

SELF PORTRAYAL THROUGH TRAVEL NARRATIVES

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Received: 20 Dec 2017

Accepted: 29 Dec 2017

Published: 25 Jan 2018

ABSTRACT

Travelling is the best process to gain knowledge; there are many others like Vikram Seth and V S Naipaul, who have gained so many new perspectives towards life by just travelling through many places. This research paper aims to reflect on all the issues which come across in any travel experience.

The hidden truths and facts are revealed to a person while travelling; an improved vision is generated with the new real experiences which helps interpret the traditional or new problems of life.

KEYWORDS: *Truths and Facts, Person While Travelling, New Real Experiences*

INTRODUCTION

It has been a process for a traveler to face new things and add on new experiences in life; ultimately a traveler like Vikram Seth is left enriched with lots of fine experiences about religion, language, culture and life. In 1981, Vikram Seth was 29 and at Nanjing University. In the summer traveling on a 'guided tour' in Turfan, he was seized with the thought to return his home Delhi from China via Tibet. He thought this would be his first book.

It was before he embarked on that remarkable novel -- *Golden Gate*-- and a decade before the *Suitable Boy* put him to his rightful place as a lyrical master of the modern novel. The Cultural Revolution in China had just ended a few years ago (in 1976) and now much-celebrated decade of economic reforms was still in fancy. Seth used diplomacy, charm, bull-headedness, and his knowledge of Chinese to make his way through uncharted territory. Hitchhiking with chain-smoking truckers across isolated parts of China, dealing with *guiding shi guiding* (regulations are regulations) from small-town bureaucrats, the hospitality of strangers, and facing the legacy of the misadventure of China's Cultural Revolution.

Just before he enters Tibet on August 14 --a day before India's Independence Day-- and while reading V.S Naipaul, he thinks seriously about the two countries. "The Chinese have a better system of social care in comparison to India. Their aged people do not starve and their children are basically healthy. By and large, the people are well clothed, very occasionally in rags." There is question in his mind that, would you prefer a life in China or in India with its chaos, lower standard of living, but greater personal freedoms? Seth was studying the demographic effects on the Chinese economy, a topic that was ahead of its time and would have made more interesting study a decade later when the huge mass of Chinese workers were set loose in the new economic climate. In 1981 China was still a lot like India, but the young Seth, who arrived in China for economic studies admits that he was surprised about its achievements.

As Binlang Xie (his Chinese name) in his journey sees tons of Buddhist temples were destroyed. At Dunhuang and then again in Tibet, Seth is brought to tears seeing the destruction. In Tibet, Seth decides not to visit the Gandian monastery after being saddened by the destruction to Ramache. Similar to Peter Hessler, Seth as Mr.Xie was also woken up in the middle of the night for not registering properly with the local authorities.

Vikram Seth is a novelist, but, he is always a poet. Whatever genre he picks to write, his traditional style of rhyming poetry always makes a cameo appearance. He wrote an alternative table of contents for his magnum opus -- A Suitable Boy -- in rhyming verse.

Cold in the mud logged truck, I watch the southern sky: A shooting star brings luck; A satellite swims by. The Silver River flows Eventless through the night. The moon against the snows Shines insular and bright. Here we three, cooped, alone, Tibetan, Indian, Han, Against a common dawn Catch what poor sleep, we can, And sleeping drag the same Sparse air into our lungs, And dreaming each of home Sleep talk in different tongues.

Seth improved himself linguistically in Chinese as Seth writes about his dream of inaugurating six-month intensive course in Chinese, where each week corresponds to a year in the life of a Chinese child and the Mayonnaise Principle which states that learning a language is like making mayonnaise: add too much at once and the mixture will separate out.

Like any journey, he learns about another culture, and also learns a lot about himself in the process as well. In London he missed dalmoth, in China he missed California wine, and he wonder what he will miss when he wanders further. Summarizing the nostalgia of a wanderer, he writes: I sometimes seem to myself to wander around the world merely accumulating material for future nostalgias. Seth dedicated the book to the people who he met on the way. People who could very exasperating dealing officially, but were most helpful and accommodating when dealing personally.

From Heaven Lake also shows Seth's abiding interest in the encounter with different cultures: in the course of his journey he discusses the influence of Islam in Sinkiang, the interaction of Tibetans and Han Chinese, and the contrast between Indian and Chinese life. The hardships as well as the pleasures of travel, both of which are described in verse:

Cold in the mud logged truck I watch the southern sky: A shooting star brings luck; A satellite swims by. The Silver River flows Eventless through the night. The moon against the snows Shines insular and bright. Here we three, cooped, alone, Tibetan, Indian, Han, Against a common dawn Catch what poor sleep, we can, And sleeping drag the same Sparse air into our lungs, And dreaming each of home Sleep talk in different tongues.

