



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Symbolism in the works of V. S. Naipaul

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Abstract

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, commonly known as V. S. Naipaul, also Vidia Naipaul, is a Trinidad born writer of Indian descent. The writer of British citizenship occupies topmost place in newer Indian writers. He was awarded with the coveted Nobel Prize in literature in the year 2001. He had also received 1971 Booker Prize for being the best writer with his publication of the novel *In a Free State*. Vast array of his works have avid description of characters, events, dialogues, themes, motifs and symbols. His novels started with the element of comedy and emerged with serious issues. The stories set in the Caribbean deal with themes of universal significance. He is often compared with Joseph Conrad, Charles Dickens and Leo Tolstoy in his way of representing the bleak view of human existence and effort and self fictionalizing.

Keywords- post colonial, colonialism, struggles, symbols, contradictions, colonized, migrations

Majority of V.S. Naipaul's works deal with contradictions of post colonial world. He represents both, the arrogance of the colonizer and the dilemma and struggles of the colonized. He makes intensive use of symbols and themes in his works to bring in focus the agenda that resonates with the common people. He begins with comedy, moving to satire and shows the disoriented human identity and existence. He uses the mode of self-fictionalizing to avoid the hypocrisy and give his writings a picture of real experience and essence. He writes of the migrations, ironies of the exile, and clash in terms of belief and unbelief that encompass the central issues of postcolonial Indian Diasporas. The migrations done help the development of new nations, but, in turn, also foster alienation. Naipaul uses multitude of instances, events, characters, places, amongst other things, as symbols to portray this chaos and these contradictions. He also gives emphasis on cultural shifts and differences that cause the alienation and has consequences of dissatisfaction, disorientation and destruction.

“In Naipaul's novels the dissatisfaction of the West Indian arises from the destruction of culture and the lack of distinct guidelines for the ordering of life.”¹

His earliest novels deal with irony and satire in the life of the Caribbean. His first novel *The Mystic Masseur*, published in the year 1957, is a recipient of John Llewellyn Rhys Prize (1958). This comical novel and a political fiction, in semi autobiography, represent the story of rise and struggles in the life of Ganesh Ramsumair, the protagonist, who is “a failed schoolteacher and impecunious village masseur who in time becomes a revered mystic, a thriving entrepreneur, and the most beloved politician in Trinidad.”² This course of events in the life of Ganesh is symbolic of life and struggle and hypocrisy of fame and wealth while thriving to secure a place at a new establishment. “In each step of his career, Naipaul is parodying, mildly the rise to power of a perhaps representative of the people in a newly independent state.”³ Ganesh is an inept teacher by profession, so he takes to giving cheap massages to anyone and everyone in order to supplement his income. His profession as a teacher symbolizes failure of one’s endeavors. He initially chose to become a teacher but the professionalism sparked his disinterest, hence quitting the job. His choosing and struggling between professions is also representative of the conflicting views of life, something that V.S. Naipaul faced during his life, as well. While working as a masseur and a spiritualist, after having married Leela, he takes to reading so as to increase his knowledge and eventually turns to writing his own books. He publishes two books; one called *101 Questions and Answers on the Hindu Religion* and second his autobiography called *The Years of Guilt*. These books, along with the process involved, of reading and writing, are used as symbols that depict wealth of knowledge, experience and worldliness. Skimming through wide range books help Ganesh expand his horizons and develop mastery of spiritual and literary aspects. The former published book of his represents his comical treatment and his ignorance and insignificance towards religious enlightenment. While he proclaims himself to be a religious mystic, his works do no justice to his words. He does not write for the religion, nor does he write for the people. However, the course of life and worldly experience makes him realize his guilt and the unfair practice of leading his people. His realization guides him to write the latter book, autobiographical in nature. In addition to all these, the central construct of the novel, that is, the massage is the symbol around which the novel partly revolves. The massage symbolizes the healing powers. For Ganesh this symbol works for leading him in right direction of learning and conquering his spiritual endeavors. To compare with the real world, this symbol also reflects the dire need of healing that needs to be done in the world of hypocrisy.

The 1961 published novel *A House for Mr Biswas* is a widely successful novel of Naipaul about a man named Mohun Biswas, a character based on father of V.S. Naipaul, Seepersad Naipaul. Set in the Caribbean island of Trinidad, it is the story of continuous struggles of Mohun Biswas who feels suppressed under the domination his wife’s influential family, Tulsi family. The house as a symbol in this novel serves the varied aspects in the life of Mohun Biswas in particular, and the rural middle classes, in general. Biswas’ is a story of tragedy whose character who scuffles his own life to find permanency.

“In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the story is portrayed through a series of homes which symbolize Mr. Biswas’ personal identity. Mr. Biswas was trapped in the clutches of Tulsidom. He has dream of his own house. The house of his dream is highly symbolic. It is an archetypal symbol, which connotes stability and permanence, something solid in life.”⁴

The house is, thus, also a symbol of oppression that highlights the hype of society about money. Biswas realizes how owning the monetary sources bring opportunistic power in hand. Marrying Shama causes him to lose his identity. Despite holding many jobs, he feels alienated in his living environment, as he has never experienced this kind of humiliation before. This is also depictive of the grave issues of caste and class-consciousness. However, Naipaul also shows Biswas with heroic qualities. He is shown as a man of sturdy decisions and perpetual struggles to attain the goals. He is an archetypal symbol that connotes search for identity and meaning in life.

