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## The Silent Voices: Enigma of Naipaul's Female Characters

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Women are peripheral figures in V.S. Naipaul's novels like in *A House for Mr Biswas*, *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds*. Naipaul's narrative space is a paradox where the female characters in spite of being the peripheral voices are the pillars on which the men are leaning on and without whose presence, assistance, and approval there can be no growth or fulfilment that is possible. Men are the central characters but have limited relevance in the private spaces. Women are the directional forces of the narrative that lead the male characters into the quest of their destiny. Without their presence the men would be in a state of limbo. It is their push that forces the men into action and occupies a silent yet forceful place that gives direction to the narrative.

Many critics of Naipaul consider him to be a misogynist and anti-women. Bruce King says that this perception arises because of the gender based violence depicted in Naipaul's books. He says, "Because Naipaul has scenes of sexual violence in his fiction he sometimes has been regarded as anti-women." (13) On the publication of *A Bend in the River* Hemenway wrote: "A Naipaul reader has a right to ask, does this author hate women?" There are those who differ in their opinion in this regard. Gillian Dooley pronounces that women "are not singled out for his anger or contempt. They are, on the whole, treated with no less, nor more, sympathy and respect than their husbands, brothers, sons, and lovers" Sanna Dhahir, with reference to the female characters in *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* remarks that "in their efforts to show Naipaul as a misogynist, critics have completely overlooked the forcefulness of the archetypal female in some of his fiction" (95).

In addition to this controversy surrounding the portrayal of women by Naipaul in his fiction, there is another thing that stands out in his novels and that is the limited narrative space granted by the writer to the female characters. Dooley says that, "Women, in Naipaul's fiction, are rarely central but often important".

In this article we will try to examine if this leads to the marginalization of their impact on the narrative or not. For the purpose of this article we will limit ourselves to three of Naipaul's novels, *A House for Mr Biswas*, *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds*. All the three novels being considered have one thing in common between them and that is the presence of an Indian origin protagonist. Although the novels differ in their context and settings *A House for Mr Biswas* is set in Trinidad and its surrounding areas with the writer confining himself to the immigrant Indian origin settlers. In *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds* his last two novels, the action takes place across three continents—Asia, Europe and Africa and Naipaul does not confine himself to one community or people. Naipaul in these two novels presents characters who are immigrants, local

migrants, locals and come from varied ancestries'. Willie's father belongs to a local migrant group and is an Indian born and brought up in India. Willie and Sarojini are Indian immigrants to Europe. Anna has a mixed ancestry and is a migrant, whereas Percy is a migrant "Jamaican with mixed parentage" (61) Roger is a Britisher, as is Perdita. In addition to this there a number of African characters that Willie encounters in Africa. These characters are fleshed out to varying degrees by Naipaul and do not remain peripheral. Roger and Perdita are present in both the novels and their character evolves over the passage of time that has been shown to have passed. Sarojini's presence is more palpable in the second novel than in the first. In the second novel Naipaul presents a large number of migrant characters that have relocated within the India due to mainly economic reasons. The narrative keeps oscillating across the physical and social spaces as the Willie the narrator-protagonist traverses across them. Willie sees the African world of the common African spread around the estates and realizes the similarity to his Indian home . He says, "It was like a version of what- in another life , as it seemed- I had known at home. By a strange chance I was on the other side." (152)

The last two novels will be taken as a composite whole for the purpose of this particular article, as the main protagonists' growth and journey is completed through the narrative space of these two novels. The character of Willie Chandran has lived only half his life and is still in a state of limbo when the reader leaves him at the end of *Half a Life*. Some of the characters and influences are common in both these novels barring Ana, Willie's wife who is absent from the second novel. She is a major directional force in his life in the first novel but is absent in the sequel, although the main protagonist is occasionally riddled with guilt at abandoning her at a difficult time. He tries to suppress this feeling by deliberately avoiding any contact with any news regarding the Portuguese African colony that was his home for eighteen years of his life. Another aspect that is common in these novels is the number of female characters who flout the patriarchal rules that govern the society. One also comes across female characters who seem to be adhering to these rules but are constantly at odds with the male symbolic head of the family. The strength of his women is also evident from the breakdown that the male characters face once the women are no longer a part of their lives.

