



Political Despondency in Post-Colonial Fiction: A Study of V. S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*, Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* and Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*

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Abstract: The paper entitled “Political Despondency in Post-Colonial Fiction: A Study of V. S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*, Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* and Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*” analyses the issue of political despondency in the postcolonial context discussed in the novels concerned. Important issues such as the pessimistic temperament of the authors, corruption at various levels and the influence of the colonial leftovers on the political scenarios of the territories concerned discoursed in the novels also have been analyzed. The hypothetical proposition in the paper is that most of the political leaders in the Third World countries blindly imitate the western political models and systems conveniently overlooking the innate evils of those models and systems. Since the eastern countries were not politically literate to accommodate such systematic and polished political structures, most of the third world countries sooner or later fell into the hands of despotic regimes. The resultant trauma could be the reason for the dismal temperament shared in most of the post-colonial texts dealing with the political questions under consideration.

Keywords: Political despondency, corruption, Achebe, Naipaul, Mistry, dismal temperament.

Postcolonial Studies is one of the recently originated genres of literary study. It focuses on the literary activities of those nations which were formerly the colonies of Britain and other imperial powers. In addition to the evaluation of the literary productions of these countries, Postcolonial Studies or Postcolonial Criticism also tries to evaluate, interpret and re-read the western literary canons in which the easterners and their life styles were misinterpreted during the imperial days. Some of the important issues dealt with in postcolonial discourses are the question of cultural crisis, the problem of hybridity, the colonial hangover, sociological, historical and psychological consequences of colonialism, identity crisis, loss of cultural and traditional roots and finally the social and political despondency in the Third World due to the gap between the dreams and the realities. As Leela Gandhi puts it,

“Postcolonialism can be seen as a theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath. It is a disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past. The process of returning to the colonial scene discloses a relationship of reciprocal antagonism and desire between coloniser and colonised. And it is in the unfolding of this troubled and troubling relationship that we might start to discern the ambivalent prehistory of the postcolonial condition.” (Gandhi, 11-12)

A remarkable feature of the post-colonial writings is their critical and pessimistic treatment of the political issues. Most of the writers from the Third World are preoccupied with the political activities and future of the Third World nations. Multiple reasons can be attributed to this negative outlook. Post-colonial literature has tried to express these crises and dilemmas through a wide variety of literary devices and narrative modes. This study analyses the political predicament brought to light in the post-colonial fiction, selecting a novelist each from the Caribbean sub-continent, African and Asian continents namely V. S. Naipaul, Chinua Achebe and Rohinton Mistry. The works singled out for the purpose are Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*, Achebe's fourth novel *A Man of the people* and Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*.

Most of the third world writers have a dismal temperament which is more evident in the treatment of political matters. There are heterogeneous factors responsible for such a bleak perspective. Many of them being educated in western countries or majored in such academic disciplines, the western approach of the occasional political favour and general neutrality are visible in them. Such a response is also due to the wide gap between the dreams and the realities. Most of these countries had a wide range of aspirations during their freedom struggle. But after their independence, the situation was quite different. Majority of the new officials were previously kept away from the main stream political activities during the colonial rule. Naturally they had little idea

regarding the administrative affairs. The Utopian measures of the new-born politicians naturally had damaging consequences. In addition to all these, several Third World nations, especially in Asia and Africa fell in to the hands of despotic regimes and military authorities. All these are discoursed in a pronouncedly negative light in remarks on diverse political issues by writers in this spectrum including Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul, Chinua Achebe, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry and Edwin Thumboo.

