

A Feminist Study of *The Mystic Masseur*

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V.S.Naipaul is a Trinidadian-British writer, who is a remarkable immigrant writer in the world literature. He wrote many works throughout his life, including *A House for Mr. Biswas*, *Miguel Street*, *In a Free State*, *A Bend in the River*, *The Enigma of Arrival* and so on. With Kazuo Ishiguro and Salman Rushdie, they are dubbed as the three great immigrants in the English literature. From the perspective of feminism, this paper focuses on the study of female images in his first novel, *The Mystic Masseur*. These female images in the third-world are dominated by the double oppression: patriarchy and colonial culture. And in this process, they lose their voice and have an inferior social status because of economic and other elements, making them become the subordinate of the subordinate. The paper analyzes the reasons for the oppression upon these women and is intended to reveal the deeper connotation that embedded in this novel. That is to say, it provides valuable enlightenment to modern women.

Keywords: *The Mystic Masseur*, feminism, Naipaul, double oppression

1. Introduction

Naipaul was born in a small town in Trinidad in 1932, who belonged to a family of Indian Brahmin. There, he grew up in the Hindu culture and attended British schools. These experiences, combined with living in England and travelling all over the world, make up what Naipaul calls him many-sided background. In 2001, he won the Nobel Prize in Literature, for “having united perspective narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories” (Wang, 2013, p. 276). As an immigrant writer, he was known for his novels that describe the politics and culture of the third-world, which reflects the British colonial control to Asian-African colonies. He described India, his home, Trinidad, his birthplace, and the United Kingdom and other vast Middle East regions. Due to the characteristics of his immigrant writers, many of his works are free from the cultural traditions of Britain and India. And the marginalization of this work is very suitable for studying from the perspective of post-colonialism. In 1957, Naipaul published his first novel, *The Mystic Masseur*. Compared with his later novels, this novel covers a few female characters, mainly dealing with male images, so much analysis and interpretations of this novel focus on the post-colonialism.

At present, one strand of the study of Naipaul is mainly about the post-colonialism of his novels (Wang, 2010; Qi, 2014; Zhang, 2015). And another strand of research is the narrative art in his work (Yu, 2011; Yao, 2012; Zhang, 2015), and the author's identity research. However, the study of *The Mystic Masseur* is rarely to be seen, especially from the point of view of feminism. For that matter, the images of the female in this novel

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cannot be underestimated, since they to some degree symbolize the characteristics of the society at that time. Build on the previous studies, this paper studies Naipaul's early work, *The Mystic Masseur*, from the perspective of feminism. Here feminism relates to the post-colonial feminism. From this aspect, this study has certain research significance.

2. Main Female Images

Compared with his later novels, this novel mainly deals with masculine images, with a few female images occupying the plot. This paper will concentrate on the analysis of three female images.

2.1 The Description of Leela

Leela, an important female image in the novel, is the wife of the hero of Ganesh. In the post-colonial period, most women suffered the dual oppression, both patriarchy and colonialism. Leela, before she got married, lived with her father, Ramlogan. Under the influence of his father, she happens to be in love with Ganesh, and married with him. Her marriage is manipulated and arranged by his father. Under the patriarchal system, women have no choice but to accept the arrangement of their father or husband. So does Lila. She does not have a lot of her own voice or even the right of choice. However, it is undeniable that this traditional patriarchy also provides these women with a certain level of living security.

Just as a subtle but important plot in the novel, Leela gets away from home and returns to his father's home for comfort and shelter, when she and Ganesh have different opinions. This practice also reflects the third-world women's desire that seeking independence and reconstruction of their identity, though it fails. After marriage, although Lila gets rid of the control of his father, she starts to be dominated by his husband. In the author's opinion, the event that Ganesh first perpetrate violence in Leela is because their family life officially started, not because of the other element. Obviously, it seems to be so ridiculous in the contemporary society. Nevertheless, the previous state actually embodies this kind of absurdity. For her, the event can be a precious moment. Because of this, Leela can tell her stories like many married women, thus shaping a sense of resonance among them. It forms an outstanding contrast between in the first world and the third-world. From this, it's obvious to note that the husband's rights system began to replace the patriarchal system that appeared in Leela's life. In terms of the prevailing view, it's a great irony. And women in the third world suffer a great misery, but they still appreciates this kind of situation.

