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Projection of Western Womanhood in V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*

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Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul's wide range of literary activity both in fiction and non-fiction has been a matter of continuous debate and discussion. Naipaul was born in a Hindu family in Trinidad. Naipaul's literature presents the image of an author who did not experience any sense of belonging anywhere; but the wide range of experience of this author has resulted in many memorable books. His writings reveal the author's constant search for a cultural mooring. He has a vast repertoire of literary output on different forms i.e. Novels, Historical Documents, Travel Books etc. at his disposal. His vision is not enervated by contemporary social cliché or political routine. He is independent and relevant. He engages himself with the stresses and strains that we recognize crucial in our experience now. His writing represents creeds, cultures and continents. With his expatriate career, he is able to practice an art in and of very dissimilar worlds; all this gives him a peculiar contemporary quality.

Naipaul claims a vast store of literary output, which includes both Fiction and Non-fiction. In his fiction, Naipaul has touched upon an enormous range of subject matter. In addition, a set pattern can be observed in his fiction. His novels move around the life and destiny of the central figure that is generally a male character. In *Mystic Masseur*, it is the story of Ganesh Ramsumair, a dismissed school teacher who later transforms himself into a masseur, gets famous as a mystic and a writer of the religious books and finally a strong political figure. *Miguel Street* delineates the succession of events happening in a particular street of Port of Spain in the form of short stories. The focus of this compact set of stories is to give a brief insight into the life and activity of the people in the Island of Trinidad. *The Mimic Men* begins with the description of the life of an exiled and withdrawn politician Ralph Singh who is disillusioned and is writing his memoir in some anonymous hotel room in a London suburb. *Half a Life* describes the enterprises of Mr. Willie Chandra in India, London, Africa and finally his exile to Germany. A comprehensive study of Naipaul's works gives an idea that all his protagonists are male characters and little has been said about his women characters. We notice that the author grants a peripheral role to them. For Naipaul being the member of a community that has its roots in India, a land of "Patriarchal Culture", has inherited directly or indirectly some of the basic tenets of Patriarchy.

The Mimic Men (1967) is considered as Naipaul's master-piece in the first phase of his literary career. It presents the experience of a newly independent country in the Caribbean, the island of Isabella. The protagonist in the novel is a Caribbean Indian politician who is exiled in London because of racial strife on the island i.e. Isabella. The novel depicts the truth about the postcolonial experience of the people in the Caribbean Island who are trying to establish order by governing their country as an independent

nation but end up mimicking their colonizer. The novel starts with the description of the protagonist Ralph Singh, writing his political memoir in a hotel somewhere in a London suburb after having failed in his personal life and political career. The crooked political ways of an island having multicultural society ends in failure and frustration for Ralph Singh and he reaches a position where he fails to find a meaning for his existence. Like other male characters of V.S. Naipaul's fiction viz. Ganesh Ramsumair, Willie Chandra, Mohun Biswas, Ralph Singh also starts writing his political memoirs to render coherence to his political and personal experience of life and to find meaning to his existence. The novel progresses in accordance with the consciousness of the protagonist. At the beginning, he intends to look at the causes of instability in the newly independent nations and moves back to his own past and then to the awareness and the attempt to give coherence to the experiences of life by putting it down in the form of a memoir.

Sandra, Ralph Singh's wife is a prototype of Western Womanhood in the novel. She is ambitious, assertive and dynamic. She is a Londoner who marries Ralph Singh as a way to avoid a dreary future when her academic ambition fails and accompanies him to his native Caribbean Island of Isabella. Ralph Singh describes his marriage with Sandra as an "episode" in these words,

It seemed a textbook example of the ill-advised mixed marriage.(The *Mimic Men*, p.p.41)

We could sense a passionate and nostalgic love for Sandra in Ralph Singh's words whenever he would think about Sandra. Ralph Singh is a sensualist by disposition. Sandra was always an element of delight for Ralph Singh. She was endowed with an attractive body. There was firmness and precision in her movement. That she, herself was conscious of her physical beauty was a surprise for Ralph Singh. She would scrupulously care for her body herself. There was some kind of narcissist pleasure that Sandra used to derive in caressing her body. Ralph Singh writes:

No one loved her breasts more than Sandra herself. (The *Mimic Men* p.45)

Further in the narrative he candidly describes his attraction towards Sandra. In his memoir he wrote.....

