

V.S. Naipaul's New Technique of Narration

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V.S. Naipaul's novels have been studied meticulously by critics like Walsh, White, Paul Theroux, R.H. Lee and Karl Miller. He remains primarily a great novelist on the sheer strength of his brilliant imagination and a mature sense of organization. As a matter of fact, from Naipaul's own remarks it becomes clear that he strives hard to achieve artistic integration. As a novelist, Naipaul is in a class apart. It is difficult to describe him in terms of usual categories. As Premanand Kumar has rightly observed:

Humour and humanity, irony and even satire, the mingling of realism and fantasy, the adroit manipulation of the serious and absurd and the capacity of uncanny observation are among the marks of these novels.¹

A chronological examination of the stylistic devices of Naipaul's novels is, therefore, quite instructive. Though Naipaul's novels are remarkable for his personal outlook and experience, yet their success ultimately lies in Naipaul's authentic knowledge of the region described in them. Apart from the achievements that V.S. Naipaul has made in his writings, fiction and non-fiction, he has actually made his mark as a very impressive writer with a beautiful economy and sharpness of perception, chiefly in exploring very successfully the new technique of narration which characterizes the new literary form known as nonfiction. In fact, it is through this new genre that the novelist narrator has been able to adopt altogether a new technique and express his ideas in a startling and arresting method. V.S. Naipaul is among the few American and Commonwealth writers who has emerged as one of the most prominent and successful exponents of this new technique of narration. In recording the impression of his travels to various countries he has shown such skill both in his use of language and form that he has come to be known as a superlative traveler who misses nothing worth the record in a narrative which is beautifully written and almost impossible to put down.

Let us make a brief elaboration of the essential features of this new technique with references to Naipaul's non-fiction works on India. One of the first and foremost features of this technique is that, while standing close to art of a journalist and get differing fundamentally from the function and method of a journalist, the writer of this form makes use of an altogether a new mode of expression which enables the writer to occupy a privileged position and write in the first person while cutting away sharply from the usually known literary forms like autobiography, travelogue, travel fiction, confessional and journalistic writing. Expression of the filtered truth is also the most outstanding features of this new technique. The writer usually describes things in a seemingly journalistic manner but at the most important realization which takes the form of universal truth. Another important feature of the nonfiction novel is its dependence on the candour and the recreation of the memory. While narrating his experience the writer is seen to recreate his memory by linking the same to wider visions and experiences which almost appear to function like creating experience within experience, a kind of art that the poet T.S. Eliot achieves by his use of allusions which deepens his thought with rich associations.

Apart from these traits that distinguish the style of this genre from other forms of fiction, there is another characteristic which also makes it altogether a different mode of expression. The best non-fiction novels depend for their success on their candour in the recreation of memory. Minds are caught in mid-visions; then those visions are replaced by others, and while the writer is recreating these, the names of places, persons and even things begin to throw up other associated names as a result of which the whole process calls for attention pointing the entire book towards what may be called a trend of anatomy genre.

The most striking feature to note is the fact that while the writer is expressing facts, he is at the same time transforming these facts in to the literary art form of the novel. In other words, non-fiction which means facts are recreated here into fiction by the highly poetic and imaginative mind of the artist who is pulling all the strings together with his art of centrifugal technique piling all the time memory upon memory and experience upon experience, transforming there by the whole record of his experiences and facts into a highly literary work of art.

While using all the features of this technique of non-fiction as mentioned above in all his non-fiction works, Naipaul concocts a few more devices to make this technique all the more brilliant, powerful and arresting. Thus, a deeper and searching probe into the salient features of his narrative technique evinces that Naipaul has made use of many more devices than used by other artists in this field to make it a powerful mode of communication. One such device may be seen in his treatment of history. It has been treated in various ways chiefly as a novel concoction to replace the traditional way of narrative technique. Salman Rushdie has treated history in his novels like *Shame* and *Midnight's Children* in such a way as to bring the past in close juxtaposition to the present. In a slightly different way the pioneers attempting this form of novel, have made use of history in order to recreate the past for the review of the present, which serves to throw light on the similarity or difference of attitude of the people towards an identical situation.

