat of life in the turmoil of the world. It has countless resources at its command to sustain human life, deities to worship, churches to pray, scriptures to read, rites, rituals, myths, and legends to observe, festivals to celebrate and above all symbols to understand their world and their place in it. It has an ethical code to organize man's social life, social and psychological modes to solve the problems of existence. Moreover it has a relevant rationale to prop up the scientific culture that threatens the existence of old forms of religion. These are precisely the features that characterize Naipaul's conception of religion. Naipaul, in spite of his professed atheism, has some specific and well defined notions of religion. But his notions are neither exclusively Western nor Eastern or Indian. Neither does he go exclusively for the higher forms of religion, concerned with mystical experience nor for its lower forms, dealing



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with occult practices. His approach is somewhat existential. Interestingly Naipaul relates religion with the totality of human experience. For him religion is not so much concerned with spiritualism as with the social and political problems. At the same time, he believes, it is closely related to history, inspiring human beings to pursue the past of their country in a religious spirit for sustaining their social institutions. Eventually Naipaul's vision has four dimensions, Hindu, Islamic, Christian, and composite. Nevertheless, Naipaul feels the charm and beauty of Hindu or Brahminical rituals and partly experiences their transporting quality. At the same time, Naipaul underscores the importance of Islam and Christianity as the way of life and the relevance and need for a composite religion in the modern pluralistic societies. However, throughout his discussion, Naipaul maintains a secular stance, with atheistic lineaments. As for Naipaul's atheistic pretensions, let us concede that he never has been an atheist in the strict sense of the term. Indeed he condemns religion, but condemns only its sentimental, irrational, and outdated forms. He criticises religious rituals but not because they lack intrinsic values but because the adherents of these values do not care to explain their rational basis. He condemns them because they are long, monotonous, and tedious.

Obviously Naipaul does not like these ceremonies, as they are too long and are in a language which he does not understand. He finds them boring, because they lack variety. However, this repulsion for religion has some other reasons that are rooted in his mental make up. He does not believe in rituals for that matter in magic, and myth, for they involve a belief in fate, which clashes with the idea of human freedom. As a staunch adherent of freedom it is hardly possible for him to accept anything that goes against his world vision. Significantly, even while criticising rituals, Naipaul is not against all rituals. Rather he takes a keen interest in rituals that are relevant to the new environment and that can be a little fascinating. Naipaul makes a tremendous effort to adapt and adjust Hindu rituals and myths to an alien atmosphere. The most specific instance of this adjustment or adaptability can be found in his creative transformation of the Indian classics. It is interesting to see how Naipaul goes on to modify the teachings of the Gita in *The Mystic Masseur*. Besides he goes on to invert and distort the Ramayana in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Obviously Naipaul is prepared to accept those Indian books, rites, and rituals which are made relevant to the Trinidadian environment.

Reservations notwithstanding, Naipaul never seriously questions the importance of religious ceremony, rituals or for that matter religion in human life. As his uncle contends, his "denial is an admissible type of Hinduism"⁴ He rejects only that form of Hinduism which differentiates people, which believes in caste-system, and which is noted for uncleanness. But the Brahminical Hinduism which stands for values begins to take roots very early in his life. According to Sudha Rai, "Naipaul himself is amazed that the Hindu base of his childhood and youth could continue intact in the diversified culture of

Trinidad. A strong, inviolate Hindu culture lives in the very heart of the clash of several ethnic groups in the Trinidad of Naipaul's growing years." Obviously Naipaul does not find fault with all religious forms. He criticizes only the forms which are outdated which are detrimental to human progress. But for other forms he is quite positive. In his monumental work *A House for Mr. Biswas*, he is quite alive to religious traditions. He expresses his sorrow to the neglect of the traditional religion and is quite concerned for the corrosion of the Hindu traditional customs and beliefs. However, Naipaul finds fault with all theoretical forms of religion -- the forms that deal with abstract problems which have a very thin connection with actual life. The form in which he evinces keen interest is a form of applied religion or religion in practice that is dynamic or developing and that includes new facts of human experience. Though a secularist: he does not hesitate to appreciate the role of religion in the societies in which it is mixed with politics. In his journey to the South, he becomes interested in the versatility of religion in the South and the improbable alliances it sustains" (Nixon 164). He keenly observes the alignment of politics and religion. He finds how the Christian fundamentalism in the South weds politics with religion.

