

**Research paper**

# **Exploring Caste, Ethnicity and Social Fragmentation in Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* and *The Suffrage of Elvira***

**\*Dr.Ghanshyam Pal \*\* Dr.Surekha Dangwal**

\*Lecturer, Department of English, HNB Garhwal Central University, Srinagar Uttarakhand

\*\*Professor, Department of English, HNB Garhwal Central University, Srinagar Uttarakhand

Accepted 21 March 2019

The writings of V.S. Naipaul deal with shifting identities, roots, homes and changing realities of migrants. The rootlessness is a prominent theme found in almost all of Naipaul's writings. It generates from alienation brought about by exile; physical, psychological or social. He describes the people who had to abandon their own countries and shift themselves in strange places without friend with little loyalties and with the feeling that they are trespassing. The present research paper is an attempt to view some of the problems faced by the diasporic community due to their caste and ethnicity in the settled society as revealed in the novels of Naipaul. Almost all the diasporic communities face initial problems and sufferings when they settle in a new land. Among the problems that diasporic communities face in the settled country are discrimination and social fragmentation. Discrimination is the leading trauma, which upsets them most, and caused a subaltern status in an alien land.

**Keywords:** Caste, Migration, Ethnicity, Home and Homelessness

**Cite This Article As:** Pal G., Dangwal, S (2019). Exploring Caste, Ethnicity and Social Fragmentation in Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* and *The Suffrage of Elvira*. Inter. J. Eng. Lit. Cult. 7(2): 19-27

## **INTRODUCTION**

Caste and ethnicity as a factor for social discrimination in India remain one of the major concerns in Naipaul's writings. Since his childhood he observed indentured people sticking to the heritage of caste identity they brought from India. They take it as a means of protection according to Purbi Panwar:

They carried their faith in caste and creed with them and clung to them for security, in an alien world. Caste and religion had become an institution for them, which they thought would protect their identity. (108)

Naipaul argues that caste disparities construe its social structure so equality among the habitants would be a

'Utopian dream.' Naipaul had never been untouched by caste hierarchy. The hierarchy which withdraws him from India gave him a subject to deal social fragmentation in society.

Naipaul satirizes the dichotomy of India secularism. Indian is a secular and democratic country constitutionally but not so in real life. Dr. Radhakrishnan in *Religion and Society* asserts, "The aim of democracy is always the interest of society as a whole, not any class or community. All individuals immaterial of their race of religion have the right to an equal share in the political power of the society" (Radhakrishnan91).

As a descendant of sugar plantation indentured family, Naipaul has been witnessing his forefathers' clinging to the age old tradition and their denial of the new. Many of

his books exploit same theme, where there is an apparent clash between the new and the old. He reinterprets “colonial history” and makes it an inseparably part of his expression. Naipaul bears his writings on postcolonial binary and explores the tension between the rich and the poor, colonized and the colonizer; powerless and powerful, centre and the margin.

Many times, even after adjusting in the new environment Naipaul’s characters face several other problems such as ethnicity, discrimination, alienation and identity crisis. During the period of settlement in the new country, almost everyone in the diasporic community would undergo psychological trauma. Feeling of loss, sense of alienation from the society, loneliness and longing are a part of diasporic literature.

Naipaul’s perspective begins with the non-Western person’s realization of this state of the sense of having boundaries drawn around his life by the West. Having sensed this dispossession, the former colonial begins to fantasize, to dream of greater reality, and seeks to create the conditions of liberation. In his major fiction, Naipaul portrays marginalized characters on the basis of caste, ethnicity, class, nationality and colour. They are understandable in terms of intersecting dialects of slavery and the impact of imperialism and colonization. Naipaul portrays men who cannot construct a coherent self and the reasons for this malady lie deep in the pattern of subordination and existential split suffered by them under a system that recognized no difference, humanly or culturally in its ruthless drive to hegemonies everything. As Peter Hughes has commented:

Above all, because the writing out of the narrative of decline and fall, of disorder and lack of authority involves the discovery of a void at the heart of Naipaul’s world and it has been discovered through his writings. (31)

*The Mimic Man* presents more complex dilemma—the predicament of a colonial expatriate from an outsider’s point of view. In this novel Naipaul depicts a newly independent country in the Caribbean, the island of Isabella. In spite of the long-cherished achievement of the independence, it appears that the previously colonized people of the island are unable to establish order and administer their country. The feelings of dislocation, placelessness, fragmentation and loss of identity haunt their psyche and thus they are reduced to the status of “mimic” men who imitates and reflect the colonizer’s lifestyle, values and views.

