

WOMEN IN V. S. NAIPAUL'S EARLY NOVELS: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

With the rise of feminist literary theory and criticism, the representation of women in literary works has grown to be a significant problem. It raises concerns about how women are portrayed in literary works, particularly by male authors. It also challenges the conventional and stereotypical view of women that patriarchal society and male traditions of viewing women have created. This paper makes an attempt to examine, from a feminist standpoint, how V. S. Naipaul depicts women in his early works.

Keywords: Feminism, representation, patriarchy, matriarchy, education, violence, equal rights, husband, wife, children.

INTRODUCTION

Feminist literary theorists and critics have a passionate disagreement about how often women are represented in literature. As feminist literary criticism primarily addresses how women are portrayed in literature, it also examines how women are portrayed in that literature from the perspective of male writers. Once more, it is focused on how women are portrayed from a female perspective in the works of women writers. In fact, Simone de Beauvoir laid the theoretical groundwork for feminist criticism in her book *The Second Sex* (1949), where she examined the position and function of women and asserted that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman," which ignited the debate around modern feminism. Elaine Showalter claims that when it comes to women's representation in literary texts, "feminist criticism concentrated on exposing the misogyny of literary practice: the stereotyped images of women in literature as angels or monsters, the literary abuse or textual harassment of women in classic and popular male literature, and the exclusion of women from literary history" (Showalter 5).

The feminist literary critics ponder why women have always served as men's servants. They are worried about how the long-term subjugation and exclusion of women has affected the lives of women throughout history. They contend that because women's experiences differ from men's, women should write about and portray themselves in their works. They contend that male representation of women is inherently unfair and unacceptable. Feminist writers consequently reject the portrayals of women in works by men. Numerous people have criticized Naipaul for being misogynistic because of how he depicted women in his early works. His female characters play very small parts and are stereotyped negatively as prostitutes or, in Beauvoir's words, as docile,

weak, and second-class people. In actuality, Naipaul's perception of women as the other is a result of his cultural and familial heritage. Bruce King makes a wise comment when he says that Naipaul's novels differ from most European and American fiction in portraying romantic love a sexual freedom as destructive, a dereliction of one's duties. The perspective is Indian rather than European" (King 35) grew up in a conventional and ritualistic environment where this is true since Naipaul's tribe occurred to reside in a closed-off, isolating environment where women are expected to be housewives and mothers rather than autonomous individuals. That is why as, Gillian Dooley observes, women have never been a major concern for Naipaul nor is he interested in women's issues. His avoidance of women's issues in his novels stems from the distance he himself feels from women as subjects, and is part of the concern he develops during his career clarifying the subjective position from which he writes (Dooley 2005).

In Naipaul's early novels, *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), *Miguel Street* (1959), *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) and *A Bend in the River* (1979) women characters hardly have an existence independent to men. They are either portrayed as vulnerable wives who use to do hard work but have no freedom or dignity, or as mothers of many children often with an image of a monster or man-eater. They are shown as objects of sexual desires for men, as prostitutes and immoral characters with no social status.

In *Miguel Street*, Naipaul presents a chaotic world displaying colonial disorder where everything is different and stands as individuals. But, the women characters, though few, taken together, do not have any individual and independent existence. Their social status as Dooley argues, is usually defined by their relationship to men and it is the women who normally work, rear children, do the household work etc. while men like Popo idles his time in "making the thing without a name" (2). As a carpenter, he is unable to make any money nor is he able to treat his wife properly. His wife Emelda happens to go out and work as they have no children; he has this crooked idea: "women and them like work. Man, not make for work" (10). He is however, seen in the street as a "man." His wife one day leaves him and he becomes almost insane; he tries to rectify himself - he starts working hard, paints his house and puts new furniture in it. He brings his wife back but she becomes the talk of the town: "You see the sort of thing woman is . . . You see the sort of thing they like. Not the man. But the new house paint up, and new furniture inside it" (13). As for Morgan who brings up their ten is engaged with fireworks but with no prospects, his wife Mrs. Morgan is reduced to a machine of child-birth and rearing as she brings up their ten children. He often makes fun of his wife and ten children: "Is a miracle of me, that a man like me have ten children. I don't know how I manage it" (64). He has however, his doubt to be the father of all of them and thus puts his wife's character and loyalty

in question. Yet, he is conscious of his manliness: "[y]ou people think I not a man, eh? My father had eight children, I, his son. I have ten. I better than all of you put together" (68). He has the view that men can do whatever they like; he sleeps with other women that makes his wife angry, "you are not a anti man, you are real man. You ain't only make ten children with me, you are going to make more with somebody else" (69)

There is another woman in the novel who is portrayed as the representative of the degraded women. Laura is the mother of eight children from seven different men. Laura is a vivacious woman, always gay and passionate. She is not properly educated and often blames God and the wickedness of men. She has a very difficult living and depends on those men of the street who use her. She however, marries a man called Nathaniel (after having six children by six different men) who has contempt for women. He beats his wife to keep her in place. He considers his wife as stupid which women are traditionally considered. He says, "women just like cows. Cow and they is the same thing . . . Woman and them like a good dose of blows, you know" (87). It can be understood that how women are abused and subjugated in the patriarchal society and how men try to legitimize their control and dominance over them. Lack of education is somewhat responsible for Laura's plight. She has no identity or dignity; she is treated as public property ready to be used by anybody. Hence, the men, who "cycled slowly past Laura's house in the evening, whistling for Laura, were not going to give any of their money to Laura's children. They just wanted Laura" (86). She realizes the need of education for women to live a life of meaning and dignity and does not want to let her children be like her: It have nothing like education in the world. I don't want my children to grow like me" (90).