Evidently Naipaul's religious vision is not so much entrenched in books as in real experience. Though a well-read man in the nuances of religious literature, he prefers a religion which is attuned to the strains of actual life. Influenced by his reading of Albest-Comus and Jean Paul Satre, he cultivates an existential view of life. But overcoming the existential rejection of religion, he goes on to develop a religious view which is relevant to modern human condition. Naipaul frames his religious vision in view of the religious pluralism of his country. His modified Hinduism is framed in confrontation with Islam and Christianity.

For all intents and purposes Naipaul's religious vision develops under the shadow of Christianity which confronts and questions his Hindu beliefs. His Brahminical sensibility which has its roots in his Trinidadian experience is seriously undermined by the Christian traditions. Naipaul's vision is conditioned by yet another conflict, the conflict between Hinduism and Islam. It seems that in the beginning Naipaul has a prejudiced opinion about Islam. Later he becomes a little indulgent about it, without shedding his earlier view point. In his opinion Islam is a complicated religion, being neither philosophical nor speculative. It is a revealed religion with a prophet and complete set of rules which produce fear and promise reward. Despite his interaction with the people of different Islamic countries. Naipaul's view of Islam remains almost unchanged.

Ideological Conflict

Naipaul does not cease to criticize Islam for time to come. He criticizes Islam not so much for its lack of metaphysics but for the threat it poses to modern civilization. According to Selwyn R. Cudjoe, "his ideological onslaught against Islam was the result of his deeply entrenchment fear that the Islamic way

might subvert the 'real' civilizing order in which he had placed so much faith."6 Naipaul is critical of Islam for its fundamentalist beliefs and for the formation of Islamic States. Presumably Naipaul's criticism of religion, or to be precise traditional religions, is energized by his deep rooted idea of the need for a composite culture, based on a composite religion. Naipaul's religious ideal, in the fitness of things, is neither Hindu or Christian, nor Muslim. It is a blending of all enjoining a belief in living rituals in which every citizen, Hindu, or Muslim, or Christian, should participate. Naipaul's composite religion has its faith in religious books of all traditions. He provides a blue-print of this religion in books like *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Suffrage of Elvira*.

Probably the most important feature of Naipaul's religious vision is that it is rooted in his experiences of life, as Trinidadian Hindu, as an intellectual living in England, and above all as a traveller in countries remarkable for their religious beliefs. Champa Rao Mohan believes that "[m]uch of Naipaul's writing issues from his personal experience of being a displaced member of a minority race and religion in Trinidad." Eventually Naipaul belongs to the East Indians who were brought as indentured agricultural labourers to the West Indian colonies. Incidentally these Indians were able to preserve their Indian culture, their rites, as well as much of their customs and traditions, The East Indians had kept intact the social structure of their ancestors. Besides, they continued to observe their religious practices and kept alive cultural traditions. They carried on the practice of chanting stanzas from *The Ramayana*, believing like their Indian forefathers that the chanting would take them to the abode of God. Naipaul is indebted to his East Indian ancestry for the "corpus of myth, religion, and philosophy that predominates in Naipaul's early fiction". (Cudjoe 10)

Religious Literature and Comparison

In spite of the encroachment of the Western cultural idea, Naipaul continues his faith in the Aryan culture of India. He remains to hold fast to his Brahminism. It is no wonder that he envisions himself, "being one of the early Aryan horsemen who conquered India and created its great Sanskrit culture." Furthermore, in spite of his bitter criticism of the old Hinduism, Naipaul never ceases to be a true Brahmin. He curbs his rationalism to adhere to Brahminic devotion to intellectual pursuits. Likewise, Naipaul's Trinidadian childhood is also important in the sense it brings him in contact with a mixed-race or rather with a new race of people which has worked out a synthesis of three cultures, to which the East Indians eventually provide the fourth dimension. Cudjoe discusses this merger in his inimitable style. "It must be remembered," Cudjoe states, "that in the colonization of the Caribbean a new race of people mixture of European, American Indian, and African came into being: a major synthesis of peoples that brought together the best of their three cultures, The coming of the East Indians to the Caribbean in 1838 as indentured labourers added In Spite another dimension to the hegemonic dominance of the African

cultural element, particularly in Guyana and Trinidad" (Cudjoe 13)

When Naipaul comes in contact with these people he learns about their religious practices, their customs, and manners. He goes on to describe his experience in books of his early period. *The Mystic Masseur* (1957). *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958), *The Miguel Street* (1959). *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), as also in *The Middle Passage* (1962). It is mainly his encounter with the mixed race which is responsible for the idea of a composite religion.

