

V. S. NAIPAUL AND HIS TREATMENT OF WOMEN IN HIS EARLY NOVELS: AN ANALYSIS IN FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

Dr. Kafeel Ahmed Choudhury
Associate Professor
Dept. of English
Govt. Zawlnuam College, Mizoram

Abstract

Role of women and their portrayal in literature has always remained limited compared to their male counterparts. The male writers' portrayal of women in literature is also not free from bias. However, representation of women in literary texts has become a major issue with the emergence of feminist literary theory and criticism as it questions the way women are being represented in literary texts mainly by the male writers. The feminist literary theory questions the traditional and stereotyped image of the woman constructed by patriarchal society and male tradition of looking at woman. This paper attempts to survey V. S. Naipaul's portrayal of women in his early novels in feminist perspective.

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

Role of women and their portrayal in literature has always remained limited compared to their male counterparts. The male writers' portrayal of women in literature is also not free from bias. However, representation of women in literary texts has become a major issue with the emergence of feminist literary theory and criticism as it questions the way women are being represented in literary texts mainly by the male writers. Representation of women in literature is a burning issue with feminist literary theorists and critics. As the feminist literary criticism basically responds to the way women are represented in literature, it also looks how women are presented in literature by male writers from the male point of view. Again, it is also concerned with how women are represented in the writings of women writers from female perspective. If we go back to the Victorian era, we can find that during those days there were debates on the role of women not only in literature but also in everyday affairs as women were treated as a weaker sex and their status was no better than a household commodity: they happened to be the 'the angels in the house' who would look after their husbands and rear children. They were not given freedom to think and act their own besides their deprivation of the right to vote, or own property.

The discourse on the status of women and their struggle for liberation in the society and in literature, however, is not new. Women's liberation movement, popularly known as 'feminist' movement, started with an aim of establishing and defending equal rights and opportunities for

women. Until late eighteenth century, women, whether of Europe or non-Europe, did not raise any voice to claim their rights in the society. With the publication of the British feminist writer and advocate of women's rights, Mary Wollstonecraft's revolutionary work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), there emerged a women's movement which not only articulated the causes of women's subjugation and deprivation in a 'patriarchal' society, but also demanded equal status, rights and opportunities for women. This has subsequently resulted into the birth of several feminist theories and movements.

Theoretically, feminist criticism has its foundation laid by Simone de Beauvoir, the French feminist critic and theorist, through her book *The Second Sex* (1949) in which she analyses the role and status of women saying that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" which sparks the debate of contemporary feminism. As for women's representation in the literary texts are concerned, American feminist writer Elaine Showalter opines that "in its earliest years, 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 question why women have played a subordinate role to men. They are concerned with the fact that how women's lives have changed in the course of history due to prolonged subordination and exclusion. They argue that women's experiences are different from that of men and hence, women should write about themselves and represent themselves. Male representation of women, they believe, is bound to be biased, inauthentic and unacceptable. Hence, feminist writers refuse to accept the images of women as portrayed by male writers.

V. S. Naipaul is one of the most important writers of literary diaspora who has won Nobel Prize in Literature in 2001. His portrayal of women in his early works invites lot of criticisms that have put him in the label of a 'misogynist.' No other writer, however, in the contemporary literary scene, is as controversial a figure as V. S. Naipaul. Most of his early works reveal the truth about his being a 'misogynist.' There are a very few women characters who appear in both of his fictional or non-fictional works — they are nondescript and often portrayed as prostitutes and degraded characters. In his personal life too, Naipaul had been very cruel to his English wife Patricia Hale. His biographer, Patrick French has brought into light, the other side, the 'monstrous' side of this great author, in his widely acclaimed book *The World Is What It Is: The Authorized Biography of V. S. Naipaul* (2008). Taken its title from the very first line of Naipaul's great African novel *A Bend in the River*, French's book reveals the shocking personal life of V. S. Naipaul. In his novels too, his women have a very limited role to play and are presented as negative stereotypes: as passive, weak and second class citizens (in de Beauvoir's phrase); and in most cases as prostitutes. In fact, Naipaul's cultural and family background is responsible for his vision of women as the 'other.' Bruce King makes a brilliant observation saying that "Naipaul's novels differ from most European and American fiction in portraying romantic love and sexual freedom as destructive, a dereliction of one's duties. The perspective is Indian rather than European" (King 35). This is so because Naipaul grew up in a traditional and ritualistic world of Indian indentured migrants who happened to live as a community in an insulated and shut-in world from outside where women are expected to be wives and mothers rather than independent beings. 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 such as *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 desire 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 failed carpenter, he is neither able to make any money nor treat his wife properly. His wife Emelda happens to go out for work as they have no children; yet, he has this crooked idea about his wife: "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 as a result, he becomes almost insane without her. He tries to rectify himself and starts working hard: he paints his house and puts new furniture in it. One day 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 the new furnitures inside it" (13). It may somewhat be clear from the preceding quote about men's attitude towards women and how the latter is treated in a degrading manner. This shows the pathetic role and status of women in a patriarchal society represented by Naipaul's crooked male characters.