From Heaven Lake was written during Seth's second year in China. Seth's *Heaven Lake* starts with "Turfan" which happens to be the first chapter of the book. Seth becomes a member of a party of organized tourists of Nanjing University and proceeds on a journey that lasts three weeks. Seth and his foreign companions set out from Turfan, a nondescript town in the province of Xinjiang. It being a conduct tour Seth and his companions have thrown all their cares and anxieties to the winds and do not bother about guides, transport and accommodation. But the stringent time schedule in a conducted tour has its drawbacks as Seth points out. He has to move "from sight to sight, savoring nothing".¹

Seth desires to have a unique experience of hitch-hiking this influences his decision of dissociating himself from his fellow tourists of hitch-hiking. So, at the next stop Urumquai, he parts company. As an itinerant traveler, he is aware of the restrictions which the Chinese authorities impose on the travel plans of foreign students. It is incumbent on the part of

every foreign student to carry a travel pass for every place of visit. Nor do the Chinese savor the idea of foreign students hitchhiking here and there. Readers of *Heaven Lake* especially in the Chapter two & three of the book are appalled by Seth's descriptions of the picturesque beauty of the place. Seth introduces the anecdote of the cap-seller to impart a story-telling interest in his travelogue. The ethnic population of Xinjiang is primarily Muslims, who speak the Uighur language. It becomes impossible for Seth to communicate with them as neither of them understands the each other's language. A schoolboy who understands the Mandarin Chinese of Seth acts as the interpreter between the cap-seller and Seth. Seth scribbles the word "Hindustan" in Urdu script which closely resembles the Arabic script in Uighur language. The cap-seller is so delighted to read this word that he charges Seth a price lesser than its market-price. He gladly re-stitches the cap to strengthen it.²

Seth is a post-colonial writer but he is never bothered by questions of identity in as much as other post-colonial writers. Small wonder his interest in expressing the geographical, socio-economic and cultural facets of a region; the area near and about the Lake is so breath-taking in its beauty that Seth grows euphoric in its praise. It is "an area of such natural beauty that I could live here, content for a year." Seth's idea of bliss conforms to that of the Chinese sage Confucius. Confucius underscored that the only way by which he could attain supreme bliss was by taking a dip in the river, Yi. He would then follow it up by chanting poetry and walking homewards. The glory of the sunset which ravished Keats and stimulated Shelley has a similar effect on Seth. The Kaleidoscopic changes in the sky are partly reminiscent of Hardy's description of nocturnal sky in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Seth's description of the sunset, of the deserts of Dunhuang reads like a picture gallery. Then exultant Seth makes a passionate outburst on stretching the sunset but he is also capable of depicting the experience as an event. For instance he says: *The sunset tonight in this vapid flat-roofed town is beautiful-tufts of pink and bands of yellow at the close, and the freshness of skies washed by rain.*³ Even Stevenson who described his walk in lyrical passages in *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes* does not create the verbal magic which Seth does. Stevenson writes: *The night had come; the moon had been shining for a long while upon the opposite mountain; when on turning a corner my donkey and I issued us into her light.*⁴

Seth brings an element of novelty and contrast when he describes a lake in Nanhu, "the lake is cool, but warm bands stretch sensuously across it".⁵ Seth is so mesmerized by the landscape about the Chaidam basin that he makes a frank admission of his lapse: "*The landscape is so spectacular that I seem hardly to have noticed our more mundane activities today*".⁶

The Potala palace in Lahasa under a sunlit afternoon sky is so captivating that it holds him speechless: "In this late afternoon light it is so beautiful that I cannot speak at all." The true traveler, as Bacon would have us believe, is who avoids

People of choleric complexion on the one hand and befriends people during one's sojourns. Seth seems to have understood the significance of Bacon's observation for he regards friendship as something precious, if his at Tiananmen Square at Beijing (in the foreword of the 1990 edition). Seth's diatribes against Chinese imperialism and the desperate predicament of the native Tibetans are clearly conspicuous in the travelogue. He is critical of the lack of amity between India and China. On subjects such as these, his musings exhale the aroma and internationalism: *If India and China were amicable towards each other, almost half the world would be at peace. Yet friendship rests on understanding; and the two countries, despite their contiguity, have had almost no contact in the course of history [...]*⁷