The trap of Mohun Biswas and other men in the family is also representative of colonialism. “A House for Mr. Biswas, metaphorically, is a miniature world which symbolizes the colonial world. Mr. Biswas's personal battle with the stronghold of the tulsis household (the symbol of the colonial world) is a quest for existential freedom and the struggle for personality.”⁵

The life of struggle and misfortunes of Mohun Biswas were foregrounded in the beginning of the novel when the pundit declared about the miseries associated with birth of Biswas with an extra finger, the base symbol in the novel.

“Mr. Biswas has six fingers, a symbol of bad luck for his father and family, and this plays a decisive role in Mohun's life. Mohun is an alien even in his own family as from the very beginning he is declared unlucky in his horoscope. Pundit Sitaram who made his horoscope also predicted that he would be responsible for the death of his parents'. Later in his life; he was often reminded of this prediction made by pundit, and it always increased the bitterness that already pervaded his heart and made him feel more miserable.”⁶

Though he is caught up in the house of Tulsis, he never tires to own his own house to claim the symbol of independence and identity. He works as a shopkeeper, supervisor of laborers, journalist, and community welfare officer and thus develops an obsession of having a house, that he even ultimately has. But his own house proves tragic for him. “At the end he is able to build a house of his own by taking a loan. He is happy to move into a house of his own with his family at long last. The house is jerry built and mortgage, but it is his own house. He was not at the mercy of anybody, rather he was his own master. He dies of a heart attack soon after occupying it, but it is better than death in the house of the Tulsis.”⁷

The 1967 novel *The Mimic Men* is “a profound novel of cultural displacement ... masterfully evokes a colonial man's experience in a postcolonial world.”⁸ It shows the racial politics and dichotomies where the economic power is seen as an asset of the colonizers. For instance, *The Belle Bella Bottling Works* are an apt symbol of colonialism. Cecil is the inherent owner of the factory after the death of Singh's grandmother. The international contract with the coca-cola is symbolic of the influence of westerns and the colonizers. The economic conditions are also not good as the manpower in the factory is non-native. The work has proved to be symbolic of representing rifts in the postcolonial world, of race and politics. The coconut trees and their representation are evident symbols of the degrading ethic.

“Coconut trees and beach and the white of breakers seemed to meet at a point in the distance. It was not possible to see where coconut turned to mangrove and swampland.”⁹

In the 1960s Naipaul turned to writing non fictions and travelogues. His first non fiction *The Middle Passage* was published in the year 1962 about societies in West Indies and South America. The name symbolizes the inter island racial tensions and the culture of mimicry of and about the colonial identity. He questions, along with this, the religion that seems to govern itself. The islands serve as symbols that represent the devastating colonial past that supersedes the language, politics and values. Naipaul, through this novel, explores and observes how selling of people of small Caribbean islands resulted into new slavery. The novel, however, got a low response, especially from Derek Walcott who called Naipaul as “V.S. Nightfall”¹⁰ after having gone through the gloom of the novel. The 1971 trilogy called *In a Free State* is another popular collection connected with prologue and epilogue. The course that runs through the novel is representative of the journey beginning with ‘A Resting Place for Imagination’ and ending with ‘Flight.’ The travel is a symbol depicting the progress in one's life as they leave the past behind and strive for achieving the new. Santosh feels overwhelmed with his travels and experiences in the new lands and welcomes whole heartedly the new opportunities. While the travels present positive symbols, they also symbolize the counterpart. It represents the resort for those with no national identities like the character in the prologue. He travels all his life and has no home to stay. The American Media is a symbol that reflects the ideals of life abroad. Santosh is pleased to wander around in Washington DC, but realizes the difference between the real and the reel. The television shows,

thus, symbolize the hypocritical content and the falsity of things and lives that people get trapped into and rendered into gloom. This raises questions on ideality, reality and authenticity.

The 1979 work *A Bend in the River* shows the story of a post colonial Indian merchant in Africa. The work despite having been shortlisted for the Booker Prize was criticized for defending European colonialism in Africa. Salim shifts to Africa which he calls as “home.” However, his image of home is something that is stranded with the central symbol of the novel, which is, the river, “the great African river.” The bend in the river is the cause of the isolation of the village that cuts it off from the usual visits and progresses that were done during the period of colonialism. During those times, the river used to be the focal geopolitical anchor from where the work of trading was done. However, there’s little denying the fact that it serves as the medium of mobility for the people as its flow helps them commute. While it serves for all the positive factors and connects the people from all walks of life to travel through and approach the capital, it also is the medium that enables escape. The same Salim who recognizes the grandeur of nature and takes pleasure in its fragrance chooses this gift of nature, the river, to escape from the foreign city of his dreams in the concluding pages of the novel. Therefore the river is a multifaceted symbol, with stability and constancy at its crux. Another symbol is water hyacinths that demonstrate the political independence of the people of this new African state. The rapid proliferation of hyacinths symbolizes the expansion of political independence that was not readily accepted. “The symbolic value of the recurring image of the water hyacinth reinforces this idea:

“...in the local language there was no word for it. The people still called it ‘the new thing’ or ‘the new thing in the river,’ and to them it was another enemy. Its rubbery vines and leaves formed thick tangles of vegetation that adhered to the river banks and clogged up waterways. It grew fast, faster than men could destroy it with the tools they had...Night and day the water hyacinth floated up from the south, seeding itself as it travelled.”¹¹

Naipaul published his more works with like *Guerillas*, *A Turn in the South*, *Half a life*, among others, with extensive use of symbols, clear presentation of language, dialogues and events. His symbols, motifs and themes centre on the contradictions and struggles of the post colonial world, and wide migrations.

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