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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# WOMEN IN *THE MYSTIC MASSEUR* OF V.S. NAIPAUL

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### ABSTRACT

V.S. Naipaul is doyen among postcolonial writers. His fiction and non-fiction is a record of his personal views and experience. His novels deal with the struggle of Indo-Caribbean people who are caught in the web of socio-cultural and ethnic forces of heterogeneous Caribbean society. He adopted the western form of writing novel, but his fiction is replete with ethos of Indian community in Trinidad. Naipaul's early fiction is full of humour, kind irony. All the protagonists in his early fiction are male and female characters play peripheral action. The women are portrayed as victims under patriarchal system, and as marginalized victims. Therefore, I have chosen *The Mystic Masseur*, one of the early novels of Naipaul, to explore how V.S. Naipaul portrayed women. This paper 'Portrayal of Women in *The Mystic Masseur*' deals with how V.S. Naipaul portrayed and cornered women as peripheral characters.

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## INTRODUCTION

Naipaul is a prolific Trinidadian novelist of Indian origin whose grandparents were migrated from India to West Indies as indentured labourers. He imposed exile upon himself from his birthplace, Trinidad, and lives in England, but never feels at home anywhere. His consciousness of homelessness is at the core of his fictional and non-fictional works. This paper aims to deal with how V.S. Naipaul portrayed women in *The Mystic Masseur*. The early fiction (*The Mystic Masseur*, *The Suffrage of Elvira*, *Miguel Street*, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, and *A Flag on the Island*) of V.S. Naipaul is replete with warm humour, kind irony and almost invisible criticism of the society. Naipaul recognized as Indo-Caribbean novelist, portrays Indo-Caribbean women as exploited, separated and rejected personalities. The women characters play the peripheral action and are portrayed as victims under patriarchal system, and as marginalized victims. Naipaul is the major writer who uses his Indian experience in his fiction. Therefore, in the novels of V.S. Naipaul, women characters are not central characters, but male characters. In Espinet's views is that "the invisibility of women in V. S. Naipaul's novels spring from the old Hindu custom which declaims against actually seeing Indian women" (427). Though he lives in England, he writes about Indian community in West Indian Island of Trinidad. Contrary to the most European and American fiction in portraying women regarding romantic love, and sexual freedom, Naipaul portrays women differently because they are Indian Woman, not the European woman.

Naipaul seems to have adopted the male-oriented Indian tradition in which women are mostly confined to the domestic chores in their role perceived basically as governed by the desires, whims and needs of the men-folk. As Indian tradition is male-oriented, Naipaul portrays women characters as peripheral, vulnerable, and scapegoats. Naipaul visited Australia in the year 2001 and gave an interview in which he was asked to give opinion on feminist movement. In an interview with Cathcart Michael, Naipaul said, "I haven't thought about it". He said in literary festival between Indian women writers on feminist issues, "My life is short. I can't listen to banality. This thing about colonialism, this thing about gender oppression, and the very word oppression irritates me". (<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/politicsphilosophyandsocietystory/0,6000,6>). Naipaul considers none as his literary match. In an interview to Royal Geographic society, he said "I read a piece of writing and within a paragraph or two I know whether it is by a woman or not. I think (it is) unequal to me". (<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/02/vs-naipaul-jane-austen-women-writers>). Before exploring the portrayal of woman in *The Mystic Masseur* of V.S. Naipaul, I delve into the history of Indo-Caribbean woman. During the 1830s and 1910s myriad of Indian women were migrated to different parts of the world as indentured labourers as indentured labourers to work in sugar plantation. The Indian women migrated along with their husbands from India to Caribbean region in 1830. Some of them sought refuge as runaway wives, or ordinary prostitutes. They were contracted to work as labourers for five years with the hope returning to India after the expiration of the contract. Even after the expiration of the contract, many of the Indians desired to stay in West Indies with the grant of some land by the colonial administration.