During the colonial period, apart from women, men were also subjected to twofold oppression and in a marginal position. Ganesh is a case in representative. In that case, men characterized by Ganesh reposition and reconstruct their identities by means of maltreating women. In the novel, Leela becomes a weak attachment of Ganesh, descending to the subordinate of the subordinate. At that time, the image of Leela is actually an epitome of all women situated in that society.

2.2 The Description of Great Belcher

Naipaul believes that women should not appear in novels when there is no definite plot need. So in his fiction, women in the third-world are generally nameless, flat, ugly, stocky and unfeminine. They are characterised by oppression under the hierarchy. In the patriarchal power system, women's voices are erased and become voiceless. Let alone these women who are located in the post-colonial period. Just as Spivak said,

women in the third-world become speechless, hence they can't speak for themselves.

Under this circumstance, hiccup aunt, Great Belcher, is just an obvious example. She doesn't have her individual name, which demonstrates the subordinate status of women in the third-world again, and the miserable suffering that they also do not have their own identity. In the novel, aunt's hiccup behavior first appears in Ganesh's wedding, which she claims that her hiccup arises from the heavy wind. In fact, the essence of the behavior is the fact that women in the lower social status lost their voices, and they conceal their uneasiness and fear by means of this way. By this artful design and description, Naipaul shows us an authentic and symbolic scene. Her husband passed away for a long time. Nonetheless, she frequently referred to him when she suggests that Ganesh should be a masseur. And her words full of a sense of admiration. By this, it's easy to witness that the patriarchy has such a profound effect on her. Regardless of the fact that her husband died, she still keeps the original lifestyle due to the ingrained value. Apart from that, she was told that her hiccup behavior caused by the issue of liver, while she argued that it is due to the wind. From this, her ignorant attitude towards science is fully presented, which demonstrated the level of his lower education, echoing the author's idea (women in the third world don't deserve their names). The state of ignorance hinders them from determining their identities.

2.3 The Description of Suruj's Mother

Suruj's mother is also a particularly feminine figure in the novel. From the beginning to the end, the author never gives her personal name, and the way she appears is always in the name of Suruj's mother. Meanwhile, the author uses indecent words like "tall" and "bulky" to describe her, which can reflect the inferior status of women in the third world, and the pejorative attitude of the author. Like a negative Nancy, she frequently complains her life and everything around her. She believes that she lives a dreary life, as she must do chores, as well as taking good care of her husband and her three children. Like the Great Belcher, she is also an illiterate. She always grumbles that Beharry reads useless books, and detests her husband's behavior of reading. She regards Beharry's books as a heap of trash. She makes these behaviors as if she detested schooling, but the thing doesn't go on like that. When talking about Leela's escaping event, she lays herself bare to her husband. Beharry. She actually aspires to receive education, but the conditions and circumstances of that time don't allow that happens. She also has unprecedented insight, taking the dressing style of Ganesh as an instance. It is not other people but she proposes that Ganesh should dress traditional Indian clothes, in order to suit his masseur image better. Unlike Leela, Suruj's mother follows her husband devotedly and says that she will never leave Beharry. Her mind is imprisoned by the Indian feudal patriarchy, probably it is this reason that influences her outlook on life. In a word, she is a controversial figure, for there are at the same time traditional and modern aspects that embodies in this character.

