

Good evening, warm greetings from the UoF, Vanakkam and Bula from Fiji. I thank the collaborative organizers of Two Day International e-Conference: Hislop College, Nagpur, J. M. Patel College of Arts, Science, and Commerce, Bhandara and Smt Binzani Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Nagpur for inviting me to be a Resource Person **at this conference on the theme "Emerging Trends in Literature and language". Thank you Dr Veena Joseph and Dr. Kartik Panickher for furnishing me with details.** I must sincerely thank Associate Professor Supantha Bhattacharyya, who was not ready to take no for an answer and so here I am.

### **POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE IN AN AGE OF CRISIS is a topic I have chosen to speak on**

There are two contradictory developments in the 21st century: one is Decline in interest in reading books - bookshops closing down, universities making more space for computers, difficulty in persuading university students to read, obsession with mobile phones, and fewer students taking vernacular languages. Secondly, a lot of books are being written by Fijian, Pacific and International writers. There is both hope and despair. The future is uncertain because of the pandemic. It is possible in isolation people are reading more books; at the same time, it is not easy to go to libraries to borrow books, or buy books from bookshops. Many people in the World are not used to online buying, or online reading books.

Reading is one of the most important intellectual activities as humans can ever engage in. Reading is a process of comprehension and understanding and it applies to every aspect of life where we must decode something in order to lead our individual existences.

Nevertheless, things have changed since the turn of the century, so as educators we must ask: Why should students read literature in the 21st century?

There can be many reasons, but four main reasons are: Stories are about communication, Reading is always an act of empathy, always an imagining of what it is like to be somebody else; Reading critically and thoughtfully gives us better tools to develop **more** balanced arguments, express oneself clearly, and collect important information efficiently; By knowing what it is like to be the people we read about, we learn more about those around us, those who came before us; and we learn more about ourselves. These are a few values of reading Literature.

I now turn to a Trinidadian born, Sir Vidiadhar Surujprasad Naipaul, a Postcolonial Diasporic writer and deliberate why his texts should be read as valuable literature. He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth the II, for his contribution to Literature.

V. S. Naipaul gave form and language to the girit ideology and the Indian diaspora its distinctive discourse and a consciousness. The Caribbean offered Naipaul his first writing material. Trinidadian themes occupy a privileged place, fundamental in Naipaul's writings. I focus on three fictional works, namely *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), *Miguel Street* (1959), *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961). He has written about history, meaning of life in a new land, the sufferings of unknown people, their idea of progress, corruption, Hindu rituals, mimicry, making us compassionate and appreciative of other people's problems.

An analysis of Trinidad as socio-cultural construct is not an easy task because the Trinidadian society as it is, is one, comprising several ethnic groups: Afro-American, East Indian, Creole and Chinese, to name just the most important. This happened because of colonial politics, which cruelly displaced people, complicating their roots and routes. Naipaul in his writings highlights the unaccommodated man's repeated attempts to find a stable location in a ramshackle and random world, his struggle for selfhood despite experiencing dispossession, displacement and exploitation. He ridicules the sham of independence for former British colonies. The problem of fragmentary identity in the context of post-colonialism and post-modernism is also raised. The concept of family ceremonies in uniting people, the idea of progress being associated with a British education and the colonial stereotype of the East Indians are significant issues discussed by Naipaul.

Though Indians have been venturing out to the neighbouring Asian countries from as early as the first century AD, the story of the Indian Diaspora primarily begins with the indentured labour system ... a system that British premier Gladstone thought to replace the needs of planters after black slavery was abolished in the nineteenth century (Mishra, 1995: 1). That was the beginning of the story of the 'desperate diaspora' (Lal cited in Anjum, 2007: 1). Close to a million Indians

driven by poverty and desperation, and hoodwinked by a power-drunk and racist colonial power, found themselves sailing through the *kala paani*, black water, to unknown places to work, sleep, eat and work for years, without any hope of returning to their places of birth.

The diaspora remained hidden until writers like V.S. Naipaul started recording their stories. Naipaul not only sought to write about the past, he also sought to renew their bonds with the motherland that had forgotten them. In a way, Naipaul was perhaps giving vent to the sour memories and abuse that the forgotten diaspora had suffered in far-flung island nations, oblivious to the Indians in a free India, and his dark readings of Indian society of that time, a mirror image of his bitter palate of memories.

