

**Diasporic Indian's burden – family or revolution?:****A Critical Study of V S Naipaul's *Magic Seeds*****Dr. J. Ravindranath**

**(Abstract:** Diaspora literature has an illustrious history replete with writers like Raja Rao, Naipaul, Rushdie, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahari, Chitra Banerjee and many others. Nostalgia, search for identity, yearning to integrate the cultures of the East and the West have been leitmotifs of Indian English writers of Diaspora. The recent mass migration from the Middle East to European countries in the era of Globalization is reminiscent of the migration of Indians to Africa, Europe and the Caribbean islands in the past during colonialism. Among the Diaspora writers V S Naipaul holds a special place and his novel *Magic Seeds* (2005) shows how the ideal of revolution can be misleading and simple family life is more meaningful than abstract ideals. Chandran, one of the major characters on the novel, has been unhappy over his uneventful, passive and over dependent life with his wife in Africa. He moves to Germany to spend some time with his sister Sarojini who has been given to cause-bound life. Sarojini chides his causeless and soulless life and inspires him to choose a life wedded to social change. Chandran goes to India and joins the revolutionary movement, suffers disillusionment, surrenders and spends some time in a jail. A timely intervention by his sister and the publication of his writing in London help his release and going back to London. His second sojourn in London makes him realize the changes that have crept in the city and in his own thoughts. Naipaul shows the changing social and political landscape and futility of revolution in India and England. My paper shows how the novelist portrays the inner reality of the revolutionary movement with his objective observation, the unfeasibility of the abstract ideals, inherent pain, tragedy and futility of individual lives in the maelstrom of change. It also questions some of the assumptions of Naipaul and others who highlight family and nation but not revolution.

(Key words: Diaspora, globalization, family, revolution, identity)

Naipaul has been a writer of Nobel significance who has made his mark on the literary map of the world. He raises admiration for his style, objective portrayal of reality, bitterness due to his unsparing criticism of India, sympathy for his extraordinary efforts by dedicating his life to express his writer self in the present times in which an individual and society have found themselves at loggerheads sometimes individually and other times as part of groups.) Naipaul has emerged “one of the most authentic voices to create a comprehensive vision of history and experience of different places and people alike.” (Jhanji 15)

Naipaul sees into the inner turmoil of his characters with enough sympathy as well as enough detachment. His father Seerparsad wrote to student Naipaul as follows: “ We must learn to look at people objectively. Perception is rare and intelligence is by no means widespread. Those who have it to any unusual degree, often suffer terribly. Look at Sinclair Lewis (Babbit). Yet, more often than not it is from such people that the world derives its true greatness.” ( *Letters Between A Father And his Son, Naipaul VS, 2009*) Fiction works best in a confined moral and cultural area, where the rules are generally known; and in that confined area it deals best with things-emotions, impulses, moral anxieties ---that would be unseizable or incomplete in other literary forms.“ (Naipaul. *Literary occasions*, p.24)

It can also be observed that Naipaul “has been writing a kind of psycho-history of these marginalized, derelict Third world societies which he sees vulnerable and weak because of their historical and colonial past.” ( Jhanji 15) “The notion of placelessness is a crucial feature of the discourse of the *place* in post-colonial societies , and tis is as much about Naipaul’s understanding of placelessness as of home and rootlessness.” ( Jhanji 22)

Naipaul says in his Nobel lecture, *Two Worlds as follows*: “I have always moved by intuition alone. I have no system, literary or political. I have no guiding political idea.” (*Literary Occasions*, p.194)

Naipaul’s novel *Magic seeds* shows how simple ideal of leading a family life is more meaningful than abstract ideal such as revolution.. Here we find a parallel to Kundera’s the unbearable lightness of Being. Both the novels show how it’s futile to chase the mirage of goal-driven life and compromise with what one can do is more meaningful rather than so called revolution.