Naipaul's early life is also instrumental in producing a dualistic religious vision. It is interesting to find that Naipaul has a double vision of things. The reader gets confused when he finds two contradictory strains in him existing side by side. In case of his religious vision as well the reader is baffled, as he finds that Naipaul blows hot and cold in the same breath. This dualism can be traced from his very childhood, which made him aware of the two distinct worlds, the world of his house and the world outside it. The consciousness of the two worlds existing side by side in his mind continues to swell. Naipaul is unable to remove this rift. His life in London and his visit to India goes on to widen it more and more. Ultimately his broken image of India goes on to break his life itself. His journey to India, he confesses, "broken my life in two.

This split-consciousness becomes instrumental in shaping Naipaul's vision literary as well as religious. Gordon Rohlehr finds him "caught up in two voids" (Cudjoe 6). Naipaul actually hankers after existentialism which he receives from Comus and the Eastern aestheticism. He eventually becomes the victim of double loyalties that compel him to reshuffle his stance frequently to find a common stand. "Because his loyalties," writes Cudjoe, "stood midway between the Eastern and Western visions of the world, he gave the world a complex narrative of Eastern acceptance and Western striving: a complex retelling of the greatest epic of the East in language and cadence that the West could understand and accept" (Cudjoe 15).

In his literary forms as well, Naipaul has to shape new modes that can articulate his terrible vision of the Western individualism and the Indian religion, "The novels," as Bruce King explains, "tend to have double structure in which events are both seen from a Western perspective - causality, individual will - and allude to a Hindu explanation in which the world of desire and things is an illusion consisting of cycles of creation and destruction. The European perspective dominates, but the Indian world view contests it and has its attractions" (King 15).

Naipaul's Hindu world-view, as Bruce King's remarks, is dominated by "a Brahmin's devotion to study scholarship, philosophical thought, vocation." King further adds that "there is a Brahminian consciousness of cleanliness, purity, food and the various duties expected of a well-regulated life" (King 15).

It is because of this double vision that Naipaul's attitude towards the mother country of his forefathers is marked by the conflicting elements of

fascination and repulsion. In his life as well, he betrays contradictory elements, Though a thorough materialist and a professed atheist, he evinces a keen interest in spiritualism, as his characters and autobiographical passages go on to reveal. Bruce King, while tracing his conflicting attitude, goes on to state, "Naipaul satirizes Indian notions of fate, but his novels are usually structured around such Indian notions as the four stages of an ordered life student, marriage and house owner, retreat into study as a preparation for total withdrawal from worldliness. There is a continuing conflict in his writings between the chaotic freedom of the world and the fulfilment of Brahmin ideals" (King 15).

Naipaul's education and London life also play an important role in shaping his religious vision. His education in Chaguanas Government School and Tranquillity Boys School in Port of Spain, introduces him to a wider world and to different traditions of religion. Thereafter his life in Queen's Royal College and Oxford further enlarges his area of experience. The new environment in which he is placed brings tremendous changes in his mentality and religious outlook. Away from the psychological confines of his family and the enclosed world of the Hindu community, he now comes in touch with a much larger post-colonial world teeming with new spirit and moving with new energy. Coming closer to different literary and religious traditions Naipaul further expands his mental horizons. While confronting his new environment, he eventually cultivates a spirit of disinterestedness, a cardinal Hindu and Buddhist virtue.

Though Naipaul's London experience becomes instrumental in cultivating the virtue of disinterestedness which comes with non-attachment and brings an expansion in his mental world, it also makes him aware of his alienation. This sense of alienation makes him incapable of aligning himself either to the Western community or to its eastern counterpart. Even though this position enables him to develop two different perspectives, it makes him a wanderer all the same, without an established identity. As we have discussed earlier, Naipaul's doubleness or dichotomy does not allow him to develop a well defined religious vision. His double-nature leads him to a faithless state of scepticism, which seriously hampers his power of reaching firm conclusions. He remains as ever, a man stranded, a man ostensibly belonging to many worlds, but in reality to none of them.

