Ethnicity, Identity and Conflict as Portrayed in the Writings of V. S. Naipaul

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Abstract – India is one of the most complicated, complex yet unique agglomeration of diverse ethnic groups. Though India is a secular nation, ethnic and religious conflicts between various groups are recurrent and it's not limited to any one place. V.S Naipaul's India a million mutinies now is a radical insight of his journey across India in late 1980's when Naipaul traversed various places namely Bombay, Madras, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Bengal, Lucknow, Punjab and Kashmir. V. S. Naipaul has established himself as a powerful member of the English Literary scene; one whose memoirs reflect India in its true entirety. Out of the many interviews taken by Naipaul, a few truly encapsulates the stress and agitation prevalent in so called multicultural and multiethnic India. During the interviews he became a listener to hatred and violent clashes, between various communities where ethnicity became divisive. The paper discusses India and its heterogeneous ethnicity in the late 20th century.

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V.S. Naipaul was born in Trinidad to parents of Indian descent. He is a postcolonial writer, who has focused much on the legacy of colonialism of the British Empire through his writings. His novels are situated both in the colonial as well as ex-colonial societies. The New York Review of Books celebrates him as "a master of modern English prose. The major themes of his novels are linked with the problems of the colonized people. The present article attempts to show the impact of the colonial rule on the politics of the rulers of independent India. The author compels irresistible aesthetic pull in his projection of the politics of the Indian rulers after the end of British colonial rule. In his book India: A Million Mutinies Now, Naipaul argues that the differences on the basis of class, caste, gender, religion lead to million mutinies i.e. fragmentation of Indian society. The political leadership is responsible for the infighting among Indians on various issues such as region, religion, caste or language. Castes dominate the political scenario in India. National issues are neglected often at the expense of the local ones. Politicians are more concerned about their own well being than the nation. There is loss of culture, tradition and religious identity. There is hardly any attempt made to preserve and propagate the Indian culture, language and religious beliefs. Contrary to this all out efforts are made to westernize the Indian society by promoting the language and culture of the colonizers. The satirical portrayal by Naipaul of Indian separatism, regionalism and its split into diverse groups depicts the divisive policies followed by the Indian rulers. In Lillian Feder's

considered opinion, V.S. Naipaul "… has been acclaimed for his penetration into the lasting impairment of postcolonial societies, especially the deprivations of individuals who inherited a history, and he has been excoriated as reactionary loyal to imperialist values" (Naipaul's Truth, 1) Naipaul believes that India continues to naively believe in its unity and secularism despite the fact that it has never been one and that its unity has always been spurious. The talk of secularism by the politicians is just slogan to show their secular character. Perhaps Rushdie has aptly observed: "Now it can be argued forcefully that the idea of secularism in India has never been much more than a slogan; that the very fact of religious block voting proves this to be so; that the divisions between the communities have by no means been subsumed in a common 'Indian' identity; and that it is strange to speak of nationalism when the main impetus in present-day India comes from regionalist, separatist political groups."(Imaginary Homelands, 385)

V.S.Naipaul, one of the eminent Trinidadian novelists has produced a significant body of literature that has sustained the interest of not only literary critics but also social scientists and cultural anthropologists. Interestingly, while awarding the Nobel Prize, the official citation of the Swedish Academy presented Naipaul as 'a modern philosopher', whose "…perceptive narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories" ("Nobel Prize for

Literature 2001"). Writing as a person utterly displaced and yet connected by birth and education with three different societies, Naipaul acquired a unique intellectual freedom that took him out of his "colonial shell" (Naipaul, 1985, p. 12) and enabled him to judge the Caribbean space with "…an enigmatic mixture of nostalgia and patrician disdain" (Bhabha, 2001). As a social interpreter of colonial history, Naipaul therefore discovers personal resonance with the worldview of the marginalized, the once colonized West Indian subjects now cast on their own resources and groping for distinctive identities of their own. In the words of Gareth Griffiths: "[t]he West Indian has only the fact of his separate existence…the African was colonized, the West Indian was enslaved, in the process of enslavement the West Indian was deprived of his personality, as well as his roots and his cultural identity" (1978, p. 79). After the abolition of slavery the British imperialist power evolved a system of indentured labour which resulted in the migration of agricultural labourers from India and China to produce sugarcane in the West Indian plantations. Consequently, the heterogeneity inherent in this cultural collage intensified by the virtual annihilation of the native Caribs and Arawaks and the presence of several colonial masters gave rise to a multicultural, polyglossic society where cultural conflict became recurrent social phenomenon. The inhabitants of this New World encountered the process of 'transculturation', which Mary Louis Pratt characterizes as a feature of the 'contact zone', "…where disparate cultures meet, clash, grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (1992, p. 137). This complex cultural encounter defined as 'Creolization' (Brathwaite, 1995, p. 202) is a social process of chaos, interstitial instability and disorder.