A closer examination of these novels reveals that the physical space that the female characters occupy bears no correlation to the influence they exert on the direction of the narrative, as well as on the development of the plot. The physical narrative space that the female characters occupy in Naipaul's novels is deceptive. One thing that is common in all these three novels of Naipaul is the depiction of the powerless female as a myth that the male ego feeds on to find relevance and strength in their life. The men have limited social relevance in the private spaces, where in spite of being seemingly in control they find themselves alienated, made redundant and powerless. Naipaul depicts how the male resorts to violence both physical and emotional to find meaning and relevance but feels emasculated at a deeper level. It is in trying to fight this feeling of being emasculated that he realizes his own weakness and the strength of the female. The male protagonist at some stage in the novel is struck with the realization that he

derives his strength from the women in his life. He reaches a realization that he has been leaning on the women and they are the stronger in this equation while appearing to the weaker and subservient of the two. Willie in *Half a Life* tells Sarojini, “I drew comfort from Ana, her strength and her authority. And just as now, as you may have noticed, Sarojini, I lean on you” (141) Similarly Mr Biswas is leaning on the women in his life first Tara, who he knows will rescue him whenever he is trouble and later on, on his wife Shama. When this acceptance of the strength of the female increases the male protagonist stops fighting the inevitable and gives in and is finally able to find peace within him.

When this stage is reached, by the male protagonist within his own mind space that he is able to find fulfilment, peace and acceptance of his own inherent limited capabilities and finally mature as a human being. It is not possible for him to reach this stage without this acceptance. In *Half a Life* Willie is shown to have felt fulfilled only when he surrenders to the greater female power of Ana and it is this realization that makes him confess to Sarojini. He is grateful to Ana, “for the luck and liberation she had brought me, the undoing of fear, the granting to me of full manhood.” (145) As long as he is flailing against the female presence in his life he is struggling against an unknown force that he is unable to conquer. This acceptance releases him from the “fear of losing language and expression, the fear almost of losing the gift of speech.” (146) The female presence which is often described as emasculating in Naipaul’s earlier novels here is a liberating force. Here Naipaul depicts the advent of the realization of the empowering female presence whose acceptance by the protagonist leads to a more mature and accepting attitude that was earlier lacking.

Once this stage has been achieved than the narration takes a turn and the voice the reader hears is more balanced and accepting of the female presence. This presence is now a transformed voice and in the hearing and acceptance of this change the writing has changed. We find the narrative voice which does not view the female as an outside force that has to be subdued and fought against and hence the portrayal undergoes a change. The Naipaul depicting the female force at this stage is a lot less antagonistic and angry at the intrusion of his physical and social space. This growth and acceptance of the main protagonist leads to a corresponding growth and acceptance of the female voice also who starts being a lot less critical once the male presence is no longer viewed as a force to be fought against. This brings a sense of peace and fulfilment that was not possible within the realm of the earlier equations that had been witnessed by the reader. At the end of *Magic Seeds* Willie is seen to forgive Sarojini and absolve her of all responsibility in what has happened to his life. He says, “I have no business to rebuke her, however indirectly”. (283)

Although the main characters and narrators in Naipaul’s fiction are men yet the women are the directional forces that lead the male characters into the quest of their destiny. Some of these women like Willie’s mother have no narrative voice at all and are only alluded to by the other characters but they are the compelling force driving the narrative forward. Without their presence the men would be in a state of limbo. It is their push that forces the men into action and

occupies a silent yet forceful place that gives direction to the narrative. Naipaul's narrative space is a paradox where the female characters in spite of being the peripheral voices are the pillars on which the men are leaning on and without whose presence, assistance, and approval there can be no growth or fulfilment that is possible. In the patriarchal, predominantly Indian world that Naipaul showcases in his novels, the females who flout this norm are evident in his all three of his novels, *A House for Mr Biswas*, *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds*. These novels stand out in the portrayal of female characters who may not occupy a vast narrative space, but whose usually silent presence is the dominant force that takes the narrative forward.

When reading Naipaul what needs to be kept in perspective is the social reality of the society and time that Naipaul is presenting in his novels. Dooley says that Naipaul has a, "passion for accurate observation that makes him an exceptional writer." (3-4) Naipaul's passion for looking beneath the surface and presenting the complex relations that govern the personal spaces that his characters occupy brings forth the hidden force of his women. Although they are never the central characters, the presence and the force can be sensed, in the actions of the men whose life they influence.

From his earlier novels, if we move on to his first major novel that established him as a writer of great repute, *A House for Mr Biswas*, we come across a world order where women hold dominant positions in the household. Not only that they have a presence independent of men. Whether it is the character of Tara or Mrs Tulsi or even Shama the main protagonists' wife, women are a powerful force to reckon with. The delineation of these female characters has been described as unsympathetic by some critics. While doing so they are ignoring that Naipaul is presenting these women through the eyes of a narrator, who is a man—he is a son-in-law, and a husband and his pronouncements against these female characters has to be viewed from this perspective. In addition to this, the character of the narrative voice is presented as inherently flawed. He is an individual who promises a lot, but delivers little. He refuses to take responsibility for his actions and expects more from his relationships on one hand, while abdicating his corresponding responsibilities as a son, husband, son-in-law or father on the other.