*The Mimic Men* by V.S. Naipaul is a novel that revolves around the life of its protagonist, Ralph Singh. The novel is an autobiographical product of Ralph Singh where he collected the memoirs of his life. Ralph Singh is the perfect example of the mimic men. From Singh’s narration the readers get an idea into his life and his

surroundings, “in *The Mimic Men* Naipaul is primarily interested in the development of Singh’s personality as he wrestles with the difficulty of finding reality, conditioned as he has been to settle for mimicry” (Boxill 12) .

Mimicry is the outcome of colonization that started from the colonizing period and crept into the postcolonial era. A famous critic is of the view “An increasingly important term in postcolonial theory, because it has come to describe the ambivalent relationship between colonizer and colonized” (Griffith 124). The concept of mimicry is heavily discussed by Homi Bhabha where he says, “Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (122).

Oppression and frustration of the natives during the colonial period leads them to have firm belief that the whites and Europeans are superior and they were inferior. A blind imitation of the whites would lead them to superiority and an access to the powers they hold. Ralph Singh is the ultimate mimic man of Naipaul to whom London was a ‘promised land’ where he could search order. His attraction towards whiteness is revealed in the very first page of the novel when Singh expresses his opinions about the white man Mr. Shylock:

Suits made of cloth so fine I felt I could eat it. I had nothing but admiration. Mr. Shylock looked distinguished, like a lawyer or businessman. He had the habit of stroking the lobe of his ear and inclining his head to listen. I thought the gesture was attractive; I copied it. (*The Mimic Man* 7)

Bhabha also states though mimicry to the colonized is the “most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge” (122).It leaves people more confused than ever “the discourse of mimicry is constructed around ambivalence” (122).

Bhabha also says that “mimicry repeats rather than represents” thus growth of an individual is not possible if one always haunts what he lacks which explains why at the end of the novel, Ralph Singh mimicry and an attraction towards the white, the English, the foreign disappoints him. Mimicry also becomes a hopeless attempt due to reasons elaborated later in this novel which explains the sufferings of the colonized people. Boxill exclaims, “How can a society which is profoundly mimic produce anything which is not itself mimic; how can a man who is not sure what he is produce anything which is genuinely his own?” (13)

Homelessness is a distinguished feature that emerges as a result of colonization. The protagonist, Ralph Singh suffers from the feeling of being homeless which gives rise to his identity crisis. Born in the Island of Isabella among people of multiple ethnicities he had always been detached from his original homeland, his country, India.

During the period of colonial rule, the colonizers provided the people of the Island with the English world and presented the English way of life as a world of discipline, success and achievement. The colonizers have made these people believe that their English ways and manners were superior to the inferior natives of the Island. Ralph Singh grew up knowing the English world as an integral part and parcel of his life.

Thus, he took for granted that every culture was like the culture of the English and every world was a subset of the English world. Having no knowledge of his original culture and traditions, Singh viewed the world through the colonizers eyes and fantasized his own land to similar to the English lands. This is proved true when Singh imagines his grandmother "leading her cow through a scene of pure pastoral, calendar pictures of English gardens super- imposed on our villages of mud and grass" (89).

On the other hand, the Island where he was brought up could not provide him with any (true) identity as well. The Island which was a melting pot of people of mixed race, mixed culture and traditions did not hold any significance for a particular religion or culture that even when Singh belonged to the ethnicity minority. Moreover, impressed by the English culture and lifestyle Singh could not relate himself to the variety of people having various conducts, cultures and histories. Singh had Chinese, Black and French people who were natives of the Island as friends.

Browne was among those people who could live contended by blending what has been provided by the colonizers and incorporating them into their native ways, that the "native and Western are linked" (Cooke 37). Browne wanted Singh to see that they had a history, though 'contrived' and 'manufactured, but the Island of Isabella did have some sort of history after all, if one wanted to search for it. He demonstrates emphatically:

Our landscape was manufactured as that of any great French or English park. But we walked in a garden of hell, among trees, some still without popular names, whose seeds had sometimes been brought to our island in the intestines of slaves. (Brown 147)

Browne was very optimistic about the idea that there were promising perspectives of the Island from which one can view the nodal points of this history, all they needed to do is to make this history their own "look above the roofs of the city and imagine!" (147). Browne persuaded Singh to come out of his 'classical' perspective and argued "the first task awaiting the islanders, to provide native names and thereby clarify the order which exists in indigenous terms, is implied" (Cooke 36). Singh had a more pessimistic view and he mockingly thought that "Browne's pretentiousness is actually a mask for his own discomfort" (Cooke 37).