Commenting on Naipaul's use of the historical problems Subramani rightly observes:

It is true that in Naipaul's novels personal and historical problems are closely linked. Speaking of his method, Naipaul has said that he creates the sociohistorical condition and the characters are subjected to its needs. This is why he insists that knowledge of the West Indian background is necessary for understanding his fiction. No discussion of his works can ignore the historical dimension, which is inseparable from the philosophical and artistic dimensions. Thus there is an organic connection between Ralph Singh's mimicry of the black man's basis of inferiority, and the historical basis of his existence. Man's homelessness is not an external fate: Naipaul attributes it to concrete historical circumstances. Naipaul often finds the plots for his novels in history, and the dramatic actions flow from the conflict between character and historical circumstances.²

Similarly, Naipaul has very successfully been able to bring the past close to the present by connecting different events of history occurred at different points of time chiefly on the basis of their identical impact and effect. These events placed in close juxtaposition to each other make a very successful exposition of the difference as well as the similarity of their impact. Thus narrating the history of the Sikh, Naipaul connects the following events revealing his novel treatment of history:

Events which can be dated and analysed, and placed at a proper distance from the present, can also at stage begin to appear far away; can fade. Myths are fresh; they never lose their force. Though at Malerkotla in 1762 the Sikhs were massacred by an invading Afghan army, in Malerkotla in 1947, at the time of the partition of India and the population exchange between India and Pakistan – the flight of Muslims to Pakistan, and Sikhs and Hindus from Pakistan in Malerkotla in 1947, because of that Afghan nobleman who laid down gold sovereigns over the cremation site of the two sons of the 10th Guru, no Muslim was harmed. In the 1960s the Sikh political party, the Akali Dal, nominated the Nawab of Malerkotla as their candidate, and he got the Sikh vote in three elections.³

Besides Naipaul has such tremendous power of telescoping historical events as to throw open a big span of time through a very limited use of words as may be seen in the following passage in which he sums up the changes that have occurred within six months in the world.

Karachi, Pakistan, six months later. Many things had happened in those six months: the Muslim world had been on the boil. The American embassy in Teheran had been seized by Iranian students and more than fifty embassy staff held as hostages. There had been a siege and gun battle in the mosque at Mecca, hinting at underground movements in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Russians had invaded Afghanistan.

In Pakistan itself there had been changes. In August and September there had been talk of elections. Those elections had been cancelled; martial law had been tightened; the newspapers were censored; there were public whippings.⁴

In this connection it may be noted that Naipaul almost makes a resurrection of history when he connects two different events in different parts of the world to focus a similar situation as a result of which he appears to add some veracity to what may be called myth and legend in history.

In the Sikh catalogue of the torments and martyrdoms of its founding gurus, the

bricking up alive of the two sons of the 10th guru has a special place. The story with its echoes of King John and Richard III — has some of the quality of myth.⁵

Likewise Naipaul appears an adept artist in his use of what may be called the literary allusions in the chronicle order of history. Thus commenting on the Indian practice of rigidly sticking to the work assigned to a community, he quotes from the *Geeta* and Shakespeare to illustrate his argument vividly:

The prompting is universal, but the Indian practice is purely of India. And do thy duty, even if it be humble, rather than another's even if it be great. To die in one's duty is life: to live in another's is death. 'This is the *Geeta*, preaching degree fifteen hundred year before Shakespeare's Ulysses, preaching it today. And the man who makes the dingy bed in the hotel room will be affronted if he is asked to sweep the gritty floor. The clerk will not bring you a glass of water even if you faint. The architecture student will consider it a degradation to make drawings, to be mere draughtsman...⁶

Naipaul's use of literary allusion becomes all the more striking when he comes to project the difference between two different ages and periods. In his attempt to show the difference between the years of industrial and imperial England he dives into various literary works that very well reflect the different changes that have taken place:

Between the two uses of the word lie a hundred years of industrial and imperial power. In the beginning of this period we can sense the swiftness of change, from state-coach to railway, from the essays of Hazlitt to those of Macaulay, from the *Pickwick Papers* to *Our Mutual Friend*. In painting it is like a second springtime; Constable discovering the sky, Bonington discovering the glory of light, of sand and sea: youth and delight that can communicate themselves to use even today. It is a period of newness and self-discovery: Dickens discovering England, London discovering the novel; newness even in Keats and Shelley. It is a period of vigour and expectation. And then, abruptly, there comes fulfillment and middle-age. The process of self-discovery is over, the English national myth appears, complete.⁷

But he does not appear satisfied with this, and in order to illuminate the underlying difference further, he again comes up with another set of rich literary allusion:

At the beginning of this period Hazlitt can dismiss the English writings of Washington Irving with scorn because Irving insisted on finding Sir Roger de Coverleys and Will Wimbles in a country that had moved on since the days of *The Spectator*. Hazlitt's myth rejecting attitude is like the attitude of those today who object to British travel advertising in the United States ('Lovely way to Land', says the advertisement in *Holiday* in 1962 'Fly Sabena to Manchester Drive right off past thatch-roofed cottages and start wending your way to London. Gradually. Beautifully'.) But soon the myth becomes important; and in the new narcissism class consciousnesses as well as race consciousness are heightened. *Punch* in the 1880s has Cockneys talking in the vanished accents of Sam Weller. The Consciousness of class in Forster is altogether different from the knowledge of class as an almost elemental division in Jane Austen.⁸

Naipaul makes use of literary allusion for depicting the salient traits of his characters in a brilliant way. Not only such allusions create a rich associations in the mind of the reader but also render the character in question all the more life-like and vivid. Thus delineating the character of Mrs. Hauksbee, an Indian who figures dominantly in *An Area of Darkness*, he mentions well-known literary works to give a good exposure of the mannerism of this lady:

It is as if an entire society has fallen for a casual confidence trickster. Casual because the trickster has gone away losing interest in his joke, but leaving the Anglo-Indians to the churches of Calcutta on a Sunday morning to assert the alien faith, more or less abandoned in its country of origin; leaving Freddy crying, 'just bung your cont down there, Andy'; leaving the officer exclaiming, 'I say by Jove I feel rather bushed'. Leaving 'Civil lines', 'Cantonments', leaving people 'going off to the hills': magic words now fully possessed, now spoken as of right in what

is now at last Indian Anglo-India, where smartness can be found in the cosy proletarian trivialities of woman's own and the *Daily Mirror* and where Mrs. Hauksbee, a Millamont of the suburbs, is still the arbiter of elegance.⁹

Often Naipaul appears a consummate artist, nay even a poet, when he comes to describe the city of landscape with minute details;

Madras, with the sculptured towers of its temples, its special floods, the idlis, and dosas, its music and its dance, the museum with the great bronzes, could appear to the visitor to be still a whole culture. It took time to understand that usurpation had taken place, that brahmins were on the defensive, though they were still the musicians and dancers, still the cooks, still the priests in the temples.¹⁰

Naipaul appears an unparalleled narrator when he comes to paint a picture of nature that fires his poetic imagination. It is in such passages that he rises almost to the height of poetic art of transforming objects of nature into superb elements of beauty:

The snow on the mountains to the north melted and the exposed rock looked bleached and eroded. On the cool parkland of the foothills the firs became darker blobs of green. The poplars on the lake lost their fresh greenness and the willows scattered spinning leaves in high wind. The reeds became so tall they curved, and when the wind blew they swayed and tossed like waves. The lotus leaves rose crinkled and disordered out of the water, thrust up on thick stalks. Then, like blind tulips, the lotus buds appeared, and a week later opened in explosions of dying pink.¹¹

A painter needs a keen sense of colour in order to render his subject clear and vivid. Naipaul possesses a fine sense of colour but also a good deal of sensuousness which is necessary both for a poet and a painter in the field of artistic creation. With such skill he succeeds in rendering a landscape in a vivid manner and thereby gives it the accurate touch of colour to make it appear exactly what it is. This may very well be noticed in his painting of a landscape in Kashmir:

Kashmir was coolness and colour; the yellow mustard fields, the mountains, snow-capped, the milky blue sky in which were discovered the drama of clouds. It was men wrapped in brown blankets against the morning mist, and barefooted shepherd boys with caps and covered ears on steep wet rocky slopes. At Qazigund, where we stopped, it was also dust in sunlight, the disorder of a bazaar, a waiting crowd, and a small inn the cold air of charcoal, tobacco, cooking oil, months-old dirt and human excrement. Grass grew on the mud-packed roofs of cottages – and at last it was clear why, in that story I had read as a child in the *West Indian Reader*, the foolish window had made her cow climb up the roof.¹²

Close to this lies his art of narrating the climate and atmosphere of a particular moment with such minute observations and artistic touches that the reader cannot but feel like partaking in the beautiful surroundings that the writer creates:

It was only early spring, and on some mornings there was fresh snow on the mountains. The lake was cold and clear; you could see the fish feeding like land animals on the weeds and on the lake bed, and when the sun came out every fish cast a shadow. It could be not then, with the sun out, and woolen clothes were uncomfortable. But heat presently led to rain, and then the temperature dropped sharply. The clouds fell low over the mountains, sometimes in a level bank, sometimes shredding far into the valleys.¹³

