

Ethical Dislocation and Cultural Alienation: Reading V.S. Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness* through the Ethical Philosophy of the *Thirukkural*

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Abstract—This paper approaches a critical exploration of V.S. Naipaul and his book, *An Area of Darkness* with the context of putting the story into perspective with the moral code of the *Thirukkural*, a classical Tamil text that has been hailed as the most ethical code. The occasion of Naipaul back to India is characterized by large scale cultural alienation and ethical displacement, experiences that are not confined to the personal, but are archetypal of postcolonial predicaments of identity, sense of place and of moral purpose. Comparing incisive and at times disturbing insights into Indian social realities as provided by Naipaul with the moral principles of the Indian traditional ethical text, the *Thirukkural*, especially its focus on virtue, moral responsibility, truthfulness, and compassion, this paper will enquire about the origins and consequences of ethical crisis in the postcolonial subject. Through the analysis, it has been proven that alienation produced by Naipaul is a result of collision between inherited moral frameworks and parts of realities that were created by colonial history and social stratification. In addition to this, it argues that ethical humanism of the *Thirukkural* offers a substantive counter-discourse to the despair, cynicism and moral pessimism that are often the order of the day in the prose of Naipaul. Placing a modern postcolonial travel story in conversation with an ancient ethical tradition, the article claims classical moral philosophies remain an active resource of answering the modern questions of ethical responsibility, cultural difference, and finding a sense of belonging in a postcolonial world.

Index Terms—postcolonial ethics, cultural alienation, moral responsibility, identity crisis, postcolonial literature, moral philosophy, Indian social realities, ethical crisis, classical traditions, sense of belonging

I. INTRODUCTION

The theme of the journey back especially the diasporic subject returning towards a homeland of origin has taken a central role in post-colonial literature. It is one of the primary points of intersection in the negotiation of identity, belonging and moral self-awareness. Such returns are seldom described in terms of a smooth redemptive narrative instead, they give birth to a disturbing clash between mythic memory and lived experience, between inherited cultural ideals and the contradictions which first-hand experience brings. The constructed homeland frequently falls apart in the face of historical complication and social disparity. The most important text on this trend is V. S. Naipaul, in a book called *An Area of Darkness* (1964), which tells of his long stay in India, where he belonged, and gives a sharp analysis of the psychological and ethical foams that were created during this process. The style of Naipaul is not limited to both the travels or autobiography, it is an extended investigation on the ethical consequences of colonialism, cultural fragmentation, and alien identity. The swinging fascination and disgust about India is informed by a lifetime of the feeling of not belonging, which depicts an underlying sense of ethical disquiet and not merely cultural alienation. Such discomfort is characteristic of a more general postcolonial situation where hereditary moral systems prove no secure guide and no cohesive alternative moral system has yet solidified.

In sharp contrast, the *Thirukkural* by Thiruvalluvar in the early centuries of the Common Era presents an ethical philosophy that is rigorously developed and

which has had a tremendous impact on the Indian moral thought. The piece is made up of aphoristic couplets about virtue, wealth, and love and in this way propagates an idea of ethical life based on general concepts such as compassion, truthfulness, restraint, and moral responsibility. The prescriptive *Thirukkural* is not just a series of idealised moral injunctions, but it provides an ethical system that, upon which individual and communal behaviour can be easily judged at all times.

In an attempt to clarify the ethical aspects of alienation of Naipaul in the book *An Area of Darkness*, and at the same time, explore the ability of traditional ethical values to solve the modern identity and belonging crises, this paper aims to bring out the dialogical narrative of both Naipaul and the ethics of *Thirukkural*. It is a comparative methodology that will enable us to understand postcolonial ethical dislocation in a subtle way and thus give an example of how moral philosophy can be used as a critical tool and a restorative capacity in settings that are defined by historical dislocation and cultural alienation.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ETHICS, ALIENATION, AND POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITY

To have a subtle interpretation of the book, it is important to pay close attention to the inter-relationship of ethical dislocation and cultural alienation as they are used to explain the experience of the postcolonial subject. Ethical dislocation that is used in this paper is the fundamental breakdown of the ethical orientation: the destabilization of ethical points of reference that are constituted via upbringing, education, and hereditary tradition in the face of competing social reality. This break is more than mere superficial cultural dissonance, and it is an indication of a more fundamental loss of moral confidence and moral coherence.