Mohun the main protagonist and narrator is presented as a flawed character who when compared to his wife and other female characters in the novel is seen as less able, as well as, more gullible. His wife is presented by the writer as the more rational of the two and is seen to be the silent force that rescues him from his multiple misadventures. The depiction of women as the more sensible and worldly wise of the two is a theme that is present in his initial novels and is continued by the writer in this novel too. To ignore this aspect of the presentation of Naipaul's women leads to a flawed reading and presentation.

In *A House for Mr Biswas* the female characters are limited to the personal space and do not exert any influence outside of it. Their roles though not totally limited to but are to a great extent confined to the personal space. Naipaul in this novel presents two very strong women—Tara and Mrs Tulsi. Tara dominates in the first phase of the novel in the main protagonists' life,

while Mrs Tulsi in the latter half. Both of them are the factual heads of their families. All the decisions regarding Mohun are taken by Tara at the earlier stage of his life. The shifts, turns and twists in his life, as well the progression of the narration is a result of her influence. She is the one who brings her sister—Mr Biswas's mother, from the village to her house in Pagotes and sends Mohun to a Canadian Mission school. She is the driving force that later on sends Mohun to Jairam and on his return from there to work at the rum shop with Bhandat. It is her displeasure that leads to the expulsion of Dehuti from the family fold.

The men, whether it is Ajodha—her husband or Mohun both act as per her directive. The entire action in the novel is driven by her although her actual presence in the narrative space is limited. She might appear to be a marginal character but her narrative force is phenomenal as all the action is driven by her decisions and actions. At a later stage in the novel, it is Mrs Tulsi who becomes the force that propels the narrative forward. It is her actions that give meaning to the love letter Mohun has written. Had she chosen to ignore the letter the marriage would never have taken place. Later in the novel also, whether it is the move to 'The Chase' or to 'Green Vale' or to 'Port-of-Spain' or to 'Shorthills' it is her actions that propel the main protagonist and the action forward. Even the lives and actions of her sons are governed by her. Seth may have been held responsible for the lapses, but the decisions were never really his. Had Mrs Tulsi decided to send Shekhar to Cambridge it would have been accomplished. She breaks the rules and formulates her own when she so desires. Owad was too young to have propelled the move to Port-of-Spain and later on taken a decision to study abroad. Mrs Tulsi's personality is stamped across all the decisions that are taken before Owad's return from his stint abroad. Without the presence of these two women there would have been no action that propels the storyline forward.

If we examine the character of Shama one thing that stands out is that Mohun always feels lost and incomplete without her. The strength of her character becomes first evident at The Chase where frightened and alone she starts crying. Mohun is unable to provide her the reassurance she needs. Naipaul in this scene writes, "He wanted to comfort her. But he needed the comfort himself . . . in the end it was Shama who gave him comfort." (149) Shama emerges as the stronger of the two and it is her actions which are able to liberate him from his precarious position at The Chase. Mr Biswas till the end finds strength and solace from her whenever things are not going well for him. In the end it is when Shama is ready to lean on him that he is able to establish his position as a head of his house. Naipaul puts the onus squarely on the protagonist Mohun for his inability to become independent and hence be accepted in his role as a husband. Sympathetic in his delineation of the shortcomings of the character of the main protagonist based on his father Naipaul might be, but he definitely is not appropriating the blame on the female characters in the novel. Dooley writes, "Shama is portrayed not without sympathy, although she is clearly not as ambitious or interesting as her husband."

Another major aspect of this novel that is missed by most critics is the presentation of Savi by Naipaul as the savior of the house. When the novel ends it is the strong, proactive and benevolent female character of Savi that has saved the day. Naipaul writes, "Savi returned and

Mr Biswas welcomed her as if she were herself and Anand combined. Savi got a job, at a bigger salary than Mr Biswas could ever have got". (622) Naipaul presents to the reader a transformed Mr Biswas, he who had earlier not even been aware of Savi's growing up or focused on her education welcoming her as both, his son and his daughter. The displacing of Anand as the savior and the promising son, as the force that would secure their future, that Mr Biswas had always envisaged, by Savi, is a very important aspect of the novel. Anand is shown to have abdicated his responsibility and is absent at this crucial stage. What is noteworthy is not only this act of Savi, but its acknowledgement by her father Mr Biswas. These are some crucial aspects of this novel that show a clear shift in the attitude towards the female strength and presence in the main protagonist's mind.