As such, West Indies is replete with India large ethnic group. The women lives were harder because of the disparity between sexes and the dominant patriarchy which created many social problems. They received meager wages and became subordinate to men. Law in 1881 allowed men to persecute their wives worsened the position of women. The relationship between women and men was deteriorated and the humiliations and harassment on women were mounted up enormously. Moreover, the indentureship ended in 1917 which withdrew women from plantation and restricted them to housewives. Cornering the women as housekeepers has led them to remove themselves from political struggles and resistance movements. As women were restricted to family in Indian society, Indo-Caribbean women were also restricted to family and they were made subordinate to the male members of the family getting exploited under patriarchal system. They were treated as mere property. They lost their identity. Until recently, the portrayal of women in the novels of Caribbean male novelists is as exploited, separated, rejected personalities taking periphery of the action, and as the victims of the patriarchal system. Rambai Espinet argues that Indian women are 'invisible' in West Indian fiction because the male authors have not been yet able to pay attention to their existence in the Caribbean" (425).

In the early fiction of Naipaul, who has the Indian social and cultural background and is the offspring of the indentured labourers, it is not surprising that the Indo-Caribbean women are the Other for Naipaul. Helen Pyne-Timothy views, "Naipaul has in these works provided a view of women which is extremely harsh, moralistic, and judgmental". Moreover, as Ken Ramchand writes, "There is a substantial negative commentary on his presentation of women" (<http://www.nepalnews.com.np.ntimes/issues65/world.htm>). *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) is the first published work of Naipaul. It seems that the narrator is knowingly on the side of Ganesh Ramasumiari, an exploiter who treats his wife badly, as Milton was said to be on the side of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, Book I & II. The protagonist of the novel is Ganesh Ramsumair, an exploiter of gullible people. Ganesh starts his life as a struggling masseur, a postcolonial who achieves international familiarity as an M.B.E at the end. He is an unsuccessful teacher, an unsuccessful writer, unsuccessful massager, exploitative masseur, and exploitative politician. He is a victim in the beginning, but an exploiter of the gullible immigrants at the end. He denounces Indian name and Indian way of dressing, but learns exploitation to become a successful individual as the exploitation is the core feature in India. The novel *The Mystic Masseur* is comic. The comedy achieves through the use of irony to satirize the heterogeneous Indo-Trinidadian society. Its inhabitants are gullible and ignorant. Trickery, quackery, opportunism, and ill treatment of women are their prime qualities. While the male characters play a dominant role in *The Mystic Masseur*, the female play a peripheral role. The women are portrayed as gullible and exploitable characters in the hands of male. There are a few female characters in the novel. They are Leela, the Aunt (The Great Belcher), Suraj Mooma, and Soomintra (Leela's sister). Leela is portrayed as a scapegoat in the hands of foxy Ganesh, whose disposition is exploitation. In the beginning of the novel, Leela is portrayed as a joyful girl, a daughter of a cunning shopkeeper, Ramlogan, later, as if, a bonded slave to Ganesh. The relationship between Ganesh and Leela is like that of the fish and fisherman. Both Ganesh and Ramlogan treat Leela as physical property and both want to get profit from her. Leela is very happy to marry an educated man, Ganesh, but this marriage is mere a business for Ganesh. Ramlogan wants to sell his daughter with a little dowry, but Ganesh expects financial benefit from his father-in-law. After demise of his father, Ganesh keeps himself in touch with Ramlogan, who encourages Ganesh and Leela to marriage with premeditated plan. Very soon Ganesh knows that Ramlogan is exploitative opportunist. Ganesh employs a trick on his father-in-law by asking for small dowry in the kedgere ceremony. But to the surprise of Ramlogan, Ganesh demands huge dowry during the kedgere ceremony. At the outer surface, Ganesh appears to the people of the village to be plain. But in reality he tries to exploit the pious marriage also for his personal advantage. Exploitation around Leela is see-sawed between Ramlogan and Ganesh.

Both seem to be clever tricksters of tricksters who try to outwit one another. Leela is pleased to marry such a well-educated man but for Ganesh, this marriage is a profit which later leads to deterioration of their relationship. Ganesh proceeds to marriage with a premeditated wicked plan to get the house in Fuente Grove as dowry from Ramlogan as she is one of the two heirs for the property of Ramlogan. Ganesh agrees for the marriage immediately once Ramlogan reveals the details of his property. "I know is hard to believe, sahib. But it is the gospel truth. I think is a good idea, sahib, for you to married Leela". "All right," Ganesh said". (V.S. Naipaul. *The Mystic Masseur* (London: Picador, 2002 p.37). "In the end Ganesh got from Ramlogan: a cow and a heifer, fifteen hundred dollars in cash, and a house in Fuente Grove. Ramlogan also cancelled the bill for the food he had sent to Ganesh's house". (p. 45). Leela is caught in the web confusion which side she should take. On the one hand she has to respect her husband, and on the other hand she has to respect her father. She is like a pawn in the hands of her husband and father. She doesn't know the exploitative nature of her husband and father. Ganesh scolds Leela's father and pacifies his wrath by brutally beating her. Ganesh humiliated Leela, "Girls, how you let all your father bad blood run in your veins, eh? How you playing you don't know what happen, when you know that you run around telling Tom, Dick, and Harry my business?" (p. 54).