In Naipaul’s novel Chandran who has been disillusioned with his passive life joins the guerillas at the behest of his sister Sarojini. He goes through the stage of excitement, ennui, adventure, violence, incarceration and disillusionment due to mind- numbing and dogmatic life expected to be followed by the revolutionaries. Chandran has been unhappy over his uneventful, passive and over dependent life with his wife in Africa. He moves to Germany to spend some time with his sister who supports cause-bound life. Sarojini chides his causeless life, questions his manhood and for not siding with guerillas in Africa and staying with his half-white wife . When Chandran objects mildly saying that deep down he was sympathetic but didn’t have war to go she says “if everybody had said that, there would never have been any revolution anywhere.” (3) Chandran had been defensive about his cocooned life, aware of Sarojini’s close understanding of his self and feels guilty about his too secure life. Sarojini relates him the rejuvenation of revolution by

Kandapalli after the failure of Lin-Piao line in Naxalite movement in India. Chandran introspects and thinks that his entire past had been preparation for his future.

Chandran goes to India and joins the revolutionary movement with the help of Joseph who was a lecturer and sympathizer who says that the old oppressors have been replaced by new oppressors. The waiting in hotel for contact, immersion in reading, the earlier meeting of Joseph, the joining of guerillas with the help of courier and guide seem very much true. Chandran on seeing the poor villagers on his way to the jungle finds the latter's lives more ascetic than his and at last when he reaches guerillas from the urban background he thinks he has fallen in the wrong hands and the wrong revolution not based on mass line preached by Kandapalli.

Chandran joins the movement, given a sentry duty, feels utter boredom and later meets Bhoj Narain who tells how he has come to revolution through student life. He communicates his apprehensions to Sarojini through a letter and gets a reply which states that he has fallen among the dreadful psychopaths and bide his time to meet Kandapalli's men. Chandran also works as labourer in a factory and turns into a courier as he is considered important by the High command.

Naipaul depicts Chandran's gradual involvement in the revolutionary movement. Bhoj Narain and he meet one Raja who comes into movement from weaver class but later on kill raja on the suspicion of his being informer. This makes Chandran more introspective. He has got new feeling of understanding of the killer Bhoj Narain, the victim Raja, the disturbance in the faces of the new recruits, comrades in meetings in shelters. He thinks of the suicidal deaths of Raja and Bhoj Narain, Narain's arrest and possible encounter by the police and takes shelter with Shivdas, another man of movement. He reflects that Shiv das does those things out of his old habits and courtesies and not because of being a peasant revolutionary.

Chandran enters deeper forest, meets Ramachandra and Einstein, the revolutionaries who chose the movement instead of migration for better prospects, self-criticism movements, the sexual frustration which turned Ramachandra into a puritan revolutionary killer, relates his empty life in Africa and final joining the movement. Ramachandra tells him about the need for action to make the villagers active, criticizes Kandapalli's dependence on words, and finally meets his death in an encounter with the police. Chandran thinks about the distrust among comrades in the movement, lack of understanding about his alienation, the wasted opportunities for growth on the part of the victims and the perpetrators, the debates about party line, the initiation into killing which makes him surrender along with Einstein, another disillusioned revolutionary. Chandran's psychological peculiarity is that he tries to empathize with others-with revolutionaries, victims killed as informers,

the top revolutionary leader who had gone deranged in mind at the time of his surrender and even the superintendent of police before whom he and Einstein, another revolutionary surrender. .

He spends some time in a jail where he finds the life of political prisoners insufferable. A timely intervention by his sister who has also found herself causing the deaths of some former comrades who helped her and Woolf to make films. He gets tired with the routine political discussions distances himself from other political prisoners. When he gets a letter from his sister Sarojini about running an Ashram after their father's death, Chandran writes back that it was not in keeping with her nature. He writes that the war he waged was not that of them or of the villagers. "Our ideas and words were more important than their lives and their ambitions for themselves. That was terrible to me, and it continues even here, where the talkers have favoured treatment and the poor are treated as the poor always are" (167).

He gets special amnesty and released from jail due to efforts by Sarojini who projected him as the former writer of stories. His second sojourn in London makes him realize the changes that have crept in the city and in his own thoughts. He is helped by Roger, the lawyer who earlier helped him publish a book, dwells in the latter's home and even falls in love with Roger's wife Perdita. Both Roger and Perdita are an estranged couple and lead their double lives without breaking formally. It was exoticism that made Roger turn to Mariana and Perdita towards the banker with a big house. Willie Chandran also remembers the same exoticism that has initially brought his African wife Ana and himself together. He thinks that, "I must never forget the Perditas. London would be full of them. I must never forget the neglected." (192) Naipaul shows how all the characters such as Chandra, Sarojini, Roger, Perdita have their moments of alienation and understanding of the other. Chandran observes that the world has been changed by bigger forces so much that he needs no cause for living and decides to celebrate his new self in the present in London.

