



COLONIALISM AND CARIBBEANISM AS REFLECTED IN SIR V.S. NAIPAUL'S "MIDDLE PASSAGE"

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Article Received:30/06/2020

Article Accepted: 04/08/2020

Published online:10/08/2020

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.8.3.173](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.8.3.173)

Abstract

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, honoured with the prestigious Nobel Prize for Literature, immensely gifted, exasperatingly a controversial man and generally considered the leading writer of the English-speaking Caribbean, occupies an eminent place among the most widely read and admired literary figures of the 20th century English literature. He has a uniquely authoritative position as an interpreter of colonial and Caribbean societies. He comprehensively deals with the "shifting identities, roots, homes and changing realities of migrants". He appears to have played his role in widening the rifts between the world's 'haves and have-nots' with his controversial pronouncements like 'India, an area of darkness', 'Africa has no future' and 'Trinidad is insignificant, uncreative and cynical'.

Keywords: Colonial, Caribbean, Surinam, Trinidad, Martinique British Guiana etc.

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, a travel-observer, a Trinidadian novelist and an essayist of the Indo-Trinidadian descent, is one of the foremost spokes persons in English prose of the post-colonial and Caribbean world. He is regarded as one of the masters of modern English travel writing. He is probably the most controversial writer to emerge from the Caribbean. His creative works comprise novels, short stories and non-fictional writings including travelogues. His travelings have played an outstanding role in shifting his writings from fiction to non-fiction in the form of his travelogues. Mohit K. Ray, a senior-most Professor, adds:-

Naipaul is one of literature's great travelers and his leading theme of rootlessness, the alienating effects of colonial past on today's post-colonial people, has taken him to Africa, South Africa, India and all over the world, not in search of roots but in search of rootlessness.

He is widely known as one of the masters of Modern English travel writing. The Middle Passage is his first representative travelogue which focuses the post-colonial and the Caribbean world. It depicts his keen interest in getting laudable perfection in travel writing. It is an outstanding part of Naipaul's different travelings into the Caribbean societies. Commenting on the art and ideas of Naipaul as employed in the travel book, Serafin Roldan-Santiago aptly writes:-

Naipaul first travel narrative The Middle Passage includes in seminal form all the travel writing strategies that he would later use. It will be noted that he had already integrated into his travel narrative strands of irony, the literary image, and his thematic ideas of pessimism and dissolution.

The Middle Passage takes us back to the late 1950s and 1960s when slaves from the American

continent and were purchased as 'indentured labourers'. Most of these slaves constituted chiefly the West Indians immigrants who were barred from social intercourse by the colour of their skin. Those were the days of voyagers and explorers like Columbus who contributed immensely to the transportation from one place to another. Because of the presence of people belonging to various nationalities, there were clashes both in colonies and the metropolis. Such kind of clashes could be traced back to hundreds of years in the West Indian history. Naipaul observes:

The creole slaves ... looked upon the newly imported Africans with scorn, and sustained in their turn that of the mulattoes, whose complexions were browner; while all were kept at distance from the intercourse of the whites.

The gloomy aspect of West Indies that Naipaul observed was a state of disillusionment. He witnessed the consequences of historical events in the contemporary society. He also examined the European explorations and colonial exploitations of the West Indies, the destruction of the American society and the bringing together of people from three continent. Thus, the paper presents a vivid and deep insight into the colonial and Caribbean process. Akhtar J. Khan adds:-

The colonial process emasculated old cultural forms and precluded the creation of anything locally to replace them. Different races were brought together not for creating a new civilization but simply for economic exploitations. No new man or civilization emerged as some had envisaged from this encounter.

Naipaul is thoroughly a humanist who is full of sympathy for the East Indians and the Negroes. He unfolds the picture of their miserable state with irony, satire and pity. He calls these colonized people second-grade human beings. The Middle Passage reflects Naipaul's profound concern for the unprivileged colonized people who were subjected to menial jobs and were bound to undergo the pangs of hard physical labour, poverty, unhygienic atmosphere and lack of medicine in the event of ailment etc... S. P. Swain remarks:

The Middle Passage is about clients and customers who have consumed human beings by turning them to slaves and indentured workers Amerindians, African slaves, Asian indentured labourers and European colonist, soldiers and missionaries.