Heaven Lake is particularly delightful to lovers of prose and his style is certainly in keeping with a book of travel. Seth's pages are redolent with the descriptions of the landscape, the people, the culture, the customs and the language of the land of his sojourn. These descriptions are not merely objective; they are always colored by his subjective perceptions and experiences. All the places described in his travelogue are not extraordinary, but in passing through the prismatic imagination of Seth they become altogether new and unique. Seth uses short sentences and common words. His lucidity is worth praising. In his moods of heightened awareness, he composes poems that evince his poetic sensibility. He steers clear of foreign words and allusions from other writers to make his travelogue readable. But his brevity should not be interpreted as his lack of vocabulary. He never fights shy of using difficult words, if the context so demands of him. As an illustration of his use of unfamiliar words, we have this line from the text of *Heaven Lake: The tall green hills are riven by serrated ribs of red rock.*⁸

As Vikram Seth was interested in returning to his homeland India, similarly V. S. Naipaul was also keen to visit his birth place. Naipaul's unprecedented interest in his ancestral homeland led him to rediscover India as a leading Third World state in the post-cold war era. He reinvents himself through it. Naipaul's positive concept India is shown in his last book of travel in the country, *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1993)⁹. His two earlier books on India will first be examined to demonstrate his radical move from instrumental rationality to a dialogic episteme. The main thrust of this article is to gauge the impact of this shift in his rationality on his subsequent renegotiation with his place of origin. Nixon (1993) and Robinson (1990) have already mentioned this change of heart in Naipaul.¹⁰ In examining Naipaul's three travelogues on India I came across two distinct phases of his episteme. The first phase is predicated on an instrumental rationality (Enlightenment myopia), and the second phase is intellectual thaw.

Furthermore, his stature as a writer and the authenticity of his work are bound up with the idea of a Third World as it emerged and changed in the era of decolonization and the cold war. The Emancipation discourse of the Enlightenment, which would lead to clarity of vision and genuine "rational" understanding of the self and the world, rather shows Naipaul's myopic vision of the world. His travel spots are still embroiled in ethnic, political, or social unrest. The fact is that "recently free societies" like Trinidad, Kenya, Uganda, Iran, India, and finally Argentina have been placed by him in the single homogenizing category of Third World societies. The Third World issues are the common thread running through Naipaul's aesthetic productions. These problems are the yardsticks of the Eurocentric, instrumentally "rational" traveler. In his writings between 1960 and 1985 he is strategically opposed to the post-independence struggles of the Third World states in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. This research trip brought him back to the region to which he had vowed not to return when he was an adolescent (Naipaul, 1963, 41).¹¹ In the foreword to *The Middle Passage Naipaul*, claims that the book "sells nothing" and is based on the writer's fresh observations and leanings: "The novelist works towards conclusions of which he is often unaware which has changed his perception in multiple ways. To analyze and decide before writing would rob the writer's excitement which supports him during his solitude, and would be the opposite of my method...." (Naipaul, 1963, 5).¹² He claims novelistic freedom in his treatment of the Caribbean in the wake of independence movements in the region. But the anti-Caribbean animus is pervasive in the entire quotation "and for many years afterwards in England, falling asleep in bedsitters with the electric fan on, I had been awakened by the nightmare that I was back in tropical Trinidad". It is ironic that a child of the Third World resolves to disown his own origins. Furthermore, it stands in sharp contrast to claim novelistic freedom in his treatment of the subject under investigation. His depiction of the Caribbean as a murky dystopia, a stew of ignoble impulses betrays his ignorance of the events that had

turned the sea “satanic”. Despite being born and bred there, Naipaul’s impression of the middle passage is far different from the painful history of the region’s blood, violence, and dislocation. In this regard, Naipaul is not unlike his Anglo-American writer William H. Prescott (1891, 264)¹³ who describes South America as “a dark, despotic, Catholic-Latin world”.

Generally, it seems that Naipaul’s views and theorizations on the newly independent states have promoted negative representations of the struggles of these countries with their colonial deficiencies, but moving towards a future that holds greater promises of accomplishment, progress, and self-sufficiency. To western readers, he was the reassuring voice who described the difference of those on the fringe. The blurb furnished by the Times Literary Supplement on the back cover of *An Area of Darkness* lionizes Naipaul as the rational observer: With a few swift and beautifully calculated strokes, Mr Naipaul brings the essence of a social situation so vividly to life that one begins to wonder whether all the sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists who have tried to explain India have not labored in vain.