Chandran also comes to know about how Roger-Perdita, Peter- his wife, He and Ana, all have their own disappointments, infidelities, small exhibitions of their to others. The ego-centric businessman Peter uses his money and influence to spring surprises rewards and humiliation upon others. He gets a job for Chandran as an editor in a magazine on architecture. Chandran finds the landscape of London has changed a lot in last thirty years. He thinks that Peter and his guests do not know about physical and spiritual nullity of life he has seen in the Indian jungles. He says, "unless we understand people's other side, Indian, Japanese, African, we cannot truly understand them." (211) Roger helps Chandran to join a course on architecture. During training, Chandran ruminates that in Africa, he wasn't aware of his place and in India, he was judgmental about others in a foolish manner.

At last both of them attend a wedding in the house of Marcus, a black man whose aim is limited and precise—to mate with only white women and to raise white grandchild one day.

Naipaul shows the disappearance of the old landscape, social structures, servant class, council flats for the poor, their changing aspirations of the poor and futility of revolution in India and England. He portrays the inner reality of the revolutionary movement with his objective observation, shows inherent pain, anguish, tragedy and futility of individual lives in the pursuing revolution and portrays raising a family as a practical goal.

### **The tryst of revolutions with history:**

The phenomenon of revolution has received a lot of attention in political thought and literature. Utopian socialism and revolutionary socialism differed over the means of social change. Marxian socialism has advocated revolutionary means of social transformation on the basis of experience of the Paris Commune which made Lenin advocate the smashing of bourgeois state in his classic work , *The State and Revolution*. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century and 20th centuries revolutions happened in the wake of two world wars and even during the era of cold war. The intransigence of the ruling classes and their suppression of the working class movements led to the choice of revolutionary path in many countries. But the end of cold war, the collapse of the Soviet union, the transformation of Chinese socialism into Market socialism, the isolation of Cuban and North Korean revolutions have cast doubts on the very possibility of revolution in the rest of the world which awaited revolutions that never came. In history many potential revolutions have not happened or suffered distortions or deviation. Indian revolution hasn't occurred but Cuban revolution has lived in the face of relentless threat by the lone super power.

In India, the Gandhian moral angle which emphasizes means over ends preferred nonviolence to violent revolution. Gandhi advocated the theory of trusteeship against the concept of violent revolution. He was criticized for his silence in case of Bhagat Singh's hanging , violence during the Quit India movement. Gandhi's devout follower Vinobha Bhave led 'Bhoodan' movement during the Telangana armed struggle during 1948-51. But the question of revolution has not completely disappeared even in post- independence India. The outbursts of Naxalite movement in the late nineteen sixties, post-emergency period and even in the present times have kept the tussle between evolution and revolution intact. In the era of globalization , the support for market oriented reforms in India and the rest of the world have made revolution appear as an impractical thing if not an unwelcome phenomenon.

Of late the Indian state has begun showing its repressive face more brazenly towards the people's movements, specifically in dealing with peasant movements, nationality movements and

working class movements. The Indian State has fattened the private sector at the expense of the public sector and showed ‘devil take the hindmost attitude.’ The people have been left to fend for themselves in the name of privatization, specifically in the sectors of education and health.

The continuous domination and devastation of the developing countries specifically the middle Eastern countries by the USA and its allies and the ruthless subjugation of revolutionary movement in India shows how nonviolence remains a platitude for the ruling classes and their parties in India. The ruling party and its weak opposition including the parliamentary Left have firmly negated the revolution as a choice.