...Not everyone's idea of beauty; few women are...Sandra nevertheless overwhelmed me then; and she would overwhelm me now I know. (p.43)

He confesses

...the obvious and plausible is often wrong..... even now all I have against Sandra is her name.....(p. 41)

Everything about her was strange but attractive for Ralph Singh. He found her rapacious in her social ambition, in her pursuit of culture, in 'her bite of speech', in adoration of her body etc., she was full of consuming self-love. Even her style of expressing her love for

Ralph Singh was strange. Instead of expressing her feelings in a manner of plea; she uttered it as an idea. Sandra marries Ralph Singh impulsively and within a short period after their marriage they are separated from each other apparently as an effect of disillusionment of the mixed marriage. Although there are number of reasons that could be considered as the cause of failure of this couples' conjugal life; this paper will be an attempt to prove into the details of the same.

Sandra who belonged to the ambitious class of the human race proves to be utterly individualistic by nature. Her vaulting ambition, her desire to achieve lofty ideals in life and her acute dislike for everything common prompts her to go in for an abrupt mixed marriage. Her refusal to accept the obvious in life kept her under a range of accusation by her father and other members of her family. Her ambition to which she gives expression with the most carefully chosen phrases is one of those things that attract Ralph Singh from the beginning till the end. She expresses her ambition as

...she wanted to be either a nun or a king's mistress. (p.43)

Later Ralph Singh finds that it is a famous dialogue from Bernard Shaw's drama. Yet this attribute of Sandra has great deal of attraction for Ralph Singh. As he admits:

With Sandra...the mere act of communication was a delight. (p.45)

Another attribute that Ralph Singh finds noticeable about her at the beginning of their relationship is her confidence, rightness and ambition. Sandra's sureness is a great attraction and she has an aura of good luck about her. When Ralph Singh met her in London, she had already rejected her family for their insisting upon choosing a routine profession for her and was living of her own. Paul Theroux comments about her attitude

Her eager confidence was a cover for her uncertainty, her 'gift of the phrase' obscured rather than sharpen her perception, and in the end she became unfeeling and rude. Singh's greatest regret is the surrender of his will to Sandra. (Theroux, Paul p.p.73)

Eventually the marriage that was a result of hasty decision on the part of the couple, proved its futility on breaking down so fast. There are some reasons that contribute to this break up. The couple felt estranged and unaccepted in the island of Isabella where they first faced rejection at the port and later some reconciliation was brought about by Ralph Singh's mother with her heavy heart on missing the ostentatious marriage of her foreign returned son. The dock scene was the first shock that she received, where she first came to realize Singh's inability to take action and his dandy image is completely shattered. She bewildered to learn the fact that hitherto he has not intimated his mother about his marriage to an Englishwoman. His mother's melodramatic mourning in public, first to welcome her son and later to signal rejection of Sandra, was alien to her. Sandra was shocked and bewildered, unable to comprehend the situation. Singh was extremely calm owing to his confidence in Sandra's ability to cope with any situation. Paul Theroux in

his book *V.S.Naipaul: An Introduction to his Works* writes about the first cultural shock that she receives on that occasion:

He had not guessed how little she understood of what was happening, how desperate she felt at being rejected. He has overrated her, and later he realizes that his reliance on her 'must have seemed like abandonment at a moment when she was most insecure'. His trust burdens and confuses her, and it weakens him. (Theroux, Paul p.p.74)

Eventually, Sandra becomes aware of her own metropolitan instinct that can function in London well and she finds her existence in Isabella Island aimless and without purpose. The island, she locates people belonging to shallow, mixed and chaotic society. She finds

...everything and everyone seem third rate to her. (p.73, King Bruce)

Her sense of being racially superior partially obstructs the formulation of cordiality between Singh and herself. Eventually, she drifts away from him without Singh preventing it. He watches but does not help. It is Singh's inability to act when faced with a situation. He takes the course of withdrawal into passivity by distancing from actual world. He writes in his memoir:

Sandra bears no blame; it was he, himself who had willed the gift away.
(P.76)

On many occasions in the narrative, he confesses his sexual failure, his inability to lose himself in someone beyond himself. Paul Theroux expresses altogether different view about Singh's sexual drive. He writes:

He is a methodical philanderer, but he is not sexually vigorous. He fears the finality of the sexual act, preferring to stay 'forever at a woman's breasts, if they were full and had a hint of a weight that required support'. For him, orgasm is humiliating.... (*V.S.Naipaul: An Introduction to his Works*, p.p.72)

His exhibition of love for Sandra takes the form of performance in public. Naipaul uses the metaphor of play-acting to describe their love life without any ardour.

He courts Sandra in front of others at a party, but nothing comes to it and they sleep apart. (King, Brice p.p.74)

Their short-lived married life is full of hectic and dazzling activities, surrounded by friends of different racial and cultural group. It leaves little time for Singh to understand Sandra; even Sandra knows so little about herself. In their case, the wealth and dazzle prove completely unreal, what is real is the delicate system of dependent relationship that solidifies bond was neither openly acknowledged nor fully appreciated.

