

## Understanding Punjab In 1980's From A Distance: A Critical Diasporic Reading Of V. S. Naipaul's 'The Shadow Of The Guru' (India: A Million Mutinies Now)

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### Abstract:

*V. S. Naipaul is a well-known writer of the present times. In his writings, he has written about the problems of diasporic people. The present paper deals with his cosmopolitan and Eurocentric views, generally about the Indian society and especially about the situations of Punjab in 1980's. The focus of this paper is on his understanding of Sikh religion, Sikhs, social and political situations of Punjab specifically after 1984 with special reference to a chapter "The Shadow of the Guru" from his non-fiction book entitled India: A Million Mutinies Now (1990).*

**Keywords:** Violence, Discrimination, Cosmopolitan and Eurocentric Mind Setup.

### Introduction:

The term Diaspora in Greek means "a scattering or sowing of seeds". It refers to the movement of any population sharing common ethnic identity, who were either forced to leave or voluntarily<sup>1</sup> left their settled territory. The term Diaspora is used generally for a displaced from homeland or emigrated ethnic group, typically having a minority status in the host country. Some more basic concepts of the common understanding of Diaspora are: the strong concept of a homeland, often idealized, collective ethnic identity and group consciousness. Diaspora is a dispersion of people from their original homeland likewise expatriation, extradition, migration, separation or displacement. In the age of globalization, the issues of transnationalism, hybridity, displacement and identity crisis are continuously main concerns of 21<sup>st</sup> century diasporic literature. Basically, Diaspora is a minority community living in exile.

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul is one of the best and most controversial diaporic writers of English literature. His fictional and non-fictional writings deal with concerns of colonial, post-colonial and Third world literature. He has candidly written about alienation, displacement, identity crisis, power, freedom and frustration of diasporic people. Naipaul has been criticised for his representation of Islamic world, India and women. He has Indian ties. His grandfather was an emigrant from Benaras. He migrated as an indentured labourer.

The present paper will throw light on his controversial reputation as a diasporic writer. This paper also attempts to discuss critically his views about Sikh religion, Sikh community and Punjab's situations after 1984. This analysis is based on his non-fiction book entitled India: A Million Mutinies Now (1990) with special reference to a chapter "The Shadow of the Guru". V. S. Naipaul has no first-hand knowledge of Sikh religion and the issues of Punjab. His information is mainly based upon his meetings with people from different sections and professions. India is a free country now. But our political system is still self-centred. There is always a clash between majority and minority classes. Sikhs are a minority community in India. They are only 2% of the total Indian population. During 1980's some leaders as Sant Harchand Singh Longowal, Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindrawale and his followers, some student organizations as All India Sikh Student Federation were fighting against the discrimination that was done to Punjab after 1947. They were fighting for some

important Punjab issues as right over proper share of water, anti-drug system, rank of Holy city to Amritsar etc.

In the chapter entitled “The Shadow of the Guru” V. S. Naipaul has presented Sikh religion and Punjab issues from Eurocentric point of view. In this book he has presented India as a country of religious wars, corruption and poverty. European education and upbringing have influenced his understanding about Indian culture, problems, and Sikh issues. He saw no redeeming feature in Indian cultures. He has shown total emotional disassociation from the land of his ancestors and specifically represented Punjab from a distance. He cannot live down in his mind the fact that he is offspring of indentured labourer. Malik Arjun Patil has rightly judged Naipaul as a, “cynical writer” who “visits India with Western eyes.” (Mahanta 153) Indentured labourers also faced the problem of minority status, alienation and displacement in their settled countries. Naipaul has totally ignored the problems faced by the people of Punjab. He says, “There had been a general awakening. But everyone awakened first to his own group or community; every group thought unique in its awakening; and every group sought to separate its rage from the rage of other groups”. (277) He is aware about the general and group awakening of people. But he is failed to understand the reasons behind the awakening. This group awakening is related to minority classes. He has discussed anatomy of Punjab from cosmopolitan point of view.