Again, women are treated as machines of childbirth and childrearing. In *Miguel Street*, for example, Morgan is a character who is engaged in fireworks but with no prospects. His wife Mrs. Morgan is reduced to a machine of child-birth and child-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: "You 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 and this makes his wife angry: "You is not a antiman, you is real man. You ain't only make ten children with me, you going to make more with somebody else" (69). Here, Morgan, the male character, therefore, represents the diseased mindset of the male towards the female. As a male, he believes that he can do whatever he likes whereas, his wife, the female, has to bear all miseries and injustice including the stigma on character and at the same time she has no voice to protest or protect herself from male abuse and exploitation.

There is another woman in the novel who is portrayed as the representative of the degraded women. She is Laura, 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, "[w]omen 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 from these lines as 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 and at the same time, she is treated as public property ready to be used by anybody. For example, 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: “[i]t have nothing like education in the world. I don’t want my children to grow like me” (90). Laura wants her children to get educated and through education, she believes, women can get their rightful status in the society and live a life of dignity.

Subjugation and physical 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 and calls it a kind of ‘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, “[i]s 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 children 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 resultantly, the woman often 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 straight like bamboo . . . I don’t want a wife that can’t make baby” (Miguel Street 156, 158).

In *The Mystic Masseur*, there is no healthy relationship between the protagonist, Ganesh Ramsumair and his wife Leela. Ganesh insults his wife, beats her in order to get property in the form of dowry from her father. Dowry is an evil practice, especially in Indian societies. It has no exception even in Indian-Trinidadian society where Indians, at the time of their migration to the New World in the late eighteenth century, took with them their culture and rituals too. Women are subjugated and exploited in the name of dowry; moreover, in a patriarchal society, women are often physically abused due to that menace called dowry. In the novel too, it seems wife-beating is a ‘formal affair.’ At one point of time, Leela leaves Ganesh saying that she cannot bear any more insult on her and her family. As a traditional patriarch, Ramsumair has this say: “[I]et 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, Naipaul’s masterpiece novel, depicts the life of the Indians — men, women and children in Trinidad. The indentured labourers took with them their women and children in the New World and along with them, as mentioned before, went their customs and 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 believed to be traditionally idealized female figures who represent motherhood and submissive wives and perform marginal roles. For example, Shama, inspite 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, 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.

However, there is one exception in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the character of 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 female character who is to be feared and even to be hated.

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 parallel to that of Naipaul, regarding his treatment of women. At one point of the novel, Salim says, “[w]omen 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 man at the local university) wife, Yvette and tries to possess her body: “[w]omen 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: “[u]ntil then my fantasies were brothel fantasies of conquest and degradation, with the woman as the willing victim, accomplice in her own degradation” (202).

Scholars opine that in his portrayal of women, Naipaul has tried to demonise them. They are presented as sex symbols for male fulfilment: 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. The tone of male dominance and superiority over female is quite evident here.

The preceding analysis, therefore, shows that Naipaul’s portrayal of women is not free from traditional male bias. In his early novels and even in some later ones too, he has tried to represent them as negative stereotypes. It may not be wrong to argue that he has been unsympathetic towards most of his women characters. Though his women characters make up ‘half the world,’ as a male character of his novel puts it, yet, he is unable to do justice to them. His women characters portray the kind of subjugated, degraded and exploited women who scream for an equal, meaningful and dignified life. As women make up ‘half the world,’ they must be given their due rights and status in the society so that both men and women can enjoy a balanced and harmonious relationship.

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