3. The Self-identity of Females in *The Mystic Masseur*

As a descendant of immigrants from the colonies, Naipaul describes these native women in the third world with a complex emotion of love and hate. Influenced by outmoded ideas, he could not get rid of the bondage of male chauvinism. In the author's description, Leela takes good care of her husband's life, which is the living state of the third world women. The description of Suruj Mooma, who appears to be in a slightly "powerful" position, is so full of irony. Receiving western education, Naipaul is distinct from other aboriginal writers in the

process of writing. Based on his education, he has the impression of both empathy and understanding towards third world women who suffer double oppression: patriarchy and colonial culture. This extremely contradictory psychological state makes Naipaul try to seek an initiative identity for women in his novels.

Under the influence of her father, Leela receives a little education, though it is tiny. The way she talks to Ganesh is both traditional and innovative. On the one hand, she acts the part of traditional women, keeping housework. And the other hand, she can't torture her husband's insulting words towards her. As the result of her education, this is indeed a kind of rebellious spirit which is spring up in her mind. Maybe it is a way of reconstructing her identity to some significant extent, which is also a representative figure of women in the third-world. Despite the fact that he doesn't intend to support this point, V. S. Naipaul is inclined to the former.

In the novel, Leela repeatedly questions her husband's behaviors, and can't accept the approach that Ganesh does nothing all day without income. He doesn't write books, and refuses Leela's perspective to be a driver. And finally she chooses to leave him to show her resistance. Nevertheless, because of having no economic sources to support her life, she finally gives up her resistance and returns. Nevertheless, this resistance marks the bud of the consciousness of women's independence, and reflects Naipaul's pity and hope for women in the third-world. And an important point is that Leela is commercially minded. For example, she sets up her restaurant to provide food for those people that come from other places and aim to search for Ganesh's help, when Ganesh's identity of masseur was successfully disseminated. And the idea of running the business of a taxi is also put forward by Leela. She is trying to realize her economic independence by separate ways.

The behavior of "losing their voices" was manifested in the character of Great Belcher, which makes the female images come to life. Great Belcher gives the protagonist, Ganesh, many suggestions, no matter in his life or his career. It is her proposal that Ganesh may become a successful masseur. In the process of becoming a masseur, she helps Ganesh a lot, such as giving him various books. She is an extremely crucial and vital figure for Ganesh, as she plays a significant role in Ganesh's life. These suggestions, up to a great point, symbolize the promotion of discourse power of women, which is also progress for women. Being in the condition of the marginalized group for a long time, the author abhors those marginalization and the state of "having no discourse power". Due to this, he reposes his mood to these third world women who share the similar experience with him.

4. Conclusion

Hemenway (1982) once indicated that "it seems that Naipaul can't depict elegant and charming female images, for these females are likely to bring a 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 described, differently from males in the third world, females suffer more gender discrimination from the patriarchy and the authority of the husband. In addition, they are also ruthlessly oppressed by colonial hegemony. Due to the subordination of gender and economics, many female images in this novel are marginalized, causing them to become the subordinate of the subordinate, and the marginalization of the marginalization. Therefore, females whose living is hard couldn't gain their

originally expected political status, leading to speechless.

As an immigrant writer, Naipaul has a double sense of sympathy and contempt for those female images in his works. From one aspect, *The Mystic Masseur* tells readers about the entire life of the protagonist, Ganesh. But from the perspective of feminism, the author demonstrates the status quo of females in the novel. This novel truly reflects the miserable status and condition of third world women, who confront with the oppression of male discourse power and the cultural hegemony centered on colonialism. They either decide to escape or fight for the right, though it ends in failure. Nevertheless, they struggled for their rights at least. To some extent, it can be seen a kind of progress. If we intend to figure out the essence of the cause, it should lie in that they can't be independent in spirit and economics. They can't get rid of the bound of the traditional concept. So for the author, there is one sympathy for their oppression; and one kind of hatred for their reluctance to give up reliance on their husband.

The images of these females in the Naipaul's works reflect, not only *The Mystic Masseur*, but other works, women in the third world gradually emerge 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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