Naipaul's art of narration becomes all the more exquisite and appealing when he comes to describe a historical place in Kashmir with detailed surroundings of the native antique beauty of nature as a contrast to the presence of foreign elements:

Outside the snow-capped mountains ringed the lake, at whose centre stood Akbar's fort of Hari Parbat; poplars marked the lake-town of Rainawari; and far away, beyond an open stretch of water, on the fresh green lower slopes of the mountains as though the earth had been washed down through the ages to fill the crevices of rocks – were the Mogul gardens, with their terraces, their straight lines, their central pavilions, their water courses dropping from level to level down rippled concrete falls. The Mogul one could accept, and the Hindu. It was this English presence which, though the best known, from books and songs and grandest of the gardens it was this English presence which seemed hardest to accept, in this mountain-locked valley, this city of hookahs and samavars (so pronounced) where, in a dusty square on Residency Road, was the Caravanserai for Tibetans with their long-legged boots, hats, plaited hair, their clothes as grimy-grey as their weather-beaten faces, men indistinguishable from women.¹⁴

One of the most striking features of his narrative technique is what may be called the art of reiterating an event or a situation or even an experience in order to focus his point of view. This is chiefly to be seen in *India: A Million Mutinies Now* in which he repeatedly refers to his visit to India in 1962. Thus the writer is going over and over what he has stated before, like a spider spinning itself into its own web projecting the dual childhood emotions which first set him out to India:

The India I had gone to in 1962 was like a different country.

The India I had gone to in 1962 had been like a place far away, a place like a long journey.¹⁵

Naipaul is nothing if not a satirist and there are varied degrees of satire which characterize his style. In fact it is the satire that makes his narrative technique so powerful and forceful. Usually he begins with mild irony which slowly accumulates force and power to become pungent satire. In his characterization of Malhotra with Italian styled suit and English University tie he makes a fine note of irony by depicting his conduct in the society:

But at that level there were no outsiders, no one who, like Malhotra, had rejected the badges of food and caste and dress. He wished to marry; it was also what his parents wished for him. But his colonial eye made him aspire too high. 'Don't call us. We will call you', 'we thank you for your interest, and we will let you know as soon as the numerous applications have been gone through'...¹⁶

This note of irony takes the form of pungent satire when he comes to expose the rigid attitude of Indonesian Muslims in America: "They continue to congregate among themselves. They continue to eat the same food. They will not mix with Westerners. They will not subscribe to the newspapers."¹⁷

When Naipaul is caught in a mood of disapproval and critical observation of a country's social modes and habits, he bursts into bitter satire which amounts to rendering the people almost naked and most ridiculous their habits and behaviour. In such instances he depicts a series of pictures which are nothing but bitter, scathing and nauseating:

Shankaracharya Hill, overlooking the Dal Lake, is one of the beauty spots of Srinagar. It has to be climbed with care, for large areas of its lower slopes are used as latrines by Indian tourists. If you surprise a group of three women, companionably defecating, they will giggle: the shame is yours, for exposing yourself to such a scene.¹⁸

Of course, sometimes Naipaul becomes almost intolerable in his satirical observation on such sights and scenes. Nothing deters him from inveighing such Indian habits. Whether this is liked or disliked by his detractors, the fact remains that the intensity of his satire does add great power and force to his narrative technique:

Indians defecate everywhere. They defecate, mostly, beside the railway tracks. But they also defecate on the beaches; they defecate on the hills: they defecate on the river banks; they defecate on the streets; they never look for cover. Muslims, with their tradition of purdah, can at times be secretive.¹⁹

Another striking feature of his narrative may be seen in what may be called the use of ambiguous terms and paradoxical language. Not only does such use of paradox add great force and power but also creates an intensity of meaning that drives home like lump of lead into the mind of the reader:

Symbolic action was the curse of India. Yet Gandhi was Indian enough to deal in symbols. So, latrine-cleaning became an occasional ritual, virtuous because sanctioned by the great-souled; the degradation of the latrine-cleaner continued. The spinning-wheel didn't dignify labour; it was only absorbed into the great Indian symbolism, its significance rapidly fading. He remains a tragic paradox.²⁰

Although Naipaul emerges as a consummate artist in the realm of fiction and pioneer in the art of nonfiction writing, enough traces of journalism are still to be found in his travel writing. It is true that all travel writings are based on the art of journalism, but it is in the nonfiction novels that the artist achieves the skill of concealing the journalist in the artist as a result of which he, while remaining close to journalism, never acknowledges himself a journalist. In other words, Naipaul, following his great predecessors like Truman Capote, Norman Mailer and Tom Wolfe, emerges as an unacknowledged journalist possessing the skill of transforming or blending journalism with the art of fiction. This has been very well revealed in his exposition of the condition of the young child labourers working in India where he blends journalistic report with his own description of a particular situation:

In the morning in the rain I saw young child labourers using their hands alone to shovel gravel on to a waterlogged path. Groundnuts were the only source of proteins here; but the peasants preferred to sell their crop; and their children were stunted, their minds deformed, serf material already, beyond the reach of education where what was available.