Now if we examine his other two novels we find that the actions are propelled by the female characters to a great extent. There is no antagonism present in Willie's mind for the female presence in his life. The presentation of the two genders is fairly balanced. Talking about these two novels Dooley says that:

No character in these two novels is totally sympathetic. Willie is maddeningly passive, and other men appear weak or opportunistic. Most sympathetic, however, is probably Ana, while others, like Perdita, are viewed with unsettling coldness.

Some of the characters in these novels have no direct voice. In *Half a Life* the character of Willie's mother is given no voice, the reader encounters her through Willie and his father. She is an indirect presence, but her influence on the people and events is very tangible and pronounced. She is the one who propels the action forward and takes events to their logical conclusion—when it comes to the life and events in the life of Willie's father. She is presented to the reader through the narrative voice of Willie's father and hence comes across as crude and pushy, but Naipaul at the same time gives a positive spin to her persona when she is presented by the writer through her son's point of view. Naipaul shows how Willie as a young child, felt for his mother, and loved her dearly, before his view gets tainted by the world's perception of his mother as a woman of the lower caste. Naipaul making use of the third person narrative voice says that when Willie, "was very young he used such money as came his way to buy pretty things for her . . . gradually as he grew up . . . he began to look at his mother from more and more of a distance." (39) By doing this Naipaul here is discrediting the view being presented by Willie's father. Naipaul shows that it is view that is limited and tainted by the widely accepted standards and concept of feminine beauty, grace and expected behaviour from someone belonging to the lower caste.

Later in the novel the process of self-discovery for Willie is taken forward by his encounters and learning through the women he associates with during his stay in London. It is a process that would have been incomplete without these female characters that Naipaul presents in this novel. Whether it is June or Perdita or Graca they all contribute in the development of the narrative as well as the transformation of the character of the main protagonist. Ana his half

Portuguese wife is presented in a very positive light by the writer. She is not shown to have any malice or flaw whether physical or moral. Even at the end when she is fully aware of Willie's infidelities and weakness of character and he is planning to abandon her in the hostile and turbulent postcolonial African country, she shows no anger or bitterness. She is almost like an angel who helps him in his desire to escape. She might be physically weak but is shown to be actually the stronger of the two. Naipaul does not show her to be unfaithful, angry or vindictive even in the face of Willie's infidelity or the lies and deception of her father. She has every right to be angry and disillusioned but no such trait is presented by the writer. Her strength is a contrast to Willie's weakness. She tells Willie, "I'm not running away. Half of what my grandfather gave me was stolen by my father. I will stay here and protect the other half." (226) Willie is the one who is running away from a place he had sought shelter in when he felt he had nowhere to go after college. The only reproach she offers is a reminder that he was the one who had wanted to come here and marry her and not the other way round. All she says is a dignified, "You wanted it, Willie. You asked. I had to think about it." (227)

Another aspect that Naipaul presents is that, the only time Willie felt fulfilled was with her, this feeling is denied to him at all later stages and this sense of peace is absent from all other relationships. Naipaul shows how it was her acceptance of him in London that had made him feel like a man for the first time in his life. She with her unquestioning acceptance of him offers him a sense of self that he had never felt in his life. Naipaul states that, "for the first time in his life he felt himself in the presence of someone who accepted him completely." (125) Willie is completely "intoxicated" by this feeling and for the first time he feels that there is, "nothing to push against, no misgiving to overcome, no feeling of distance." (125) Willie is shown to have felt fulfilled only when he surrenders to the greater female power of Ana and it is this realization that makes him confess to Sarojini. He is grateful to Ana, "for the luck and liberation she had brought me, the undoing of fear, the granting to me of full manhood." (145)

Another very important character is that of Willie's sister Sarojini. Without her he would still be in Africa. It is her actions which propel him out of Africa and land him in post-war Germany. When the narrative moves to the *Magic Seeds* it is her actions that lead to Willie getting sucked up in the revolutionary movement wrecking the rural landscape in India. It is Sarojini who gets him out of jail and into London where he is shown to be at the end of the novel. She may only be present through her letters when it comes to the narrative space occupied by her, but her presence resonates throughout the novel in the cascading events that take Willie into the center of the revolutionary activities. She is a palpable presence in Willie's mind as the only hope that can suck him out of the quagmire he is sunk into. She is a presence that cannot be ignored by the reader.

We can say that the protagonists are guided and their life courses charted out for them to a great extent by the female characters present in the novels. This limited physical space in no way is central in determining their arena of influence. The paradoxical in Naipaul's absent female narrative voice is in the importance and strength of these silent voices that murmur across



the narrative space. The importance of the female characters is evident not so much in the physical space they occupy but on the influence they exert in the limited space granted to them.

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