In the postcolonial societies, these ethical crises cannot be discussed outside the prolonged influences of the colonialism. Colonialism also did not only reorganize the political and economic systems but also destabilized native moral regimes and in many cases substituted them with the imported values which were not well absorbed. In a sense postcolonial subject exists in a middle ground, not entirely at home in the traditions of his heritage nor entirely at home in his newly acquired colonial models, as

proposed by Homi K. Bhabha in the context of unhomeliness. The condition creates an ethical uncertainty that is of mimicry, hierarchy and disjointed authority with moral ambiguity.

Cultural alienation is the emotional-psychological result of such a moral discontinuity. It is expressed in the form of estrangement- the permanent feeling of not fitting in, of not receiving or belonging to one's supposed cultural motherland. Stuart Hall argues that cultural identity in the postcolonial societies is something that is not constituted in advance, but rather it is constantly implemented by the forces of difference, displacement and historical discontinuity. Naipaul illustrates that in his story, alienation is not just a personal issue since it plays the role of a commentary to structural processes that prevent not only sense of belonging but also a sense of morality.

In addressing this instability, the *Thirukkural* gives world view ethics, which is based on the continuity and universality. It claims that virtue, compassion and moral restraint always remain valid regardless of the dynamic conditions in history or in the societies. A model of this moral permanence is wrapped in the couplet which glorifies the immortal happiness of those who walk in the righteous way on this side of life. The *Thirukkural*, in the environment of postcolonial flux, provides a harmonious ethical code, in which the morality of action is superior to any inherited position or inward sanction; and here, we find a presence to offset in the vacuum of ethics that the postcolonial subject undergoes.

III. NAIPAUL'S OBSERVATIONS: THE ANATOMY OF DISLOCATION

In his book, *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul provides a continuous discussion of psychological, cultural, and moral displacement of his back to India. His observations show that it is not only personal alienation, but a generalized criticism of social practices and moral attitudes in the context of which stagnation and ethical denial are perpetuated in his opinion. These observations serve as the diagnostic instruments that reveal the cracks in the postcolonial society, which add to the processes of alienation and moral paralysis.

Instead of treating India as a place of cultural rediscovery, however, Naipaul finds it a place where his hopes are ruined, creating a crisis of realization

and moral orientation. The responses are determined by his increased sensitivity to social disorder, a failed institution, and avoidance of morality, which further enhance feelings of unbelonging. This dislocation anatomy can be best described as an ethical crisis where there is deficiency in accountability, sincerity and moral responsibility thereby sabotaging individual dignity as well as life in general.

3.1 The Loss of Distinctiveness and the Anonymity of Return

The turning point experienced in the book *An Area of Darkness* comes after Naipaul realizes that once he arrives in India, he is no longer recognized by his personality name. He notes, “And for the first time in my life I was one of the crowd... I was faceless. I might sink without a trace into that Indian crowd. I had been made by Trinidad and England; recognition of my difference was necessary to me” (Naipaul 46). This confession shows that the identity of Naipaul is essentially determined by the social distinction and identification. The loss of perceived difference disrupts his identity where his identity is revealed to be based on external affirmation. This experience echoes the exile as a state of constant displacement as expressed by Edward Said in which the subject is alienated even in places that are related to origin. The anonymity of Naipaul means the lack of belonging but the absence of any trace thus a greater degree of the ethical and psychological loss of direction.

The *Thirukkural* presents the other side of the ethical approach to individual value and identity. It says, “Decorum’s true nobility on earth;

Indecorum’s issue is ignoble birth” (Kural 133, Pope 1886) thus, that the merit of morality itself is not found in social identity or birth right but in personality and behaviour. This moral position questions the need to use difference as the basis of identity that Naipaul does, and instead of being outwardly based, develops an inner approach towards human value. The contrast between these views foreshadows a fundamental conflict between mediation of identity through social means and mediation of self-identity through ethical means in the post-colonial settings.

3.2 Sanitation, Blindness, and Ethical Denial

Naipaul is more than detailed in his descriptions of sanitation in India; it represents a greater moral

breakdown amongst the society. He points, “Indians defecate everywhere... But the truth is that Indians do not see these squatters and might even, with complete sincerity, deny that they exist: a collective blindness arising out of the Indian fear of pollution and the resulting conviction that Indians are the cleanest people in the world” (76-77).