It comes as no surprise to see the correlation being made here between this myopic vision, informed by instrumental rationality, and Naipaul’s ontology, a knowledge of the self, one in which he is painstakingly trying to disconnect himself from the Caribbean because the Caribbean and the Third World at large is nothing but “the wretchedness of his depicted scene”. This wretchedness becomes “the limit of his vision”. In the last sentence of the foreword to *The Middle Passage* he blatantly and proudly declared himself “a perfect stranger” in the region. This is perhaps the reason why he spatially distanced himself from the Caribbean, announcing and embracing the cultural citizenship of enlightened Europe. By distancing himself from his birthplace, Naipaul is perpetrating the same vice, the same mimicry for which the entire populace of the Caribbean stands condemned. In 1962, about a year after the first travel to the Caribbean, where he was born and bred, the third-generation diasporic Naipaul traveled to his ancestral India. Since childhood India had been an attraction to him whose grandfather had left as an indentured labourer to work in the Empire’s sugar cane fields in Trinidad. For Naipaul, the journey was a *personal quest* for the diasporic self in search of origin. As a leading Third World state, India in the early sixties was in the throes of shedding her colonial skins after centuries of imperial rule, domination, and occupation. Headed by Jawahar Lal Nehru at the Bandung conference in 1955, India was a key player in the emerging non-aligned movement. India was on the road to becoming a major postcolonial nation on a global scale amidst the problems of overpopulation, hunger, an archaic and tyrannical caste system, and economic reconstruction. Retrospectively, one can easily discern the Indian government’s double postcolonial task: taking over a post-British India and fighting the archaic yet pervasive caste system. Furthermore, the country was a major contender in the cold war politics with strong affiliations to the former Soviet Union. These are factors that Naipaul failed to textualize in the first part of his Indian trilogy.

An Area of Darkness is Naipaul’s first Indian travelogue whose title is an atavistically Conradian intertext, *Heart of Darkness*, which the Polish expatriate voyager wrote under the shadow of high imperialism. In many ways, Conrad has been Naipaul’s mentor. He follows Conrad’s steps in Africa and Asia. As he puts it himself, through reading Conrad’s works of fiction, in Africa and Asia Naipaul retraces some of the paths undertaken by this Polish émigré. He sees himself as another Conrad, an émigré, an intellectual wandering across the globe who has made England, the metropolitan center, his home. Being a colonial, he takes pride in appropriating the language of the empire and, like Conrad, making a glamorous career out of it. Temporally, Conrad is the chronicler of the empire whereas Naipaul covers the post colonies. Naipaul constructs people as subjects in need of objectification and re-formation. Just before the moment of departure from

Europe (London) which is “the transcendent ordering centre of the world”. The descending gaze from the centre to the periphery is suspicious, apprehensive, and ambivalent, bound to see the difference and exclude. He is heedless of the gargantuan problems such as burgeoning population, sectarian strife, housing and the economic problems that the Indian subcontinent faced after independence.

Despite his Third World origins, Naipaul’s myopic vision operates by inscribing incompleteness on India via instrumental reason as a technology of power that makes people subjects. Clearly Naipaul’s objectifying gaze does not seek common ground with the natives of India, even though he happens to be more privileged in terms of the bio-cultural ties than the rest of the travelers/ethnographers such as James Mill, Macaulay and Sir Richard Burton who all lacked the privileges of sameness (race, culture) that Naipaul enjoys. Ideally, this potentially privileged position should give Naipaul certain leverage compared to the earlier Orientalists. During his Caribbean tour, for instance, the natives find some common ground between themselves and Naipaul that could have been of mutual benefit. As he says in *The Overcrowded Barracoon* (1972), a book on the Caribbean islands as well as India and South America, while visiting a sugar plantation in Guyana, the foreman is excited to find him, a non-white, in a position of power. Common bio-cultural ties can be empowering and bring a sense of solidarity between the natives and the observer. Naipaul is not seen by the natives as an intruder, an alien, descending from the centre. Being a descendant of ancestors who left India as servants for the sugar estates of Guyana and Trinidad, Naipaul enjoys a unique position. He is originally of the margin and can be with the margin. He can be someone natives can confide in and identify with.

The first Indian encounter, despite his original expectations, is nothing but a closure. Naipaul’s relationship with India, not unlike his other engagements with newly independent states is ambivalent as he is caught between two different poles. One side is the childhood fantasy, “an area of the imagination”, that constitutes the background of his experience that found expression in *A House for Mr. Biswas*.¹⁴ The other is the subsequent encounter with India which happens in adulthood. At this point in time he is fifteen, and studying in a high school in Trinidad. He follows political developments in colonial India and commits the map of the country to his memory. But after Indian independence his interest in ancestral homeland diminishes. What separates Naipaul from India is not just the language barrier (he does not fully understand Hindi), but also a snobbish attitude towards popular Indian movies which he has referred to as “tedious and disquieting” (to his utter dismay in Athens he found Indian movies and stars popular even among the Greeks). Above all, it is Hinduism itself that he finds disquieting¹⁵ : and there was religion, with which, as one of Mr Gollancz’s writers noted with approval, the people of India were intoxicated. I was without belief or interest in belief; I was incapable of worship of God or holy men; and so one whole side of India was closed to me.