V. S. Naipaul has discoursed the political questions in his three novels, *The Mystic Masseur*, *The Suffrage of Elvira* and *The Mimic Men*. However, the most authoritative delineation of the inability and immaturity of the Caribbean politics is in the third one, *The Mimic men*. Critics observe that Naipaul in this novel is describing what is usually called “the post-colonial trauma,” the inactivity, confusion, dependency, cultural conflict and the natural euphoria provoked by the colonial rule and its sudden withdrawal. The novel is significant for its clearest expression of the themes that shape Naipaul's novels, namely, the escape of the Third World into fantasy on being poverty-stricken and isolated on the fringes of power, the sprouting up of various political and religious movements which, though ineffective, offer a sense of drama and empty excitement finally ending up in disorder, politics dominated by appeals to race and colour, the absence of real power, myths, culture or competence which have resulted in a tendency to mimic, and a feeling of homelessness and identity crisis. Naipaul presents the predicament of Ralph Singh, the protagonist of the novel, to be the same as that of any modern man including an ex-colonizer. The novel is told in the form of memoirs by the main character who is implicitly criticized by what he actually reveals about himself. It begins and ends in the present with the narrative shifting back and forth in time between Ralph Singh's childhood, student life in London, his return to the island, his political career, and exile in London. Ralph's chief troubles are his lost Indian heritage, his unexpected marriage to an English woman called Sandra, his broken career in the real estate business and finally his experimental political designations. All these factors soon lead him to a kind of physical and mental sterility and his self-exiling in a London hotel. In the final face of his career, Ralph Singh starts a socialist oriented political movement with Mr Brown, his school comrade turned journalist. The ideas of his father who had become a Hindu saint and the *Ashvamedha* he contested are the important tools in their hands as means of inspiring the mob and also for producing the required pamphlets. Even though they are able to crash the existing machinery, neither Brown, the chief, nor his companions have any plan regarding the rule after forming the government. They are faced with some important issues such as the nationalization of the sugar industry, the re-signing of the bauxite contract, the dismissal of the old civil servants and the issues regarding the trade union. They could do nothing except to submit themselves before the British politicians who miserably failed to offer any help. After the

failure of a negotiation with a British politician on the matter of bauxite contract, the political future of Ralph Singh is concluded. As N. Ramadevi puts it,

"Ralph Singh, the protagonist-narrator of the novel is the representative of a generation which gains power at independence and can only mimic the authenticity of selfhood. His various failures at the level of personal life are indicative of a larger, national failure." (Ramadevi, 68-69)

Nationalism was impossible in Trinidad. In the colonial society, every man had to be for himself; every man had to grasp whatever dignity and power he was allowed; he owed no loyalty to the island and scarcely any to his group. It was more evident in the squalor of the politics that came to Trinidad in 1946 when, after no popular agitation, universal adult suffrage was declared. The privilege took the population by surprise. Old attitudes persisted, the government was something removed, the local eminence was despised. The new politics was reserved for the enterprising that had seen the prodigious commercial possibilities. There were no parties, only individuals. Corruption, not unexpected, aroused only amusement and even mild approval. Political power embodies the colonizer's dream of power, possession and self-realization. As Shashi Kamran remarks,

"The narrator's irony and satire is a reflection on the unquestioning and greedy mimicking of patterns of behaviour of the colonial which the achievement of political independence and democracy implicitly rejects". (Kamran, 50-51)

Chinua Achebe in his first three novels, *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* and *No Longer at Ease*, focuses on the native Igbo tradition and its essential downfall after the arrival of colonialism. In *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe gives attention to the cultural hybridity in Nigeria resulted from the western education the country was provided with and the ambivalence it created. However, in his fourth and fifth novels *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of Savannah*, Achebe turns his attention to the contemporary Nigerian politics. The civil war in Nigeria, Political corruption in the grass root level, the emergence of despotic regimes in the country and the immoral and indefinite standards of social and political behaviour produced by western education in the country are some of the primary concerns in these novels. However, he is not blind to the innate nature of corruption in human beings irrespective of social and political distinctions. *A Man of the People* (1966) certainly demonstrates that Achebe's strength is not limited to dealing with the Africa of the past. It is a very different kind of novel-a satirical farce about corrupt politicians cynically exploiting a political system inherited from the departed imperial power. So disillusioned is the expose' that the author would hardly seem

to escape a charge of personal cynicism. None of the characters is admirable, and the one concession to any sort of faith in human behaviour is in a very low key.