Abuse of women in the shape of beating is a common thing in *Miguel Street*. As we have seen, Nathaniel beats Laura, likewise, Toni beats his woman like "exercise," George's wife dies because of beating and Bhakchu's beating of his wife becomes a matter of pride. As one of the characters says, "is a good thing for a man to beat his woman every now and then, but this man Tony does do it like exercise, man" (108). Traditionally, women are expected to produce babies and rear them. For example, Edward dislikes his wife for not making a baby. As it is so, when a woman cannot produce baby, she is beaten, tortured and often the woman thinks of killing herself. The man of the patriarchal society has this weapon—beating wife; as Eddoes says: "I wish any woman I married try behaving like that. Man, I give she one good beating and I make she straight like bamboo. I don't want a Wife that can't make baby" (156-58).

In *The Mystic Masseur*, there is no healthy relationship between the protagonist, Ganesh Ramsumair and his wife Leela. He insults his wife, beats her in order to get property in the form of dowry from her father. It seems wife-beating is a "formal affair" in this novel too. At one point of time, she leaves Ganesh saying that she cannot bear any more insult on her and her family. As a traditional patriarch, Ramsumair has this say: Let she feel sorry and shame. Let she go. Saying she coming here to live with me and then she can't even have a thing like a baby, a small tiny thing like a baby!" (79). Critics observe that wife beating in Naipaul's novels is a "metaphor for sexual relations" (Dooley 2005). Once sexual fulfilment is achieved, everything becomes normal.

A House for Mr. Biswas depicts the life of the Indians—men, women and children in Trinidad. The indentured laborers took with them their women and children in the New World and along with them went their rituals of culture and family relationships. Women in traditional Indian way are seen to be homely and dutiful mothers, wives or daughters, always sacrificing themselves for the cause of the family unit which is mostly patriarchal in nature. In Naipaul's fictional works, women characters are traditionally idealized female figures who represent motherhood and submissive wives and perform marginal roles. For example, Shama, in spite of being a Tulsi daughter whose family status and identity is in no way comparable to Mr. Biswas's, yet, her silences speak of the devoted wife and mother in her who is entirely devoted to the family. In the Hanuman House, the many Tulsi daughters have their ambitions—the traditional idea: to get married, to get children, to look after the family and so on and so forth. Hence, we see the Tulsi house is full of people and children swarmed everywhere and Mr. Biswas is squeezed into a corner who feels himself utterly helpless and homeless.

One exception in *A House for Mr. Biswas* is Mrs. Tulsi, the mother-in-law of Mr. Biswas. She is presented as a powerful woman—the head of the Tulsi family which is a matriarchy, where the husbands of the Tulsi daughters are absorbed in, their identity is lost and they become the Tulsis (98). However, critics of Naipaul tend to put his female characters into the following categories: "householders and bitches" and "matriarchs and man-eaters." Mrs. Tulsi falls into the second category who is portrayed as an artful witch and a calculating matriarch; she is often referred to in the novel as "the old queen," "the old hen" or the "old cow", (106) and a "she-fox" (132). She represents a monstrous character who is to be feared and despised upon.

In *A Bend in the River*, there is also negative characterization of women. Salim, the protagonist of the novel is a frequent visitor of the brothels, and even other males also do so. Some critics find his character to be a his parallel to that of Naipaul, regards

treatment of women. At one point of the novel, Salim says, "women are stupid. But if Women weren't the world wouldn't go round" (218-19). Naipaul's extramarital affairs and brothel-Manship is reflected in Salim's character. He beguiles Raymond's (the white may at the local university) wife, Yvette and tries to possess her body: "women make half the world; and I thought I had reached the stage where there was nothing in a woman's nakedness to surprise me.... I was amazed that, obsessed with Yvette as I had been, I had taken so much for granted. The body on the bed was to me like the revelation of woman's form" (202-3). He has the wish to win the possessor of the body. Here, it is obvious that the character of woman is degraded to a mere body and flesh. Salim's sexual experiences with women except Yvette have all been brothel experiences which are but fantasies of degradation on both sides: "until then my fantasies were brothel fantasies of conquest and degradation, with the woman as the willing victim, accomplice in her own degradation" (202).

Some critics opine that in his portrayal of women, Naipaul has tried to demonize them. They are presented as sex symbols for male fulfillment not only the brothel women but also women like Yvette are represented as objects of male satisfaction and violence. Again, Salim is jealous of Mahesh and Shoba in this novel who have normal and harmonious husband-wife relationship. He criticizes Mahesh for being a half-man. It can be argued here that in order to show one's masculinity, a man need not necessarily appropriate subjugation of the feminine; and if someone like Mahesh has concern and respect for his wife he is to be treated as a complete "man" and not a half-man.

CONCLUSION

Naipaul's portrayal of women is not free from traditional male bias and hence he has tried to represent them as negative stereotypes. Naipaul has been unsympathetic towards most of his women characters. Though he is aware that "women make up half the world" (202), yet he is unable to do justice to them.

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