Naturally, this “one whole side of India” (belief) which can/must be the major avenue for a cultural, dialogical rapport between Naipaul and the land as a scary space is closed off by the rational, skeptical subject. Therefore, even before setting foot on the Bombay dock, Naipaul is spatially dangling in an indeterminacy that rather tilts towards the obscure, the negative, unpalatable. This gives rise to an awareness of his own deterritorialized self (neither here nor there) which becomes the site of tormented, confused feelings of displacement.

In the first two travelogues on India, Naipaul is unable to read the cultural politics of Hinduism, which is not only India’s dominant faith, but a way of life that cuts across all aspects of life in India (it is not dissimilar to the social dynamics of Islam in the Muslim world). In fact, this denial of the vital role of Hinduism is a massive absence in Naipaul’s

first two Indian travelogues. Of all religions in India, Hinduism is dominant: about 83% of the population is Hindu, 11% Muslim, 2.6% Christian, 1% Sikh, “with small communities of Jains, Parsis, and Buddhists”. But the divisions are not distinct as Hinduism embraces and hybridizes the customs of the people of other religious persuasions. But there is also the essentialist or fundamentalist side of Hinduism, as can be seen in the rise of religious nationalism as a formidable political force in a country founded on secular principles.

A Wounded Civilization is less personal and more analytically and culturally oriented. Naipaul subjects to the close scrutiny of Indian cultural and economic behavior. At this point, the diasporas self has turned into the analytical self. Perhaps the alienating experience of the first failed encounter with India has caused this change in focus in Naipaul’s interrogation and interpretation of India.

On the second journey Naipaul examines the socio-economic prospects of India that seems to him an essentially unstructured and uncouth nation-state. Strategically, Naipaul’s approach remains that of a logician who believes that “it is the writer’s duty to order experience, that he must bring his powers of reason to bear on what is essentially chaotic so that readers may better understand the fearful failures of our era”¹⁶

The term “intellectual” occurs in a number of places, and is presented as the highest achievement of humanity that Indians lack. There are twenty-four instances in the book where Naipaul ascribes intellectual deficiency of all sorts to Indians, including “intellectual anorexia”, “intellectual sleep”, and “intellectual flaw”.

At this point he situates himself in the dialectical interplay between the two opposing asymmetric spaces of India and Great Britain that produces an unsettling effect on him. Naipaul still takes upon himself the task of being the cultural tour guide. As he puts it, “I cannot travel only for the sights”¹⁷. While in Gujarat he visited the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad. He resents and criticizes the institute’s diminished usefulness; he views it as divorced from its principle, and believes that the social purpose to which the institute must be ideally steered is frustrated. Initially, the institute has been founded to address the problems that a majority of the rural Indian people has to deal with when they are using certain tools in the villages and farms. It is supposed to ease the hardship of the people in the Indian countryside, the landless or child laborers. Again, Naipaul’s skewed rationality bars him from the reality of the scene¹⁸ There is a formative paradox, however, in Naipaul’s reductive discourse. On the one hand, he is critical of the inability of the Indians to take advantage of the latest technology—“Mimicry within mimicry, imperfectly understood idea within imperfectly understood idea”¹⁹ on the other hand, he advocates the notion of intermediate technology which must have been high on the Indian government’s agenda while Naipaul was in India. Logically, if Indians are not ready to keep abreast with the latest technology, one would assume that the alternative could well be a more compatible, user-friendly approach to make applied science available for lay people. He ridicules the idea to improve and maximize the performance of the bullock cart: “Intermediate technology had decided that the bullock cart was to be improved. Metal axles, bearings, rubber tires?”. It has gone through a metamorphosis²⁰:

In India it has circled back to something very like the old sentimentality about poverty and the old ways, and has stalled with the bullock cart: a fascinating intellectual adventure for the people concerned, but sterile, divorced from reality and usefulness.

CONCLUSIONS

The different journeys and travel experiences through it are unique to Vikram Seth as well as to V S Naipaul; they have explored the hidden problematic aspects in life in the context of India and China; both have travelled different parts of this country and found it very surprising with their unexpected happenings. Thus, this article shows the different new experiences while travelling through India & China especially.

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