Since in his Indian visit, Naipaul behaves like a European, he is unable to identify himself with India, Indians, and the Indian ways of life. By allowing his Brahmin sensibility to be overshadowed by his Western vision, he loses his perceptive powers. Since he does not reinforce his consciousness of Hindu beliefs; he is unable to penetrate to the core of Hindu religious thought. He cannot understand the unified vision of Hinduism. Furthermore, as he visits India, he becomes painfully conscious of the chasm between the India of his imagination and the real India. He realises that he lacks ability to understand the real India.

Naipaul's failure to come to grips with Hinduism in India makes him all the more alienated. Furthermore, in India, "he felt a new sense of awareness and came to realize the extent to which his identity had been circumscribed in Trinidad and England" (Cudjoe 85) Nevertheless, there is a silver lining in the dark clouds of his failed-visit. When he comes to verbalise his agonised experience of the Indian trip in *An Area of Darkness*, he "draws upon the Bhagavad Gita and other Indian religious texts to explain the Eastern world" (Cudjoe 82). This attempt proves his increasing love of the ancient Indian religious texts as also his faith in the modern version of the Hindu religion. Although his attitude remains ambivalent, it marks something positive in his attitude towards India and Hinduism.

Religious Observation and Tours

In his first visit, India appears to Naipaul a strange and elusive country, an area of darkness; but in the second it appears as a wounded civilization undermined by the alien invaders and the imperialists. However, in the second visit, Naipaul is able to come to terms with its strangeness and to remove his religious misgivings. But he is still confused, as his mind is suspended between acceptance and rejection. Naipaul's African experience is not at all enlightening from the religious point of view. It simply extends his prejudices against the black people. Nevertheless, the trip is rewarding in another sense, as it dramatizes the difficulties of an atheist like him. Through the character of Salim, the protagonist of *A Bend in the River* which embodies his African experience in the main, Naipaul mirrors his own difficulties and a sense of own security.

However, there is one aspect of religion, to be precise the African aspect that leaves its tremendous impression on the Caribbean religious prejudices. This aspect is related to the magical practices of Africans. Naipaul is extremely critical of magical practices followed by the Trinidadian Negroes.

Indeed Naipaul's African experience draws a blank but his experience with the Muslim country is not only enlightening but also fruitful. It compels him to revise his negative image of the Muslims, built during his Trinidadian days. To him Muslims were "somewhat more different than others." Just from his boyhood days he became highly suspicious of them. As he writes, "they were not to be trusted; they would always do you down, and point was given to this by the presence close to my grandmother's house of a Muslim, in whose cap and gray beard, avowals or his especial difference, lay every sort of threat" (Rai 16). Though Naipaul revises his attitude towards Muslims, some of his earlier notions continue to exist in his mind. To him Islam remains an imperfect religion lacking in metaphysics and true civilization. It is not progressive in the sense that it fails to reap the fruits of modern ideas in a proper spirit. It still sticks to its old beliefs of fear and reward.

Conclusion

Islam, in the opinion of Naipaul, is impervious to social and political changes and still remains medieval. Obviously he fails to understand

Islam much in the same way as he had failed to understand Hinduism. Here again Naipaul sees Islam with jaundiced eyes, regarding it as a threat to the fragility of the dominant Christian culture with which he aligned himself (Cudjoe 200). He analyses and interprets its dogma and religious practices with a purpose in his mind. Cudjoe points out that Naipaul begins his Islamic journey with a fixed mind. He wants to find out reasons why the followers of Islam undermine their relationship with the Western world. For this purpose he visits several Islamic countries including Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia and goes on to embody his experiences in two of his masterpieces - *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* and *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples*. In these books Naipaul examines every aspect of Islam including its involvement with politics. Though his visits improve his vision to some extent, his reservations remain intact. He sees no future for the followers of Islam, African religions, and Hinduism. As for Islam, he believes that its followers will involve themselves in violence and perish.

Obviously, Naipaul's travels for finding a religious vision end in fiasco. His travel experiences contribute very little to improve his vision. He remains torn between his Hindu birth as well as upbringing and his Western education as also an inflated love for Christianity. It is because of this overpowering love that he cannot touch the core of either Hinduism or Islam or even of Christianity. Nevertheless, Naipaul is successful in presenting before us a blue-print of the composite religion and paves the way for a world religion acceptable to the entire humanity.

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