Naipaul, a writer on the margins, may and may not be regarded as a part of the English society. He is a native Trinidadian though his ancestors were of Indian origin. He is both included and excluded from it by birth, growth, inheritance and history Timothy F. Weiss aptly says:-

The whiff of Jasmine and separation between word and flower focus imagistically the dislocations within the experience of identity of Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, a colonial Trinidadian of Asian origin writing about the Caribbean and the West Indies for Metropolitan English readers.

He further remarks:

Like the other colonials, Naipaul was marginalized through the ideology and myths of Englishness, through this and other experiences he began to learn to see as an exile.

Naipaul peeps into the psyche of the depraved colonial man, studies his problems, finds out causes and witnesses his own feeling of inferiority, uncertainty of identity and self-contempt. While trying to establish his recognition, the writer is, at times, perceived in a fix. The sense of alienation appears to haunt his mind. But his dislocation from his roots enables him to treat his own alienation as an example of his quest for identity of colonial and post-colonial people. S. P. Swain remarks:

Like a veritable exile, he peruses the middle passage by living 'in-between' and through this sharing of both origins and ends, he discovers his center. His marginality is a division between self and others among whom he has lived or continues to live.

Naipaul is an East Indian in a primarily black West Indian society. He is a colonial in the English metropolis. In an interview with Ian Hamilton,

Naipaul observes, 'London is my metropolitan center, it is my commercial center; and yet I know that it is a kind of limbo and that I am a refugee in the sense that I am always peripheral'

The Middle Passage describes the influence of Caribbean societies, and their histories of imperial depredation and depletion and colonial marginality. The glimpse of the history of the island is well reflected when Naipaul states:

The Caribbean has been described as Europe's other sea, the Mediterranean which summoned up every dark instinct without the complementary impulses towards novelty and beauty of older lands, a Mediterranean where civilization turned satanic, perverting those it attracted and if one considers this sea which the tourist now enlivens with his fantastic uniform, as a wasteful consumer of man through more than three centuries – the aboriginal population of some millions wiped out; the in satiable plantations: 3,00,000 slaves taken to Surinam, which today has Negro population of 90,000; the interminable wars; 40,000 British soldiers dead between 1794 and 1796 alone, and another 40,000 discharged as unfit – it would seem that simply to have survived in the West Indies is to have triumphed.

The Middle Passage depicts five colonial West Indian and Caribbean societies with their names such as Trinidad, British Guiana (Guyana), Surinam (Suriname), Martinique and Jamaica. It deals with the journey of Naipaul from Waterloo to Trinidad. He is greatly impressed to visit Waterloo, Southampton, St. Kitts, Grenada and Trinidad etc. St. Kitts which was once known as the mother colony of the British West Indies, is now an overpopulated island of sixty-eight square miles producing a little sea island cotton and having trouble to sell its sugar. Naipaul writes "For nothing was created in the British West Indies, no civilization as in Spanish America, no great revolution as in Haiti or the America colonies. There were only plantation, prosperity, decline, neglect: the size of the island called for nothing else".

The named "Trinidad" leads the writer to Trinidad which seems to him to be unimportant, uncreative and cynical. Naipaul is greatly shocked to see the Trinidadians living a life worse than that of a human being in a civilized country. They have no right to opt or choose. They are bound to suffer and submit in silence. They are required to live and live by as they are directed to. They have no centre of their own; they cannot adopt their own life style and they are forced to sell cheaply and purchase dearly. They are mere servile creatures, servants or 'mimic men' to accept and imitate. S. P. Swain writes:-

They are decentred by the Euro-American civilization, are dependent on foreign economies and are attached to foreign modes of cultural identity. Equally pitiable is their incarcerated attachment to values projected by the American and British media. Remolding itself in the image of "the Hollywood B-man", the West Indian has stooped to the status of the "mimic man".

"British Guiana" deals with the unhappy three hundred year history of the slave period. The people of that particular era were bonded slave and so much aggrieved that they yearned to be left alone i.e. to enjoy freedom from slavery. If any of them tried to be free, he would be fated to be condemned to seclusion, and his isolation from the milieu was sure. Interpreting their position, S. P. Swain observes:

The West Indian colonies are plagued by a sense of marginality. The colonial metropolitan relationship has rendered the colonies unknown to themselves and ignored or unseen by others; thus, colonial Trinidadians, although perhaps fascinated by the world far beyond and knowing something of the history of the metropolis, do not know their own island's history.