The historical pessimism which engulfed the working classes have strengthened the elite classes. The disintegration of communism and the weakening of social democracy led to the resurrection of religious and ethno- tribalism once propped up by the USA. Technology has caused the disappearance of the proletariat in the classical sense in many countries, especially advanced countries. The staunch Marxist historian Hobsbawm himself has expressed uncertainty regarding the direction of history. He notes that in the present it has become possible to have abundance and technological change as Marx predicted without communism. “Today the foundations of this certainty that we knew where history was going have collapsed, notably the belief that the industrial working class would be the agency of change.”( 137) In his autobiography, *Interesting Times* he deals with the nineteen sixties which have seen the students’ revolutions around the world, communism in the third world and Chinese experience without much attachment towards Chinese experiment and India gets merely a passing reference.

In such a pessimistic scenario, it is not surprising that some people advocate family and nation as primary. It has been proven that private property and patriarchy characterize the modern day family and the deification of nation and nation- state perpetuates the subjugation of the working classes which believes in internationalism.

Karl Marx writes in *Manifesto (1848)* as follows;

On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family based? On capital, on Private gain. In its completely developed form this family exists only among the bourgeoisie. But this state of things (finds) its complement in the practical absence of the family among the proletarians, and in public prostitution.

The bourgeois family will vanish as a matter of course when its complement vanishes, and both will vanish with the vanishing of capital. ( Aizaz Ahmad and others, *a World to Win: Essays on The Communist Manifesto*, p.106)

It is not my point to support revolutions gone awry due to many internal and external reasons. The struggle between the old ruling classes and the working classes continues in different forms even under socialism and liberty and equality are to be earned afresh by every subsequent generation. Hence Naipaul's contention that revolution is an abstract idea and the raising a family could alone be a feasible goal shows that he rejects the more significant and larger phenomenon called revolution in favour of the smaller one called family.

### **Violence vs. family Private Property**

Another question which Naipaul deals with is the futility of revolutionary violence in search of Utopia. Philosophically violence is seen as morally bad by religion and unfeasible vis-à-vis the mighty Indian state in the post-independence era. During the British rule, terrorist violence has got some amount of legitimacy as it appealed to nationalism of the people. That's why one finds revolutionary leaders such as Alluri Sitarama Raju, Birsa munda, the early terrorists in the beginning of the 20th century, and Bhagat Singh and others in 1930's have been lauded as patriots par excellence. But now after the emergence of post-independence Indian nation-state, the violence by the revolutionaries called extremists or sub-nationalists branded as separatists has not gained wider acceptance in the country. The influence of the Parliamentary Left dwindled from one election to the other since 1952. The naxalite movement has come to be seen as idealistic in its first phase in the nineteen sixties but anarchic in the subsequent stages, especially since 1991. The liberalization and globalization have strengthened the ideology of religious nationalism in the country and the revolutionary Marxism (Maoism) has come to be seen marginal and worth banning till date. The post-Indian nation state has not hesitated to use superior violence to crush any kind of armed challenge to it, be it in the north-east or Punjab or in the central and south India.

Naipaul's novel shows the disillusionment of revolutionary idealism in Chandran who came back to India with a cause but went back to the England which embraced Thatcherism in the 1980's and later to the rule of the Labour party that has supported the USA in its war against its rival ideological and political nation states such as Afghanistan Iraq, and now the North Korea. Here the opposition is not to violence per se but to revolutionary violence as such. While violence inherent in family, private property and State is seen legitimate and natural in the course of history, no appreciation is given to Russian, Chinese, Vietnamese and Cuban revolutions. Of course, those revolutions have gone the authoritarian way in the course of history, thanks to internal and external reasons. It shows that the exploiting classes have become more wise, more formidable and more belligerent. If this fact nullifies the revolutionary possibility in future in any country is debatable. Naipaul's negation is product of historical pessimism which engulfed one and all. History has no end.

While projecting revolutionary movement in his objective point of view, Naipaul points out the origin of violence but criticizes its dead-end and dogmatism that turns Chandran away from revolution, his surrender, his alienation from his former comrades and eventual leaving the cause for London where he studied earlier.