As the marriage begins to falter, Singh finds greater disturbance in his wife. Unable to bear the uncertainties, Sandra decides to leave. Ralph Singh who knew the reason behind their breaking relationship and unavailability of the prevailing circumstances writes:

...it was not for me to decide to leave; that decision was hers alone....other relationships awaited her, other countries, I had nowhere to go. (p.p.76)

Sandra's willful nature, her ability to take practical decision and the ease with which she reached the conclusion in her married life sounds more calculative than the eccentricity that characterizes her nature. Paul Theroux in his chapter 'Householder' describes Sandra as

Sandra is decisive; marriage was her idea, and when the parting comes it is she who goes away.(V.S.Naipaul: *An Introduction to his Works* p.p.73)

Her willingness to resume her candid life with somebody else after a broken relationship is in itself bizarre. Referring to the strength of Sandra's character, Gillian Dooley writes in his article titled *Naipaul's Women*:

Sandra is strong and vital; perhaps the first woman in Naipaul's fiction to have potentiality, an existence independent of men and marriage. (p.p. 5)

A general tendency can be found among the critics of Naipaul when they intend to analyze Naipaul's women characters. Martha Lewis in her research article "Householders and Bitches" and Consuelo Lopez de Villegas in her perceptive article "Matriarch and Man-eaters" put Sandra in the second category of women. Sandra is beyond their householder category of Naipaul's women like, Shama in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Leela in *The Mystic Masseur* etc. who sacrifice their selfish desires in order to bring solidity to their marital relationship and play the roles of a dutiful wife, sister and mother than a willful individual like Sandra. The present paper attempts to prove that Sandra is unjustly blamed and considers her from altogether different perspective. It is not Sandra who is to be blamed alone for the broken relationship and difficult circumstances prevailing at the end of their marriage. It is accepted that in the post colonial social setting, it has become most important to bring out domestic harmony in order to establish order in the society that was in the process of establishing itself. Ralph Singh, who is the member of Indo-Caribbean Society, cannot extend solidity to his relation with Sandra. We can infer some meaning to this comparison by taking into consideration the reasons behind the general subordination of women in Indo-Caribbean society and their subdued status in their families with the help of the statement of Ameena Gafoor in her article titled "*The Depiction of Indo-Caribbean Female Experience by The Regional Woman Writers: Jan Shinebourne's The Last English Plantation.*" :

...women play crucial roles within the family that is matriarchal in nature, but patriarchal in appearance, which means that women have limited power and opportunity for independence. If the preservation of family contributes to the stability of the whole society, then the fictional women

characters have supported the social and spiritual development of the Indian Society. (p.p.128-9)

It is felt that there is a cultural difference between Indo-Caribbean women portrayed by Naipaul in his other fiction and Sandra. Sandra being the woman from Western culture claims and asserts a more individualistic existence. She is overtly liberal and modern in her temperament which acquires negative shade making her responsible for Ralph Singh's political and personal failure on her. A noted critic Robert Hemenway writes in his article titled *Sex and Politics in V.S.Naipaul* :

A Naipaul reader has a right to ask, does this author hate woman? Unattractive women inhabit his fiction from the beginning and one search hard to find a woman who has not been denied the reader's sympathy. His women are either severely limited by tradition or seem semiwhores bent on using men for their personal ends. (p.p. 192)

Expressing similar opinion in his research paper titled *Psychosexual Aspects of the Woman in V.S.Naipaul's Fiction* Elaine Fido claims:

We, as readershave the right to object if we see certain traits being constantly repeated as if they were morally health perception of human behaviours when in fact they are playing on sickness which sexism creates and fosters in the mind. However, Naipaul never implies that the relations between the sexes in his fiction are morally healthy. (p.p. 90-91)

Naipaul historically portrays post-colonial society which characterizes complexity of several types to such an extent so as to make it impossible to have a healthy existence between man and woman. Hemenway's explanation for his negative portrayal of this man-woman relationship is that:

He deliberately denies his readers the hope that modern men and women, confronted by an earth slowly going back to bush, by nation states self-destructing in genocide and guerrilla warfare, can hardly find solace in the personal bonds of love, sex and marriage. (p.p.194)

Sandra is a Londoner. She is extremely individualistic by nature. She marries Ralph Singh due to her fascination for uniqueness of a mixed marriage. Later, she feels alien and displaced in the Island of Isabella where at the beginning she senses the thrill and romance of mixed marriage. The passion gradually fades out and is replaced by the cold indifference between Ralph Singh and her. She, herself being insecure and disturbed could not extend solidarity to their relationship and decides to leave. Undoubtedly, Sandra is individualistic and eccentric to a great extent but it is the individual incompleteness and incompatibility of the couple that hinder the harmony of their married life.

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