(But Science, a short time later, was to tell me otherwise. from the *Indian Express*: "New Delhi, 2 Nov. ... Delivering the Dr. V.N. Patwardhan Prize oration at the Indian Council of Medical Research Yesterday, Dr. Kamala Rao said certain hormonal changes within the body of the malnourished children enabled them to maintain normal body functions ... only the excess and nonessential parts of the body are affected by malnutrition. Such malnourished children, though small in size, are like 'paperback books' which, while retaining all the material of the original, have got rid of the nonessential portion of the bound editions."²¹

Besides, Naipaul has also a fine skill of quoting a journalist to support his own reporting while transforming fact into fiction. This can be found in his *The Middle Passage*. What is all the more important to note is the fact that Naipaul's narrative technique comes to acquire greater meaning and significance when Naipaul, the journalist, comments on Indian journalists with regard to their defective reporting. This diversion adds a new dimension to his travel writing and, at the same time, lends a good deal of truth and veracity of his nonfiction novel:

Indian newspapers reflect this limited vision, this absence of inquiry, the absence of what can be called human interest. The pre-censorship liveliness of the Indian press--of which foreign observers have spoken -- was confined to the editorial pages. Elsewhere there were mainly communiqués, handouts, reports of speeches and functions. Indian journalism developed no reporting tradition; it reported on India as on a foreign country. An unheadlined item from the statesman, 17 September 1975 ... That is all; the story is over; there will be no more tomorrow.²²

Here Naipaul appears a true reporter and evinces enough traces of journalism in his writings, and yet, whenever he comes to reporting, he sublimates this to a greater height of artistic achievement. This, of course, is a reporting with a difference – a difference that brings it close to the art of fiction:

Some weeks later Mr. Nehru went to Lucknow. Standing on the airport tarmac, he bowed his head forty-six times to receive forty-six garlands from the forty-six members of the state cabinet. This at any rate was the story I had from an IAS man in Lucknow, and he was a little peeved. The IAS acting on instructions from Delhi, had taken civil defence seriously in Lucknow. They had practiced blackouts and air-raid warnings; they had dug trenches; they had much to show Mr. Nehru. But Mr. Nehru only lost his temper. All this digging of trenches, he said, was a waste of time. In a way, the Emergency was over.²³

One of the important features of the nonfiction novel is what is known as the filtered truth that the writer attempts to present. Instead of stating bare facts, the artist makes a deep probe into the heart of things based on truth revealing thereby the same with much interest. This may be seen in his analysis of the Indian concept of illusions with which Naipaul closes the book *An: Area of Darkness*.

The world is illusion, the Hindus say. We talk of despair, but true despair lies too deep for formulations. It was only now, as my experience of India defined itself more properly against my own homelessness, that I saw how close in the past year I had been to the total Indian negation, how much it had become the basis of thought and feeling. And already, with this awareness, in a world where illusion could only be a concept and not something felt in bones, it was slipping away from me. I felt it as something true which I could never adequately express and never seize again.²⁴

V.S. Naipaul's powerful and unparalleled mastery over the language enabled him to see and feel the things in their true colour and sense. Therefore, it becomes clear that the writer has made spectacular achievement in this field with his various aesthetic devices of transforming facts into fiction. Eminent writers before Naipaul have certainly attempted this, and have made some achievements; but Naipaul remains a unique artist in the sense that, while remaining close to the art of travel writing, he ultimately emerges a very successful artist of the nonfiction novels. Though Naipaul's writing is cryptic and jerky, the comments sarcastic, but his achievements outstrip his inadequacies. Few writers match his literary skill. The simplicity, grace and dignity of his prose, the eye for concrete detail, the humour and charm, the fine sense of irony, the neatness and clarity of his exposition, and above all, his ruthless honesty all taken together have enabled him to achieve great perfection. His narrative skill is spectacular. It is this new narrative technique that distinguishes Naipaul from other writers writing in English today, either British or non-native writer.

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