Neera Chandoke notes that what naxalism did was to catapult into the lime light the complete failure of the Indian government “to look after the interests of and the needs of the most vulnerable and those who are at risk.”(82) She examines the question of revolutionary violence in international and national contexts and says that Lenin made revolution basing on working classes and soldiers, Mao of China depended more on peasantry, Castro and Che Guevara on a band of guerillas in Cuba and Cabral of Guinea-Bissau on the lumpen- proletariat to make revolutions in their respective countries. In case of India, revolution has not happened even after a nearly century of formation of the communist party of India. But they have made their valuable contribution in raising the consciousness of the laboring classes and the middle classes to an extent before and after independence. The concept of Marxist revolution has failed to fire the imagination of Indians who have become more tuned to the Juggernaut of capitalism that received a fresh lease of life after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the advent of Globalization. Now the traditional Left in Indian politics hasn't fared well in its parliamentary path to socialism. The conclusion is that “it neglected mass mobilization, succumbed to parliamentary opportunism and allowed the system to co-opt it.” (Bidwai 329) He notes,

Whatever the Left parties can rejuvenate themselves will depend primarily on whether they seriously rethink their ideology, strategy political programmes and organizational practices. Equally vitally, it will be determined by the passion and tenacity with which they rebuild their links with the working people on the basis of grass-roots movements and struggles in which the self- activity of the masses plays a prominent role.( Bidwai 326)

If the dispute over the nature of path makes no change in practical outcome, there's no reason to suppose that Nehruvian socialism could well have served as an alternative to communists' parliamentary or revolutionary path to socialism. Nehru believed that class-struggle “could be resolved through non-violent means and the rule of law.”( Chandra 227) and gradually “he came very close to Gandhiji in emphasizing that in building a Socialist India as much importance should be attached to the means as to the ends.” ( Chandra 227)

In India the conflict over the path of liberation has not been shelved. According to Neera Chandoke, “Democratic governments have succeeded in legitimizing torture, illegal detentions, encounter deaths and imposition of draconian laws that take away civil liberties by reference to

national unity and security.”(161) If it were so, violence against people is not rejected but justified. What the Chinese government has done in Tiananmen square in 1989 shows its utter contempt for its own people .

Both Gandhism and Marxism have been observed more in breach by the governments in India and China respectively. The ambiguity over the use of violence for political ends continues as long as it is seen from tactical point of view rather than moral or philosophical point of view. When democratic liberty and social, political and economic equality are denied, rebellion and violence may become inevitable .Neera Chandoke concludes saying

Violence, as we have learnt is, part of the human condition . The Political trick is to make it stay on the margins and prevent it from occupying the space of democratic politics. And this can be done , for revolutionary wars are not a law and order problem; these are political wars and have to be dealt with politically. The political negotiation of violence demands innovation, creativity and imagination, but it can be done.(170)

Naipaul has diagnosed the malady of futile violence in favour of revolution in his novel *Magic seeds* but not deliberate violence against the underdogs of the world. He proposes the institution of family as a substitute for revolution but forgets that family itself has led to the emergence of the private property and the State based on exploitation. So Chandran’s pursuit of revolution in *The Magic seeds* is chasing a mirage whereas family is the ultimate. The marriage of convenience between Roger and Perdita is not criticized much and Marcus’ goal of mating with the white woman and raising a white grand child is a smart goal. The romanticization of family as a permanent social unit may not stand in the face of single parent families, orphans, old age homes in the present days. So, the deification of family or State to counter act revolution may not be successful in the long run.

The portrayal of revolution versus family has always been a contentious one. Since revolution involves a lot more than an individual’s life and destiny , there can be reason for disappointment. In both cases of family and revolution, troubles and failures await the protagonist. It is discouraging the human agency to make history. corruption and distortion could occur in running a family as well as revolution. We find many people indulging in illegal and corrupt for the sake of family. In the same way there may be instances where revolutionaries could go awry knowingly or unknowingly. To reject the entire project is one thing and to glorify the limited unit called family is quite another.

To the issue of the role of violence in revolution, Chomsky says

Struggles to overcome class power and privilege are sure to be resisted, sometimes by force. Perhaps a point will come where violence in defense against forceful efforts to maintain power is unwarranted. Surely it is a last resort. (Optimism Over Despair, P.177)

To a question regarding the possibility of truly equal society, Noam Chomsky comments,

I see no conflict at all between an egalitarian vision and human variety... as for the feasibility of more just and free social institutions and practices, we can never be certain in advance, and can only keep trying to press the limits as much as possible.(Optimism Over Despair, P.65)

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