In the opinion of Naipaul, this rejection is more than a cultural anomaly it is evasion of ethical nature. The society protects itself by the denial to face the moral reality of the evident degradation so that the frameworks of failures that have been implemented cannot be overcome anyhow. According to Naipaul, this blindness forms moral inertia problems are not solved because they are not visible, but because they are inconvenient morally. The denial of reality provides that symbolic concepts of purity should take the place of the duty towards human misery. So, in the story by Naipaul, the notion of sanitation becomes an effective metaphor of a society, who do not want to face the ethical contradictions within the society they live in.

This situation is exactly the opposite of the moral vision presented in the *Thirukkural* that states, “Though small as millet-seed the fault men deem; As palm tree vast to those who fear disgrace ‘twill seem.” (Kural 433). The couplet points to the fact that ethical life begins with recognition - of sin, disregard and spiritual failure. In this comparative context, the critique by Naipaul can be assumed to be not only a criticism but also an unspoken moral plea: call to self-sincere scrutiny and collective responsibility, instead of being dependent on superficial conceptions of order or of purity. The implicit meaning is that the only way one can truly experience social or moral development is by the ability to recognize his or her own flaws, notice, and act accordingly.

3.3 Colonial Mimicry and the Erosion of Moral Substance

Naipaul’s own keen awareness of the residuum left by colonialism, in his condemnation of India’s promiscuous borrowing of British behaviours and social forms. He points out, “This is a mimicry not of England, a real country, but of the fairy-tale land of Anglo-India, of clubs and sahibs and syces and bearers. It is as if an entire society has fallen for a casual confidence trickster...” (62). Naipaul looks

indicative on his comment, thus reflecting what is apparent in post-colonial India: Not a vibrant culture but a warped colonial dream. According to him, this imitation is not progressive, or adaptive, but very destructive.

The continued dependency on colonial forms in the absence of the moral and institutional basis of the society undermines the local authority and guidelines. Social practices become simulative instead of being inherent, the institutions become simulacra instead of means of ethical politics. The society is thus snared into borrowed forms which have no real authority, coherence and are not based on the virtuous action. Naipaul uses mimicry as a vice that falsely deprives life of the moral content, substituting true self-determination with the artificial, degenerative ones that neither have a sense of responsibility.

The *Thirukkural* has presented another moral universe based on character and ways of living against this moral nether-world. It says, "Spotless be thou in mind! This only merits virtue's name; All else, mere pomp of idle sound, no real worth can claim." (Kural 34). It is an inward and not an outward focus. According to the *Thirukkural*, deeds cannot be evaluated based in terms of pretence or custom but needed to have moral substance. Combined with the criticism of Naipaul, the couplet provides the light of the potential restoration of moral resonance through denying the mere representation and targeting the ethical authenticity. When linked to one another, these views put across the importance of establishing individual and collective actions based on inherent moral intent instead of merely copying colonial models.

IV. THE PROBLEM OF CASTE AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

Caste is the most poisonous and ethically upsetting in the list of the anti-civilizing factors, outlined by Naipaul in the modern Indian society. What he says is that caste is not just a stratified social system, but is also a device which systematises the loss of moral agency and autonomous decision-making by individuals. According to Naipaul, "Class is a system of rewards. Caste imprisons a man in his function. From this it follows, since there are no rewards, that duties and responsibilities become irrelevant to position. A man is his proclaimed function" (82).

Caste is shown as moral failure in this analysis; it bounds people in hereditary positions thereby alienating action and responsibility as well as moral efforts.

Ethical struggle is made insignificant under this kind of a regime, diligence and moral responsibility cannot have the power to make change. Caste establishes permanence and inevitability in caste consciousness instead of creating achievement, merit, and empathy. It reinforces inequality and exonerates society of any moral duty actions to individuals. The criticism of Naipaul, consequently, presents caste as social crime but as the moral tragedy, which disintegrates the premises of responsibility.

Such an ethical reproach is echoed in the *Thirukkural*: according to it, "All men that live are one in circumstances of birth; Diversities of works give each his special worth." (Kural 972). Clearly in this case it is action and behaviour, not blood or status, that is the focus. For the *Thirukkural*, human dignity is a result of moral action, not an occasional birth right. Read in tandem with Naipaul's condemnation of caste, the couplet suggests that moral worth should be concentrated on what we owe one another rather than how special or powerful we are. Naipaul's challenge to caste can thus be seen as a deeply ethical one: asking for a society where worth supplants rank, so that a person's value becomes his behavior rather than his lineage."