Naipaul is a gifted interrogator. He collected his data from S. Gurtej Singh I. A. S., journalists such as Dalip, Ashwani, Ram Singh and Sanjeev Gaur etc. In the end his use of data is influenced from his own Eurocentric point of view. His assessments are personal. He has tried to understand Sikh community as a group. He says that they become India’s best-off large group. Sikh religion is a religion of sacrifices and service. Sikh religion has given them a sense of belonging and identity. Naipaul discusses Sikh politics as, sectarian, clannish and cantankerous. Naipaul has misjudged Sikh community as bad tempered. He has tried to discuss Sikh alienation by examining Sikh militancy of the 1980’s in juxtaposition with Sikh religious history. Naipaul mainly relies on his talks with Gurtej Singh and S. Kapoor Singh’s articles to understand Sikhism. Naipaul has skeletal knowledge about conditions of Punjab in 1980’s and 1990’s. Naipaul understands Sikh religion only as a rebellion against Hindutava. He has misjudged that Guru Nanak Dev Ji’ rebellion against Brahmin Orthodoxy was prompted by horrors of Mogul invasions. He says,

Everyone who had rebelled had started a sect with its own rigidities. Budha had rebelled; Guru Nanak, the first Guru of Sikhs, had rebelled. Two thousand years separated the rebellion, and they had different causes. Budha’s rebellion had been prompted by his meditation on the frailty of flesh. Guru Nanak’s rebellion or breaking away had been prompted by the horrors of Muslim invasions- the horrors to which at that time no one could see an end. (278)

Guru Nanak Dev Ji’s break away from contemporary religions was based on his rejection of polytheism, rigid caste system, social evils and superstitions that were part of the daily life of common people. Naipaul on the other hand points out, “the anguish caused by Muslim persecution of Hindus that the Sikh religion had risen.” (277) This is a mistaken way to understand Sikh religion. Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji was a man of God. He was a teacher, a guide and a social reformer. He was a brave man. He went against contemporary social customs to guide common people. His illumination was internal. He internally felt that he could guide superstitious common people. But Naipaul misunderstands Guru Nanak’s rebellion only as a “middle way” and “quietest one”. He has related his rebellion with Mogul and Indian wars. Sri Guru Nanak Dev ji gave the slogan of “Kirat Karo, Nam Japo, Wand Shako.” 10<sup>th</sup> Guru Sri Guru Gobind Singh established Khalsa Panth. He declared Sri Guru Granth Sahib the path giver for future. Guru ji asked Sikhs to live according to the teachings of Sikh Gurus, Sri Guru Granth Sahib and to follow the rules of Khalsa. But Naipaul mis constructs and says, “The religion had reached its final form with the 10<sup>th</sup> guru and he declared the line of Gurus over. Such a religion couldn’t be reformed. Reform would destroy it.” (279) Then he says that Sikhs have a simpler past. But Sikhs don’t have a simpler past. All the Gurus fought against injustice, discrimination, cruelty

and social evils. Sikhs always feel proud of their past. Guru Gobind Singh Ji's fight was on the side of righteousness. He brought into being a new fraternity to restore self-esteem and pride in his followers in the form of Khalsa. He was a very good poet also. He wrote *Bachitra Natak* and *Chandi di War*. But Naipaul has not noticed all these qualities in him. As Daulat Rai has rightly said, "majority of the people know so little about the great hero Guru Gobind Singh that many unscrupulous people have tried to gain their selfish end by saying many wrong and undesirable about the Guru, his life and teachings." (Daulat Rai 1)

He infers that revenge was the rage to which Sikhs were awakened in Punjab in 1980's. Revenge presumes an anterior wrong or injustice requiring remedial action. Naipaul has discussed about violent events of 1980's as killings of Natha Singh, Buta Singh, Bichu Ram etc. He misunderstands the violence to the level of communal violence. What compelled Sikhs to engage in killings? Naipaul does not try to find an answer and he concludes, "The good and poetic concepts of Sikhism were twisted and when terror became an experience an expression of the faith, the idea of *sewa* altered." (292). Naipaul depicts Sikhs as bloodthirsty. He tarnishes the Sikh faith for promoting terror. His blaming the faith or giving expression to terror is result of his disconnectedness with the actual realities of Punjab.