The novel, *The Mystic Masseur*, focuses on the dreams of the Indians to achieve success for themselves and their children, their imitation of the British political system, the Indians accepting the reality of indenture as associated with British colonization. *The Mystic Masseur* is widely seen as satirizing Ganesh, the protagonist and Trinidadian society by revealing the large gaps between modern and English realities and conceptions and their manifestations or adaptations in Trinidad. Naipaul employs Ganesh to illustrate the inability of Trinidadians to be independent, to form a functional and productive government or culture. Naipaul mocks Ganesh's adaptation of English books, American advertising, Hindu religion, and Afro-Trinidadian folk religion and illustrates Trinidadian society's inability to be "adult" or "genuine" is caused by the fact that they can only emulate the different national cultures that have contributed to Trinidad's population and culture.

*Miguel Street* is significant because it presents a world of its own. The series of impressions, a collection of seventeen sketches, has a gallery of vivid characters from Port of Spain, Trinidad, as seen compassionately through the eyes of a boy-narrator. *Miguel Street* is used to illustrate the author's own need to flee his home and family to establish himself in a culture of perceived high traditions and customs. The pursuits of the British education and fame are predominant features of the characters in this novel. The rhetoric of progress is associated with stories of dishonesty. The characters are victimized by a succession of narrow environmental and historical detriments:

poverty, unemployment, cramped domesticity and debt, which to withstand them, need all of their immense vitality and resourcefulness.

*A House for Mr. Biswas*, an unforgettable story inspired by Naipaul's father, has been hailed as one of the twentieth century's finest novels. It has metaphoric resonance – the unaccommodated man's repeated attempts to find a stable location in a ramshackle and random world is imbued with traces of colonial history and memories of coercive dislocations. This novel focuses on his father's life and his childhood amongst the East Indian community in Trinidad. It created its own intricate universe with bright lucidity piling up vivid details, naming every object, and creating numerous characters with humour and compassion. This novel focuses on the life in Trinidad. The significance of identity of displaced indentured descendants, the importance of rituals in shaping Indian identities in Trinidad, the relevance of the struggle to have a place of one's own and economic independence and the role of family and children's education are amongst the dreams of Trinidadian Indians. I expose the rich human sensitivity of this novel - The colonized subject is well aware of the struggle for selfhood, in which he/she is caught up. The issues, such as, dispossession, displacement and exploitation are linked to questions of slavery, indenture, migration, diaspora refugees and the colonial past in this novel.

V. S. Naipaul has found the most damaging consequence of colonialism to be precisely a legacy of destructive resentment. In colonial societies, enforced subordination and arbitrary power were usually galling and the background of slavery in the West Indies was a great deal worse. He has showed impressive powers as a historian in bringing to life both the most banal and the most pitiable details of the slaves, the traders, and the plantation economy. He realized that historical disadvantages were only a beginning in trying to understand a colonial people. They were the background against which to inquire into the damaging and perhaps crippling effect this history has had upon the post-colonial mind.

Naipaul's use of colonial stereotypes when representing the Afro-Trinidadian community may have a racial undertone. He is well known for his critical attitude of the Africans in general. However, Naipaul does not reserve these infantilising images for one section alone of the Trinidadian society. Smallness has negative connotations in Naipaul's imagery, being "absurd".

Naipaul speaks of “small lives” led in “small houses”. The use of the stereotype of the “little man” in *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a strategy of relating the story of Naipaul’s father’s life to the broader British literary tradition. Such a “little man” is a victim of both his lowly social status and his colonial situation.

The stereotype mentality of Indians is discussed in *The Mystic Masseur*. A scene taking place on the background of World War 11 is the one that opens Chapter 7, in the novel. Beharry, a shopkeeper, and his friend Ganesh, “the mystic masseur”, are discussing the importance of Trinidad. The passage is interesting because it presents Beharry, probably representing the majority Indians’ thinking, wondering about what would happen if the Trinidadians were to be subjected to another dominant culture. Would the German culture be like the familiar British culture, or would it shock and de-familiarize people with ‘natural’ things like money, the shop or the court-house? It clearly shows the Indian mentality, their concern for themselves; their culture; their identity and material things. Minimization and maximization are crucial factors of great importance to The East Indian community. Their position and image in the society mean a lot to them. They are self-centered and concerned about wealth, culture and identity.

Trinidad is simply small, it is dependent, and the people born in it – the East Indians sense themselves, not necessarily as individuals but as a community to an inferiority of skill and achievement. In colonial days, racial deprivation could be said to be significant, and this remains, obviously, an important drive. The ironic use of appellation “Mr.” for the protagonist of the novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* signalizes that his development has been arrested at an infantile stage. Thus, the omniscient narrator calls him “Mr. Biswas” even when the character is a baby. Later, Mrs. Tulsi, his wife’s mother, treats him like a child: “What is past is past,” Mrs. Tulsi said. “When people are boys they behave like boys. When they are men they behave like men”. The relationship between Mrs. Tulsi and Mr. Biswas is interpreted as symbolizing the link between metropolis and colony. Mrs. Tulsi’s nickname is “the old queen”. To that, Biswas adds the family trope, of which the colonial discourse makes much use.