V. RITUAL, SINCERITY, AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

Naipaul's skepticism of religious rituals and ceremonies is indicative of a more general ethical stance that esteems matter over form. He is free in his disdain: "But I had been born an unbeliever. I took no pleasure in religious ceremonies. They were too long, and the food came only at the end... I had no belief; I disliked religious ritual; and I had a sense of the ridiculous" (35–36). Less altruism and morality are forced by rituals that snap into place, as far as Naipaul is concerned, without ethical interest there is no life, mere meaningless togetherness.

This is not scepticism about ethics, but scepticism concerning the kinds of practice which would replace ethical responsibility with external observation. In Naipaul's narrative, ritual becomes simply a hollow stage act when divorced from ethical meaning or

human compassion. It is not belief then as such that is his target but self-alienation of ritual from ethical commitment in life.

The *Thirukkural* also emphasizes the importance of moral content over outward appearance. Although written in a religiously plural context, the text unequivocally values virtues over rituals. It says, “No greater gain than virtue aught can cause; No greater loss than life oblivious of her laws” (Kural 32). For here moral value and honesty in life supersede ritualistic significance. In this both Naipaul and the *Thirukkural* come together: Both cannot agree to a morality of mere formalism, stressing instead an ethical regime emanating from intention, conduct and quality of human relations. This alignment highlights a shared recognition that a moral life gains its significance not from ritualistic recurrence, but from the persistent engagement of the moral will.

VI. ALIENATION, MYTH, AND THE LIMITS OF EMPATHY

Perhaps the most pervasive expression of the alienation committed by Naipaul could be the fact that he has even appropriated the very term, area of darkness, which can be viewed as being both a geographic and a symbolic one. He reveals, “The land of my childhood, An Area of Darkness; like the Himalayan passes, it was closing up again, as fast as I withdrew from it, into a land of myth... I had learned my separateness from India, and was content to be a colonial, without a past, without ancestors” (273). The point here is, therefore, not only of alienation, but of the irreconcilability of what is remembered and what was; the homeland is mythical, emotive, and virtually inaccessible.

The concept of separateness which Naipaul recognizes prefigures disintegration of any empathetic union. It is no longer possible to refer to the past as the source of the identity and the homeland in which they were envisioned does not give them a feeling of belonging. The ensuing state causes the subject to be caught in between the history of origin and the history of return representing an alienation that is not just a temporary displacement but a kind of an ethical and emotional break that remains permanent.

Comparatively, the *Thirukkural* is a moral reform that is not contingent on culturally persistence and the

historical embeddedness; its claim that “Though good thy soul forget, plot not thy neighbour’s fall, Thy plans shall ‘virtue’s Power’ by ruin to thyself forestall” (Kural 204) as a continuing practice as opposed to the expression of tribal blood. On the implicit in the passage is moral continuity that survives in an action of will toward virtue- a rendering of awareness that has been deprived of the corruption or exile.

Where Naipaul insists on unbridgeable difference and shattered belonging, the *Thirukkural* winks at autonomic moral community underwritten by common ethical values. even when cultural memory fades, it never meets up with the present and evanescent ethical responsibility. In so doing, the text suggests that belonging might be reconstituted not of origin or descent but of membership, committed to various forms of ethicality: a different response to the insufficiencies in empathy which Naipaul’s narrative has exposed.

VII. POSSIBILITY OF RECONCILIATION: MOMENTS OF HUMANISM

Although alienation remains a dominant and recurring theme in *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul’s narrative is not entirely devoid of moments where empathy, admiration, and ethical recognition momentarily interrupt the prevailing sense of estrangement. He observes, “Out of all its squalor and human decay, its eruptions of butchery, India produced so many people of grace and beauty, ruled by elaborate courtesy... To know India was to take a delight in people as people. I did not want India to sink; the mere thought was painful” (243). This commentary is a major moral intermission to the critical book that Naipaul has produced, showing his ability to recognize the personal dignity even when the system is in disarray.

These scenes indicate that it is not that Naipaul is completely alienated but his isolation is interrupted by a few moments where similarity in humanity is observed. The ability to go beyond disappointment and recognize grace in common lives is the indication of an ethical responsiveness that cannot fade away. These human contacts, even small, provide place of reconciliation not on the plane of institutions or history but of personal experience.