In such a culturally plural society the West Indian immigrants negotiated the pervasive feeling of social marginality mostly by defining themselves in relation to the social patterns and communal rituals of their ancestral homelands. Naipaul's fiction encapsulates this profound sense of socio-cultural loss and the subaltern's notion of a stable home, thereby embodying the 'girmit' ideology1 . His texts critique such nostalgic return to an imagined India viewing the cultural baggage as an expendable burden. Naipaul's indictment of the mythologized, claustrophobic orthodox Hindu world reconstructed by the Trinidadian Indians reveals how subservient symbolic gestures doubly estrange them from the surrounding Creole realities. They are reduced to nothing other than desperate camouflages to mitigate one's socio-cultural alienation. Naipaul's sarcastic remark to this obsessive sense of Indianness has thus been articulated in "Two Worlds: Nobel Lecture": "[h]alf of us on this land of the Chagunas were pretending…perhaps feeling…that we had brought a kind of India with us, which we could, unroll like a carpet on the flat land" (2001). Such awareness of a 'fractured' identity is a recurrent

motif in Naipaul's fiction accentuating concepts of alienation, marginality and re-aligned notions of identity. For Ralph Singh, the first-person narrator of The Mimic Men (1967), fragmentation and loss also necessitated an ethnic contemplation of his pastlessness. The novel begins with Ralph, an exiled politician, writing his memoir in a London hotel in an attempt to understand the colonial subject's crippling sense of dislocation and impose an order on the muddled encounters of his life. As a child Ralph responds to the cultural diversity pervasive in the island of Isabella by imagining about an exotic Indian homeland. He avidly immerses in history books on Asiatic and Persian Aryans dreaming of horsemen and oneself as their leader. Much like the cultural nostalgia of Ganesh (The Mystic Masseur, 1957) for half-eclipsed Indian rituals, Ralph too dissociates to muse in his Aryan fantasies: …in my secret life I was…a Singh. China was the subject of Hok's secret reading. Mine was of Rajputs…and I would dream that all over the Central Asian Plains the horsemen looked for their leader. Then a wise man came to them and said, '…the true leader of you lies far away shipwrecked on as island the like of which you cannot visualize'(p. 104-5). But the mythic conception of a heroic ethnic history suggests the ambivalent nature of arrival in which there is only deferment because of difference. Naipaul here espouses Bhabha's awareness in The Location of Culture, that "[t]he epistemological limits of ethnocentric ideas are also the enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant…histories and voices" (1994, p. 4-5). Ralph's strong kinship with his imagined Indian roots maps Isabella as merely a transit point for the various ethnic groups residing on the island. Ralph thus succinctly comments on the sheer absurdity of his Chinese friend Hok's fascination with Chinese History: "…Hok had dreams like mine, was probably also marked, and lived in imagination far from us, far from the island on which he like my father, like myself had been shipwrecked" (p. 104). Both Ralph and Hok epitomize a quintessential paradox of colonial history, that "…racial or cultural miscegenation causes people to cling even more [tenaciously] to myths of purity" (Nandan, 2003, p. 139). Their envisioning strongly corroborates Cheng's suggestion of the socially marginalized subject's "…introjections of a lost, never-possible perfection" (2001, p. xi). More particularly, their blind disavowal of their biculturalism and revival of the grandeur of pre-colonial past can be perceived as nothing other than farcical attempts to salvage their sense of being marooned and shipwrecked. Lisa Outar explicates this in Ralph's case: "Ralph feels the allure of those who conquered the subcontinent, the nomads who in eschewing rootedness are never subject to conquest themselves. Only this image of inviolate wholeness can satisfy" (2005, p. 143). The Jungian motif of "collective unconscious" or racial memory thus exercises here a debilitating influence

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psychologically marginalizing or estranging Ralph and Hok from their desire to belong.

Carole Davies further identifies this urge in her book Black Women, Writing and Identity: "[m]igration creates the desire for home, which in turn produces the rewriting of home. Home can only have meaning once one experiences a level of displacement from it" (1994, p. 113). Here the fictional trope of 'exile' is fused to a quintessentially modern notion of transcendental homelessness. For the Caribbean subject this much needed profound consciousness becomes an assertion of one's syncretistic identity, no longer governed by the politics of belonging and not-belonging. Notes 1The'Girmitya' ideology may be comprehended as a form of home-building and place-making. Home-building is the building of a feeling of being at home based on four 'affective building blocks': 'security, familiarity, community and a sense of possibility. Similarly, 'place-making' involves three strategies of naming, rituals and institutions so that the 'mythologized world' of the girmitya appears in the form of fossilized memories of the old places. 2 The East Indian community of Trinidad is characterized by a close family structure and a sharp hierarchical division compounded by the absence of social mobility. However, the dissolution of feudalism also saw the gradual dissolution of these relations. The indentured Indian who was so long "…structurally Indian rather than West Indian" (Klass, 1961, p. 3) began to be influenced by individualism, competitiveness, social mobility and an intensification of wage labour that capitalism nurtured. In a 2004 interview given to Patrick French, Selby Wooding, who was at the Queen's Royal College a few years senior to Naipaul, also articulated the same opinion that the few lucky students from the tropics were expected to behave like English schoolboys as a pre-requisite of being socially integrated. He therefore endorses that "one …[has] to wear the mask of the master in order to advance" (2008, p. 42). 3 An exact parallel of this brutal slaughter has been recorded by Patrick French in his biography of Naipaul. The manner in which Naipaul's father was cajoled by his family members to escape social ostracism by sacrificing a goat is equally weird. Seepersad's unbiased journalistic account of the 'superstitious practices' of rural Indians in Trinidad "…who interpreted outbreaks of smallpox and rabies as an unmistakable sign of the wrath of Kali" (French, 2008, p. 20) and purchased a goat to propitiate the deity sound almost sacrilegious. The barbaric attitude of the religious fanatics to punish him for vilifying such long established beliefs soon manifests itself as French recounts: "[u]nder intense pressure from his wife and her extended family, he agreed to execute a goat. The rationalist, the reformer, the Arya Samajist,…the modern man, the scorner of ju-ju, succumbed to a Hindu tradition linked to sacrifice that even in India was associated with the more extreme Tantric practitioners" (2008, p. 22).

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