A Man of the People discusses the growth of selfishness and despotism in the Nigerian political scenario. As N. Ramadevi states,

"In this novel, Achebe exposes the inadequacies in a society which is losing its traditional moorings and also the opportunistic tendencies of the local, newly emerging politicians. Achebe takes a strongly satirical stand to show how the local traditions and customs are exploited by these politicians to meet their selfish needs. Achebe, here, is dealing with a country that has entered the age of the isolated individual confronting a mechanical administration." (Dhawan, 37-38)

The narrator Mr Odili Samalu, a school teacher, gives expression to his redeemed political career including his encounter with Chief Nanga, his one-time teacher and currently political opponent. While Odili is in the university, he is fascinated by the charismatic leadership of Mr Nanga. When Nanga seduces the lover of Odili, he, as a personal revenge, joins hands with another politician called Max. Mr Nanga wielding full control over the media and other machinery, both Odili and Max are under severe threat. After the murder of Max and the hospitalization of Odili, the Army is forced to take the charge in order to prevail peace and order in the country. Chief Nanga is eventually executed. This is a typical example for the despotic character of the rulers and the large-scale corruption that prevailed in the postcolonial political scene. No one is bothered about the welfare of the public or the social and political harmony. Odili joins hands with Max not for achieving any of his political goals but simply to defeat Nanga. Neither of them is concerned about the future of the country, but merely plays the dirty game of politics to gain power and authority over the nation. In a sense, Achebe is accounting for Nigeria being torn in the hands of military regime in the novel.

As Mr Amaechina comments in his study:

"In *A Man of the People*, Achebe's target of attack is no longer a George Allen, a Winterbottom or an Irene, but the indigenous political leadership as represented by Nanga, the protagonist in *A Man of the People* and the like. The novelist is thoroughly disillusioned with the rule of law by the new black-zombies who have stepped into the shoes of their erstwhile colonial masters. Chief Nanga's "princely seven-bathroom mansion with its seven gleaming, silent action water closets," in a country "where the majority of the peasants and workers live in shacks and can afford only pails of

excrement," strikes both as a symbol of corruption and as an unhappy contrast to the sordid predicament of the people." (Reddy, 107-108)

People begin to realize that the practicing politicians have taken a greater share of the "national cake" than they need and deserve and that they have started reaping where they haven't sown. The political leadership is also shrewd enough to sense the mood of the people in such a situation and organizes rigging of elections on an unprecedented scale. It becomes a free-for-all and the forces of violence unleashed by the leadership boomerang on itself ultimately, culminating in a "military take-over" which "seemed a cathartic and pragmatic necessity at the time."

Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* deals with the life of Parsis in Mumbai during the Indo-Pak war. In addition to the discussion of the social and communal problems of the Mumbai region, a major theme of the novel is the corruption from the local administration level to central the government headed by Mrs Gandhi. As Nisar Dar, a researcher, puts it,

"The novel *Such a Long Journey* is unique in the sense that it is based on factual events. On the surface, the novel deals with the Gustads and the Parsi Community but in reality, it covers the major events of post independent Indian history. Factually, the novel is written somewhat in the manner of non-fiction based on real events and real people. Mistry has interwoven facts and fiction in the fabric in such a way that the novel can be called a faction. Besides the history of the Parsi Community, their fear and anxieties as a minority are also echoed in the story." (Dar, 2)

The protagonist of the novel Gustad Noble is trying to make both ends meet during the war time, on account of the familial and social problems. Gustad's friend, Major Jimmy Billimoria who fought for the freedom of the country and took part in the subsequent battles for India is suddenly asked to work for RAW - Research & Analysis Wing, which is the foreign intelligence agency of the government of India. The prime minister Indira Gandhi herself calls Mr Billimoria over phone to ask him to engage in the service of helping the Mukhti Bahini Gorillas in eastern Pakistan. Though she herself requests the RBI officials to supply the necessary amount of Rupees Five Million to finance the movement, later it is discovered that the amount was transferred to some unknown account. Meanwhile, she fears her political opponents and gets a confession from Mr Billimoria that he has imitated the voice of the prime minister to seek the money. When he recognizes the trap, Mr Billimoria, in a desperate mood, sends the remaining amount of Rupees one million to Gustad through a person called Ghulam Mohammed. After the revelation of the whole news through the media, things fall apart suddenly. The investment of the money and later its withdrawal give a lot of troubles to Gustad and his friend Mr Dinshawji who also works in Gustad's bank. At last, Jimmy is