Such candour towards human value is a close working with the moral principles of *Thirukkural*, which says, “Freedom from faults is wealth; watch heedfully ‘Gainst these, for fault is fatal enmity” (Kural 434). Here, the focus is put on restraint, understanding, and respect towards others as some of the essential ethical values. The brevity of insightful glances on the part of Naipaul and the advice of the *Thirukkural* all lead to the same point of ethical humanism, whereby the individual is far better than their rank, success or cultural identification. Combining these two views, one can emphasize the fact that there is a chance to have ethical bond as a result of empathy and mutual recognition even in situations with alienation and social fragmentation.

VIII. DISCUSSION: POSTCOLONIAL ETHICS AND THE RELEVANCE OF THE THIRUKKURAL

Naipaul has done more than merely holds us at cross in his area of darkness, and so does the *Thirukkural*. What it is then to live in our postcolonial world, they compel us to ask an urgent question. The narration of the story by Naipaul is a product of disappointment and moral anxiety and it demands the detachment of moral ideals in India in relation to the actual and real social situation. In his case, this disappointment is an epic personal crisis--a sensation he feels in his bones, which remains and gives him a feeling of loss, displacement and disenchantment. His answers resonate with the broad postcolonial issues of the loss of ethical integrity under the pressure of colonial heritage and intergenerational inequalities.

Such a critical position of Naipaul, sometimes even in cases when he is accused of pessimism or even of elitism, is diagnostic. He does not want people to ignore uncomfortable facts because he points out the stagnation, denial, and moral complacency. However, one can do too little with obstinacy; moral exhaustion frequently has little to rejuvenate or shared optimism. This is where moral and ethical philosophy of *Thirukkural* comes in.

Naipaul concentrates on failure and rupture whereas the *Thirukkural* perceives ethical life as continuous, not as a completed thing. Virtue is not derived on an ideal heritage or cultural purity but virtue must be mended despite the flaws. This practice is against despair and contemporary acts of loving, holding

back, accountability, and self-ethical self-questions. The fact that moral value is attained through deeds as opposed to inheritance or creed or geography is also a challenge by *Thirukkural* to the fatalism and disillusionment that frequently characterize postcolonial societies.

That conflict between pessimism and humanism of Naipaul and *Thirukkural* emphasizes the main controversies of postcolonial political morality: How will societies restore the moral to the rational resources of colonialism when they were lost? How far is it possible to retain universal ethical standards in historical and fragmented, damaged situations? This contrast demonstrates that ethical systems have to be diagnostic and prophetic. They have to proclaim injustice and stagnation in stark contrast, like Naipaul does, and she has to provide instruments of philosophical renewal, reconciliation, and ethical standpoints--the way *Thirukkural* requires.

The key themes presented in this conversation to the contemporary listener are the necessity of moral philosophy to regain agency, cultivate empathy, and recover social trust. It teaches that post-colonial and multicultural societies do not belong to the past, which is an age of resigning and cynicism, but to the growth of further virtue in enlightened and critically informed, ethically imaginative and humanly responsible directions. With the opposition between critique and possibility, skepticism of Naipaul and optimism of *Thirukkural* are a fruitful interplay that can be utilized in postcolonial ethical investigation.

IX. CONCLUSION

In general, the book of V.S. Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness* is an intriguing and troubling exploration of the uncanny and convoluted structures of the conscience and psyche active in the post-colonial identity, an accompanied set of feelings of dislocation as an ethical entity and cultural outsider. Based on the memoir and personal journey, the story by Naipaul shares both general historical and social accounts, documenting the conflict of tradition and modernity, memory and reality, belonging and alienation.

This article has demonstrated how old moralities elucidate the sources of the despair that Naipaul expresses and other possibilities of moralities that at least symbolically resist the historical mutilation. The moral uprightness, duty, compassion, and

intentionality of the *Thirukkural* give sharp contrast to the skepticism and fatalism which may support a postcolonial criticism. It states that the ethical life is not inherited and cannot be guaranteed, instead it is something that is carried out in an ongoing basis through considerate and human processes.

To sum up, this paper has shown that the *Thirukkural* is not just a solidified product of a past era, but instead, it is an accessible intellectual resource, which can be used to realize its further potential of responding to the present challenges of identity, community, and moral subjectivity. These texts demonstrate ethical review and moral horizon in the framework of criteria and conditions established in the context of displacement, otherness, and historical pain. These eternal values are deep rooted in human morality DNA and in sum could lead to less insensitive, less responsible, and less human experiences by individuals and the society.

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