

Social Picture of Trinidad in Naipaul's Novels

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Abstract

Naipaul is termed as a minute observer of societies. Naipaul is a conscious writer, who has committed himself to exploring and representing the objective reality and psychological authenticity of the social class. Naipaul is one of those writers who protests and displays the inequalities and exploitation prevalent in the societies. His work contributed to the awareness of social problems including prejudice against immigrants, discrimination against racial minorities, unsafe and chaotic social conditions, exploitative labor conditions, etc. This research paper focuses on the picture of colonial and post-colonial societies painted by Naipaul in his famous novels *Miguel Street*, *Mystic Masseur* and *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Introduction

Naipaul's early works are set in Trinidad, his hometown, with a colonial history. He has described the struggles of the labor class in most of his novels. *A House for Mr Biswas* deals with an Indians' struggle for a place and identity. Naipaul has portrayed the West Indians lives and the reality of indentured descendants by presenting his own life experiences, a sample of the larger truths about colonial predicament in Trinidad. Naipaul has described his characters as in a psychological limbo, having been alienated from the culture of his people and tradition.

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Psychological Limbo

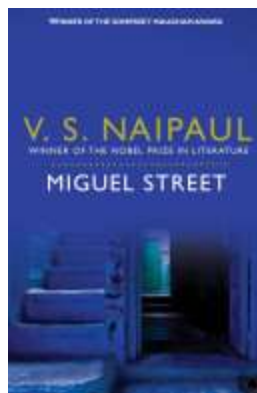
This psychological state is depicted at many places in *A House for Mr. Biswas* and *Miguel Street*. In the Prologue, Mohun Biswas, the protagonist (prototype of Naipaul's father) has suffered lack of identity. The house is used as a metaphor for identity, more than a materialistic need. So, Mohun Biswas identifies his highest achievement with owning a house.

Poor Living Conditions

As most Indians were poor, uneducated and insecure, they became easy objects of social contempt and discrimination. Their living conditions were pathetic. In *The Mystic Masseur*, Naipaul describes the social set up of Fuente Grove, where Ganesh, the protagonist lives,

“You drove through miles and miles of sugar-cane; then the sugar-cane stopped abruptly to make room for Fuente Grove. It was a sad little village, just a dozen or so thatched huts strung out on the edge of the narrow lumpy road. Beharry’s shop was the one sign of a social life and we stopped outside it. It was a wooden building, dingy distemper flaking off the walls and the corrugated-iron roof warped and rusted.”¹

Plight of Indentured Labourers



Naipaul paints the picture of the society which became less sympathetic to the conditions of indentured laborers. The upper class society reacted unsympathetically to the arrival of Indians to the Island. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, when Mr. Biswas goes to Hanuman House to paint the signs for Tulsi store, his price was reduced on unreasonable grounds.

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“Seth had beaten down Mr. Biswas’s price and said that Mr. Biswas was getting a job only because he was an Indian; he had beaten it down a little further and said that Mr. Biswas could count himself lucky to be a Hindu; he had beaten it down yet further and said that signs were not really needed but were being commissioned from Mr. Biswas only because he was a Brahmin.”²

In short, the coercive indentureship gave rise to the harsh economic conditions, the low-status job and a differentiated, harsh behavior of others towards them. All these harsh realities operated powerfully to make all sections of the Trinidad society despise them.

Cultural Classes and Social Conflicts

Naipaul, through a range of characters in various novels like *A House for Mr. Biswas*, *Miguel Street*, and *Mystic Masseur*, etc., has depicted the sufferings of dispossessed people because of cultural clashes and social conflicts. The society Naipaul depicts is chaotic and violent. In *Miguel Street* the narrator wants to flee from his hometown to establish himself in a culture of high traditions and customs. It shows the emptiness of the society in terms of values and tradition, when the narrator’s mother says, “You getting wild in this place. I think is high time you leave.”

State of Colonial Hindu Society of Trinidad - Dogmatic

Naipaul’s fictional texts are fruitful in bringing the socio-cultural conflicts of the world. V. S. Naipaul’s exploration of the colonial set-up in *A House for Mr. Biswas* is an analysis of the social conflicts of the colonial Hindu society of Trinidad, which is rotten by myths and rituals. Naipaul pictures a dogmatic society of conservative ideas and ideologies. In the Pastoral, Mr. Biswas’s birth was termed as inauspicious because he was born in a wrong way, with six fingers, which was termed as a sign of bad luck.

“She brought black leaves of cactus, cut them into stripes and hung a strip over every door, every window, and every aperture through which an evil spirit might enter the hut.”³

Westernization

In some places, we find a westernization of rituals. When Mr. Biswas’s father dies, he lay in a coffin, which was strewn with marigolds when Tara demands and orders everyone to gather for the funeral photograph, though, Mr. Biswas never owned a copy of that photograph.

“Mr. Biswas never owned a copy of the photograph and he did not see it until 1937, when it made its appearance, framed in passe-partout, on the wall of the drawing room of Tara’s fine new house at Pagotes, a little lost among many oval portraits with blurred edges of coloured prints of the English countryside.”⁴

Seeking Liberation

The protagonists of Naipaul’s novels always want to liberate themselves from such narrow cruel ideas and ideologies of the socio-cultural system and try to establish their own identity.

“A Stranger could drive through Miguel Street and just say ‘Slum’ because he could see no more. But we who lived there, saw our street as a world where everybody was quite different from everybody else.”⁵

Ambition that was Never Achieved

Miguel Street is a novel in which Naipaul introduces a range of characters who lives in inconvenient conditions and whose lives are scattered, without any destination. It is about great ambitions that never went anywhere. The characters include Mr. Popo, the carpenter who never finishes making anything. Popo had been stealing things for a long time for which he was sent to the jail. Eddoes, a cart driver had an ambition to become a doctor one day. But he failed in the Cambridge Senior School Certificate Exam.

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A Bleak Picture

So, *Miguel Street* presents a very bleak picture of Trinidadian society. Man-man was mad; George was stupid; Big Foot was a Bully; Hat was an adventurer; Popo was a philosopher and Morgan was a comedian. Naipaul depicts Miguel Street, a small place, a society like an empty vessel that makes more noise. People had great dreams but no means to make it a reality. There was no escape for any person from a society which has nothing to give. The characters in Miguel Street have a pre-conceived notion of the roles the Trinidadian society dictates for men and women. Naipaul points another flaw of such a society, by pointing the differences of the sexes.

Naipaul has painted a society with humor and pathos. It is a story of hope, poverty, loneliness and despair.

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