killed and the government declares it to be a case of suicide in the prison. Jimmy is none other than the fictional counterpart of Sohrab Nagarwala who was the chief cashier of the Parliament Street branch of the State Bank of India in New Delhi. Relating to the episode Nayantara Sahgal has said:

“The outline of his story is based on that of a parallel historical figure, also a Parsi and, by all accounts, an agent of RAW Captain Sohrab Rustom Nagarwala. On 24 May 1971, the chief cashier of the State Bank of India received a telephone call, apparently from the Prime Minister, instructing him to withdraw six million rupees and hand them over to a person whom he would find waiting on a road, and who would identify himself simply as a man from Bangladesh. The cashier obeyed these instructions and then went to the Prime Minister’s residence to ask for a receipt. To his surprise, he was told by the Prime Minister’s private secretary that she had made no such telephone call, and advised to contact the police. He did so, and Captain Nagarwala, who had taken delivery of the money, was swiftly arrested. He seemed to have left an easy trail for the police to follow and confessed that he had impersonated Indira Gandhi’s voice to obtain money to support guerrilla activities in Bangladesh. However, what began to raise suspicions at the time, and what was never adequately explained, was the hasty and highly unorthodox manner in which Captain Nagarwala’s trial was conducted. Three different judges presided over the case in just three days, at the end of which he was sentenced to four years imprisonment. The police failed to produce in court the tape they claimed to have of Nagarwalas remarkable impersonation of Mrs. Gandhi, and contradictions between his story and that of the State Cashier were never investigated. Moreover, after his arrest, Nagarwala appears to have had a change of heart. From prison, he appealed for a retrial and tried unsuccessfully to gain an interview with a journalist and fellow Parsi from a Bombay weekly newspaper. A few months later Nagarwala was removed to hospital, allegedly complaining of chest pains, where he died in March 1972.” (Sahgal, 82)

Another instance of the crookedness of the political machinery is the way how the Municipal authorities defeat the Morcha or the agitation protesting against conditions of poor water supply and the unreliable and unhealthy drainage system. When the authorities are informed of the public procession, they decide to demolish the wall in front of Gustad's house which was filled with the pictures of gods and goddesses. The Morcha ended up in a savage fight between the municipal officials and the public causing the death of a mentally ill boy called Tehmul-Lungra. After the failure of the mission of the Morcha, the officials demolish the sacred wall. Thus, Mistry tries to bring to focus the large-scale corruption and wicked plans of the politicians in the country.

An analysis of these novels in this line will surely yield the following conclusions. Corruption was not a by-product of Colonialism. However, its pace was quickened by the administrative policies of imperialism. The policies of the West in the Third World such as the appointment of parallel chiefs gave ample scope for nepotism and large-scale corruption. After independence, most of the Third World politicians in their euphoric mood blindly mimicked the Western political dogmas and models. This had drastic consequences in the political scenarios of these countries. Some of them cherished wild fantasies and Utopian dreams regarding the future of their countries. This further intensified the possibility of one-party rule and despotism in these countries. Anglophone or Francophone writers from the Third World with their Western education could not comprehend the real reason behind such an administrative catastrophe and the emergence of despotic regimes. They could only make a bleak portrayal of this sordid political reality. Thus, all the three texts under scrutiny here approach the political issues in question in a very ambivalent, dismal and blurred view pronouncedly lacking lucidity or clarity of vision. They do not offer any solution for this enigma. They only express their bewilderment and desperation in such traumatic situations. To conclude, in all the three novels, the political perspective of the authors is highly pessimistic.

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