The colonial societies think themselves to be margined and unimportant when they compare themselves to the metropolitan city. The writer describes their socio-economic status keeping in mind their slavery, the plantation system and the immigration of indentured labourers. The master races of the whites take it for granted that the Caribbeans and the West Indians are the objects of exploitations for them. The exploited colonials have

unstable roots and doubtful identity. S. P. Swain writes:

The centre of existence seems to be nowhere and everywhere and hence they move on the periphery only uncertain of the means and ways to develop their societies. Naipaul calls the West Indies a "Client culture" and a "Client economy".

Naipaul himself observed the inability of the exploited humble colonials; at the same time, he interpreted the views of the critics regarding their state. Citing James Anthony Froude, an eminent English historian, Naipaul states:

They (the West Indians) were valued only for the wealth which they yielded, and society there has never assumed any particularly noble aspect. There has been splendour and luxurious living, and there has been crimes and horrors and revolts and massacres. There has been romance, but it has been the romance of pirates and outlaws. The natural graces of life do not show themselves under such conditions. There has been no saint in West Indies since Las Casas, no hero unless philonegro enthusiasm can make one out of Toussaint. There are no people there in the true sense of the world, with a character and purpose of their own.

Naipaul notices the West Indians imitating the outlook and behavior of the Europeans and the North Americans presented in the films or on the radio. They were second-rate citizens of the country. Naipaul reveals their status and writes:

In the immigrant colonial society, with no immigrants standards of its own, subjected for years to the second-rate in newspapers, radio and cinema, minds are rigidly closed; and Trinidadians of all races and classes are remaking themselves in the image of the Hollywood B-man.

"Surinam" depicts its existing problems in a highly picturesque manner. It, former Dutch Guiana, lies next door to British Guiana on the north-eastern coast of South America; and although the Courantyne, British Guiana's easternmost region, Nickerie Surinam's westernmost, have much more common with one another than with their respective capitals. With Negroes, East Indians, Dutch, Chinese and Japanese, Surinam has a

population more mixed than that of British Guiana and Trinidad. Yet it does not have the racial problems of these territories, only there is inevitably a growing rivalry between the Negroes and the East Indians, the two largest groups. Naipaul writes:

With Dutch realism the Surinamers have avoided racial collision not by ignoring group differences but by openly acknowledging them... Every group is therefore committed to the development of the country... Nationalism is Surinam, feeding on no racial or economic resentments, is the profoundest anticolonial movement in the West Indies. It is an idealist movement, and a rather sad one for it shows how imprisoning for the West Indian his colonial culture is.

"Martinique" seems to the writer to be France. It may be called a legally constituted department of France. It is so assimilated and integrated with France that the France is officially seldom mentioned by name. Everything in Martinique is French. Naipaul observes:-

Martinique is France... The policeman are French; the street name-plates in blue-and-white enamel are French; the cafés are French; the menus are French and written in a French hand... Martinique is full of little French villages, each with its church, mairie and war memorial, each with its history and it's illustrious, for whose descendants pews are reserved in the church.

The fifth and final one "On to Jamaica" leads Naipaul to Jamaica which was once a grand and nice island but now the island has been polluted by centuries of crime. Countless horrible crimes have been committed daily. Jamaica is literally Hell for the black man, just as Ethiopia is literally Heaven. To outside world, Jamaica presents two opposed images; first the expensive winter resort-turquoise sea, whites sends reverential bowtied black servants and sun-glassed figures below stripped umbrellas, and secondly filthy situation existing there. Naipaul states:

To see the Jamaica of the emigrants you have to look. And once you start looking you can see nothing else. The slums of Kingston are beyond

description... Filth and rubbish are disgorged everywhere; there are puddles and on the rubbish dumps latrines are forbidden by law. Pigs and goats wonder as freely as the people and seem as individual and important.

V. S. Naipaul's notable travel book "The Middle Passage" deals with the colonial society of Trinidad and is preoccupied with the themes of dispossession, homelessness, alienation, mimicry and the search for identity. He has been constructed knowledge about India, Africa, Caribbean and Islamic world through this popular travel book. Naipaul, a writer from the once colonized Caribbean island, appears to have played his role in widening the rifts between the world's 'haves and have-nots' with his controversial pronouncements like 'India, an area of darkness', 'Africa has no future' and 'Trinidad is unimportant, uncreative and cynical'.

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