Naipaul mentions in the novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*, for Hindu women, “ambition, if the word could be used, was a series of negatives: not to be unmarried, not to be childless, not to be an

undutiful daughter, sister, wife, mother, widow” (165). Apparently, the strong Mrs. Tulsi contradicts this image of the subjected woman, but at a closer look, we understand that she has a prestigious position just because her husband has died. The passiveness of the Indian women, their non-questioning nature, docility, and submissiveness are the accepted norms of the colonial Indian society. An Indian man’s authority over women is obvious here.

Naipaul satirically presents Hindu rituals as inefficient gestures of no substance. This is one side of the coin. Rituals have the important function of founding collective identity. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, he presents ceremonies in detail; here, there is a feeling that rituals are intricately linked with family. Every time a person expires, for example, Raghu, Hari or Mr. Biswas himself, all relatives come to mourn the dead one. This is more than a religious duty; it is also an opportunity to come together. Shama’s sisters did not fail Shama. They all came. For them it was an occasion of reunion, no longer so frequent, for they had all moved to their houses, some in the town, some in the country” (564). These lines also show that Hindu ceremonies take place less and less often in Trinidad, as there is disintegration of extended families. Distance separates them making frequent family meetings difficult. As Naipaul explains, this is the result of leaving the village for the town which is a creolised space. According to him, the family and the village were the basic elements of an Indo-Trinidadian identity. Indians living together in villages were able to have a complete community life. There were jealousies and family feuds but it was world of its own, with narrow loyalties to the family and the village.

The novel, *The Mystic Masseur*, is another good example illustrating the overlapping of family and village life; rites like marriage or burial, acquire a communal dimension, becoming public events. Naipaul’s novel repeatedly depicts Fourways, the village where Ganesh, the protagonist lives, caught in the fever of ceremonial preparations.

Ironically, the village comes to life when somebody has died. At first, the festival is “a distant revelry”, its sounds feeble weak, and then Ganesh hears the mourning villagers. It was not long before he realized that it was his father who had died. Fourways seemed to be waiting for the taxi and the moment people saw Ganesh sitting in the back they began to wail. The climax is reached when Ganesh enters his house. The house itself was chaos. Scores of people whom he did not

know scrambled towards him with outstretched arms, bawling; and led, almost carried, him into the house which was full of even more mourners he did not know or remember.

This image of the overcrowded house is a Napaulian suggestion of the traditional India family structure as a clan, which reunites at least three generations and tens of individuals under the same roof, also suggested in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. As these unknown relatives, such as the Great Belcher, reappear at another solemn occasion, Ganesh's wedding; once again this is a festival, in which the villagers take part. Fourways was nearly as excited as the wedding as it had been at the funeral. Hundreds of people, from Fourways and elsewhere, were fed at Ramlogan's. There were dancers, drummers, and singers, for those not interested in the details of the night-long ceremony.

Indians are represented by Naipaul as people who value the sacred bond of marriage. Moreover, to think of marrying outside the Hindu community was inconceivable, when Seepersad Naipaul was writing the following lines to his son: "These Hindu girls have become so ultra-modern that they make no distinction between Negroes, Mussalmans or any other people" (*Between Father and son: Family Letters*, 122). This besides being racist signals the closed character of the Indo-Trinidadian community and its endogamous nature.

Naipaul expresses the same idea of closed community in his Nobel Lecture, titled 'Two Worlds' where he evokes the image of his grandmother's house in Chaguanas, Trinidad. The corrugated-iron gate signifies the border between two worlds, which are sharply separated: the world at home and the dark world outside. Home is described in the following way:

It was a remnant of our caste sense, the thing that excluded and shut out. In Trinidad, where, as new arrivals we were a disadvantaged community, that excluding idea was a kind of protection; it enabled us – for the time being, and only for the time being – to live in our own way and according to our own rules, to live in our fading India. It made for an extraordinary self-centeredness. We looked inwards; we lived out our days; the world outside existed in a kind of darkness; we inquired about nothing. The house in Chaguanas constituted the model for

Hanuman House in the novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*. This fictional work, with an impressive description, conveys the same feeling of closed community.