At the time of independence, Punjab was divided into two portions, East Punjab and West Punjab. Thousands of Sikhs had to leave Pakistan. Sikh community is very hard working. They quickly settled in India. Naipaul blames Sikhs for violence done to them and he claims, "They had brought this tragedy upon themselves, manufacturing grievances out of their great success in independent India." (Million 279). Grievances are normally the product of unfairness, dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs or a need unmet. Unsolved complaints turn into a protest and become part of the overall struggle. As a minority class many Sikhs have to face discrimination. Kapoor Singh was dismissed from Indian Civil Service. He was dismissed on a charge of embezzling money. He couldn't get receipts from refugees because he thought it was neither possible nor wise to get receipts from those people. According to Kapoor Singh they had no addresses. He said that government directed to ignore the cumbersome formalities like obtaining receipts in dealing with refugees. Kapoor Singh had claimed that he was treated as a Sikh not as a government officer because he was protesting against a directive issued in 1947 to all deputy commissioners that in Punjab the Sikhs must be treated as a criminal tribe. Kapoor Singh opposed that directive and he was suspended. He started a legal battle objecting an Anti-Sikh directive. Gurtej Singh joined I. A. S. in 1970 but he resigned in 1982 because a trouble was aroused over his paper about Sikh problems. Due to his government service, he couldn't express his religious views.

During Operation Blue Star many Sikh devotees and army men were killed. Hundreds of Sikh devotees were at Harmandir Sahib to pay homage on martyrdom day of 5<sup>th</sup> Guru Sri Guru Arjun Dev Ji on 5<sup>th</sup> June. But those pilgrims were killed during Operation Blue Star. Smt. Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India, was killed by two Sikh bodyguards. All Sikh community faced violence in different parts of India. As Ajmer Singh has claimed, "Sikh houses, Gurudwaras, their vehicles, shops and their factories were burnt. Women were gang raped. Sikhs were crying for security. They were requesting to administration and politicians." (Unimagined 273) These people are still fighting in Indian courts for justice after 30 years. Naipaul blames Sikh community for the violence and claims, "they had brought this tragedy upon themselves." (Million 279). He has ignored the mass killings, the fake encounters and harassments done to common people by police and army.

V. S. Naipaul has commented on Kirpan, one of the five emblems of Khalsa. Ram Singh tells him about Amrit, "that helps to control the five evils: lust, anger, covetousness, ego, love for worldly attachments." (Million 295) Naipaul compares Ram Singh wearing Kirpan with bus conductor. He says, "The knife, one of the five emblems of Sikhism, hung in a sheath from a big black cross-band, and it made him look less like a warrior than a bus conductor," (Million 295)

Naipaul has presented Punjab of 1980's from a cosmopolitan and Eurocentric mind. He got education in England. He settled there. His European world has influenced his presentation of Indian society. As a European he has not tried to understand the Sikh religion and social situations of Punjab. Wherever he goes, his European world goes with him. As he has claimed:

The migration within the British Empire, from India to Trinidad had given me the English language as my own, and a particular kind of education. This had partly seeded my wish to be a writer in a particular mode, and had committed me to the literary career I had been following in England for 20 years. (Enigma 52)

Naipaul has shown the lack of empathy for the people of his ancestral home land. India is a country of different religions, casts and regions. People have emotional ties with their religions, languages and regions. But Naipaul has not tried to understand these emotional ties. George Lamming sees an emotional distance in him that lacks empathy. George Lamming says, "His reluctance in asking for complete political freedom is due to the fear that he has never had to stand. A foreign or absent mother culture has always cradled his judgement." (15)

Naipaul portrays poverty, corruption and religious divides from European point of view. During the time of Emergency people of Punjab were denied constitutional rights. But he has ignored this and only presented the violence of 1980's. His tone of writing about Punjab is subjective. Thus Naipaul is an outsider with inside information. He has only given the violent side of Punjab. He has not tried to understand the reasons behind that violence. As a diasporic writer he has not tried to understand the alienation, discrimination and displacement of Sikh community. His writing is not writing back. He has misrepresented Sikh religion.

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