It appears in the works of Naipaul that wife-beating is a socially agreed and approved practice and it is a matter of pride for both husband and wife, a sign of the marriage working as it should be. Naipaul appears to believe in beating and harassment of women is the privilege of husband and wife. "It was their first beating, a formal affair done without anger on Ganesh's part of resentment of Leela's; and although it formed no part of the marriage ceremony itself, it meant much to both of them. It meant that they had grown up and become independent". (p. 49). He stops beating his wife after he lost interest in her and he lost hope of children. In the beginning, the relationship between Leela and Ganesh is good but later it disappears. As a result, Leela often cries, and Ganesh often beats her. "Leela continued to cry and Ganesh loosened his leather belt and beat her. She cried out, 'Oh God! Oh God! He go kill me today self!'" (p. 49) Beating of wives is simply the Indian Tradition and functions as a confirmation of the marriage and of the husband's power over his wife. Even educated man like Ganesh beats his wife like an animal, "Leela, I have a good mind to take off my belt and give you a good dose of blows before I even wash my hand or do anything". (p.54) Women in Naipaul's fiction are to support the main characters and for satisfying the rage of male characters by beating them. Suruj Mooma, wife of Behary, has also been portrayed as a typical married Indian woman and mother, looking after her husband and children and keeping her house attentively. Suraj Mooma opines that education is a very dangerous thing that leads women away from their duties. Suruj Mooma is loyal to her husband and Hindu traditions. Soomintra, Leela's sister, is portrayed as a typical Hindu wife, putting on weight and being properly beaten, and she is duly proud of it. She has married a hardware merchant in San Fernando and keeps growing rich and fat.

We can deduce and infer, based on the portrayal of female characters in *The Mystic Masseur* that women characters are victims in the hands of male. Female characters in the in this novel are given chances to appear to glorify male characters. The women characters play the peripheral action and women are portrayed as victims under patriarchal system, and as marginalized victims. Hemenway (1982) once pointed out that "it seems that Naipaul can't depict elegant and charming female images, for these females are likely to bring certain of hope to male protagonists who are politically incumbent and suffered many failings in his works. Naipaul has been trying to inform his readers that contemporary young people are in the presence of self-destruction, and it's difficult for them to get comfort from the love, even the marriage" (p. 200). Just as it portrayed, differently from men in the third world, women undergo suffering more gender inequality from the patriarchy and the hegemony and power of the husband. In addition, they are also callously oppressed by colonial domination.

Due to the subordination of gender and economics, many women in this novel are marginalized, became the subordinate of the subordinate. Therefore, women whose living is difficult couldn't get their originally expected political status, leading to hopeless and speechless. Naipaul, as an immigrant novelist, has a sense of sympathy and contempt for those women images in his writings. From one aspect, *The Mystic Masseur* tells readers about the entire life of the protagonist, Ganesh. But from the women perspective, the author presents the status quo of women in the novel. This novel truly reflects the doleful and drab condition of third world women, who confront with the domination of male and the cultural domination centered on colonialism. They either decide to escape or fight for the right, though it ends in failure. However, they fought for their rights at least. To a little extent, it can be construed as sort of development. The portraits of these women in the Naipaul's writings reflect, not only *The Mystic Masseur*, but the remaining fictional works, women in the third world slowly surface from the revolutions. For Naipaul, *The Mystic Masseur* is a record of emotional sustenance and the life in the colony. Nonetheless, for readers, there are some new connotations in this novel. From the perspective of feminism, it's obvious to conclude that women should learn new knowledge and search for their spiritual independence, in order to meet their economic independence. Only by doing this can be women improve their discourse power, and then their equal status to males.

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