Ceremonies are an expression of the Hindu caste system, confirming the special position occupied by Brahmins; sometimes the privileges that a Brahmin enjoys are temporary, vanishing at the end of the ritual as in the novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Biswas seldom went to her sister's place except when, Tara's husband, prompted by Tara, held a religious ceremony and needed Brahmins to feed. Then Mr. Biswas was treated with honour; stripped of his ragged trousers and shirt, and in a clean dhoti, he became a different person, and he never thought it unseemly that the person who served him so differentially with food should be his own sister. In Tara's house he was respected as a Brahmin and pampered; yet as soon as the ceremony was over and he had taken his gift of money and cloth and left, he became once more only a labourer's child— living with a penniless mother in one room of a mud hut.

Biswas, a Brahmin, is served and respected. He is not rich, being the son of a labourer thus lacking prestige from a Western point of view, his status is high to be accepted by the respectable Mrs. Tulsi as a match for her daughter, Shama. Biswas' prestige is effective with people belonging to lower castes, such as Ramchand, the man with whom his sister Dehuti has eloped. When Biswas pays them a visit at their place in Port-of -Spain, Ramchand regards this as an honour and is delighted. However, at this stage Biswas realizes the absurdity of the respect paid to him.

The Hindu rituals have become a time for socialization. The ceremonies, held less often, have become meaningless to the younger generation as they have lost their mother tongue and do not understand when these are performed. With the movement of families into towns, the Indo-Trinidadian identity fades as the family and the villages were the unifying basic elements. The closed community and the caste system played a vital role in the lives of Indo-Trinidadians. The Indians lived a life imitating their native country.



V. S. Naipaul equates the idea of progress with the acquisition of a British education. Dishonest practices were common amongst the East Indians. The indenture system in Trinidad held the indentured labourers enslaved to poverty and illiteracy. They, therefore, instilled in the minds of their children the idea that attaining British education was pivotal to progress and to the accumulation of wealth.

*The Mystic Masseur* is a British and West Indian novel, containing techniques of the English novel, like irony and satire, and of the Caribbean culture like carnival, music and creolization. It is a brief, hilarious tour about Ganesh Ramsumair, a bumptious, good-natured young Trinidadian of modest education and limited spiritual proclivities who stumbles into a successful career as a holy man and healer and eventually a national political leader. This novel shows the making of a 'mimic man'. In the course of turning a career as a faith healer into political success, the hero, Ganesh, buys a complete set of Everyman's Library, perfects "his prose to a Victorian weightiness" and installs, in his house, a musical toilet- paper rack that plays "Yankee Doodle Dandy".

Ganesh, the protagonist, "was to be a hero of the people and, after that a British representative at Lake Success" (11). The pursuit of British education is seen as very important. Ganesh is an embodiment of the model 'from rags to riches', he is the author of an autobiography, bearing the title *The Years of Guilt*, which was published at Ganesh Publishing Co. Ltd., Port of Spain. The ways of Ganesh and those of the rhetoric of progress and enlightenment intersect when an Indian industrialist offers thirty thousand dollars "for the cultural uplift of Trinidad Hindus" (158). After cashing the money in his capacity as president of the Trinidad Hindu Association, Ganesh does little to "enlighten", or to "uplift" the local Hindus. In the case of Ganesh, the rhetoric of progress is associated with stories of dishonesty.

In *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), considered by many to be V .S. Naipaul's masterpiece, exemplifies the cultural conflict inside Trinidadian society in a more nuanced way. In the case of Aryans, "the protestant Hindu missionaries who had come from India and were preaching that caste was unimportant, that Hinduism should accept converts, that idols should be abolished, that women should be educated" (Naipaul: 110). Traditionalism and the doctrine of progress

fruitfully meet each other in a process that resembles what has been defined, as this hybrid position is also the one adopted by Mr. Biswas and his real counterpart - Naipaul's father, Seepersad.

The recurring theme in Naipaul's books, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, *The Mystic Masseur* and *Miguel Street*, is the concern of the adults for children's education and career possibilities. Amongst the East Indians who came to Trinidad, few had the privilege of exposure to formal education. They, however, recognized the importance of knowledge. They struggled and sacrificed so their children could benefit from an education. Education transformed the East Indian community. These indentured labourers have left rich legacies that assisted them in settling and surviving in a strange land. These legacies include family life and values, hard work, frugality, sacrifice, thrift, determination, resolve, perseverance, commitment, courage and faith. They accepted the English language and adapted the Creolite culture for their children to progress.

Education, a high priority, was considered a very important tool to make a place for themselves in the new country. V.S. Naipaul's grandparents and his parents believed in education as the route to progress. Both Naipaul and his sister, Kamla, gifted academically, were encouraged to study for foreign scholarships (French, 2008: 55). Scholarship was seen as a way of escape from the "hole" and seeking "freedom" in the Mother country, referring to Trinidad as a 'hole' and believed there was no future for an ambitious person in the Caribbean. This idea was common at the time and by no means restricted to those of Indian descent.

In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the children get educated overseas, either to return or remain there. The Indian parents were ambitious for their children, wishing to give them the education that they missed. Getting a scholarship was very prestigious amongst the Indian society. Mr. Biswas, Shama and the girls agreed that Anand would go to college despite the monetary difficulties. Anand was given milk and prunes to help him in learning. Savitri got a scholarship and went abroad. Two years later Anand got a scholarship and went to England. Educating Hindu girls was not a priority but it can be seen that girls were later educated as seen in the novels, *A House for Mr. Biswas* and *The Mystic Masseur*.

The importance of education is mentioned in *A House for Mr. Biswas* as being one's own boss:

The East Indians' concept of education is associated with progress and wealth for oneself and being one's own boss after the cruel and inhumane treatment during the Indenture. They wish their children to rise above these conditions not only to achieve a better life but also not to be slaves like them.

Biwas learnt from Anand's teachers that Anand could win an exhibition if he worked hard, and Mr. Biswas made arrangements for Anand to be given private lessons after school. Mr. Biswas also arranged for Anand to have unlimited credit at the school shop. This shows Indian parents' concern for their children's education despite their struggle to make ends meet.

Mohun Biswas spent time with his children teaching and encouraging them to do better. He read novels to them. Besides helping them with their schoolwork, Biswas sent his children to Sunday school for pleasure and they enjoyed learning hymns with catchy tunes. In the Tulsi household, children were exposed to Hindu religious functions and yet it is noted that Biswas exposes his children to Christianity, another form of learning.

In *The Mystic Masseur*, Ganesh's father, an old man, wished Ganesh to study in a "town college". With the royalties he receives from the oil companies, he sends Ganesh to Queen's Royal College. Mr. Ramsumair boasted about sending his son to the 'town college', showing him off to friend. Ganesh wrote the Cambridge School Certificate and passed in the second grade. With the headmaster's help, Ganesh enrolled in the Government Training College for teachers in Port of Spain. Ganesh returned to Fourways after his father's death. His education aided him to become famous as a masseur, a writer, a spiritual healer (a pundit), and a political leader of Trinidadian Hindus, being elected in 1946 as a M. L. C. (to be addressed as "Hon'ble Ganesh Ramsumair, M.L.C.") (205) and awarded an M.B.E. title some time later. He changed his name to 'G. Ramsay Muir' (220).

This is the kind of dream the Indian indentured labourers saw for their children, giving them an education to be independent and be their own boss.

In *Miguel Street*, we see an Indian mother's desire for her son to be educated overseas. Indian parents display their concern if their children are "getting wild" (16). These words highlight an Indian mother's concern and ambition for her children not only to prevent them from doing wrong things but also to send them overseas to study. The writer's mother gets Pundit Ganesh to give her son a scholarship to study drugs in London. The readers are exposed to the corruption involved in obtaining a scholarship. Hon'able Ganesh Ramsumair accepts bribe to give a scholarship (168). The Indians like Ganesh use their education and their position in the Government for their personal gain and use devious and corrupt means to help others.

The illiterate East-Indians struggled to give their children the formal education that they themselves did not get. The concern for educating the children was to accumulate wealth and gain success leading to progress.

In conclusion, I wish to point out that such texts are in an age of crisis. Naipaul's texts constitute an arena where several discourses meet, confront each other and overlap, leading to an imagery open to a multiplicity of interpretations. His works are humorous because of the English Language usage but has issues relevant to our society today. His body of work embodies the truth about a society unknown to us. Reading his novels develops one as human beings, increase one's understanding of life and people, enables one to learn about other societies, develops aesthetic faculty and develops one intellectually. With more books being written; their availability Online, such texts are taking a back stage. Reciting and Reading Postcolonial discourses in the 21st century is worthwhile learning. People should be educated and prepared for all the wonderful things the world will throw at us. Students of literature of the 21st century have access to a wealth of reading material spanning as far back as the ancients. So my question is why recent readings and texts be included in the curriculum to replace postcolonial texts? Why these cannot be read or studied in concurrence with the recent ones? I leave you with these Questions. That is food for thought and thought for food.