*The Mimic Men* reinforces Naipaul's shattered colonial fantasy of London and England, epitomes of European high culture and elitist cosmopolitanism. At the opening of the novel, during his first sojourn in London shortly after the war with all the compulsions and hopes driving him away from his native island of Isabella, Ralph Singh portrays his experience of all the insecurities and uncertainties as an immigrant. The Kensington boarding-house where he stays is owned by a Jewish landlord Mr Shylock, "the recipient each week of fifteen times three guineas, the possessor of a mistress and of suits made of cloth so fine I felt I could eat it" (*The Mimic Man* 3). When he sees snow for the first time in his life, his feeling of expectation is coloured by the awareness of disillusionment, and his mood shifts from the ecstatic to the morbid. The selection of his observation emphasizes the tensions:

Snow! At last; my element and these were flakes, the airiest crushed ice more than crushed shivered. But the greater enchantment was the light. Then I climbed up and up towards the skylight, stopping at each floor to look out at the street. The carpet stopped, the stairs ended in a narrow gallery. Above me was the skylight, below me the stair-well darkening as it deepened. The attic door was ajar. I went in, and found myself in an empty room harsh with a dead-fluorescent light that seemed artificial. The room felt cold, exposed and abandoned. The boards were bare and gritty. A mattress on dusty sheets of newspapers; a worn blue flannelette spread; a rickety writing-table. No more. (4-5)

Seeing the attic where Mr. Shylock used to live, Ralph Singh realizes "an analogy between the wandering, displaced Aryan and the homeless Jew, both cosmopolitans rejected by the societies in which they attempt to settle" (King 78).

Mr. Shylock's boarding-house also "called a private hotel" (3), ironically reminds the reader of the "Europeans Only" Earl's Court private hotel where Margaret stays in *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion*, except that the boarding-house is a world of immigrants from different parts of the world. The christening party for the illegitimate child, mothered by the boarding-house's Maltese housekeeper Lieni and fathered by an Indian engineer, gives a clue about the "forlornness" of London and its inhabitants:

Other boarders came down. The girl from Kenya; her man friend, a blond, vacant alcoholic incapable of extended speech and making up for this with a fixed smile and gestures of great civility; the smiling, mute Burmese student; the Jewish youth, tall and prophetic in black; the

bespectacled young Cockney who had as much trouble with his two Italian mistresses, according to Lieni, as with the police; the Frenchman from Morocco who worked all day in his room, kept to Moroccan temperature with a paraffin stove, translating full-length American thrillers at speed—he did one or two a month. (13)

Although Naipaul makes the hybrid experience in the historical context of transnational migration the primary ground for the intermingling of cultures and identities, he does not naively contend that mere coexistence of people of heterogeneous cultural, national, religious or other identity formations guarantees the uptake or expression of cosmopolitan openness. He is skeptical about people's cosmopolitan disposition—a conscious attempt to become familiar and engaged with others, and to be receptive to cultural outputs of others.

*The Mimic Men* discusses from the perspective of the immigrants how and why they restrain themselves from the mingling and fusion of the cultures of others. Like the English characters in *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion*, the immigrants in London in *The Mimic Men* are not enthusiastic about experiencing joy or stimulation through immersing themselves in cultural differences either. They have only fear, suspicion and exclusion in their engagement with others. This seems to be an irony—the global migration has “contaminated” the larger world, while the immigrants themselves are not in praise of cosmopolitan contamination. In the novel, at the christening party for Lieni's baby, Lieni's Maltese friends “came in together and talked glumly in English and their own language” (12). Among the unequal elements of the boarding-house, the Maltese, enjoying immediate contacts with different cultures, encapsulate themselves in their territorial language and culture. Ralph Singh observes, “Conversation, apart from that conducted by the Maltese group, was not easy. We sat and waited for Lieni, whom we could hear in the kitchen” (13). But Lieni is virtually left in despair, she and her baby are abandoned by the engineer who has a wife and children in India. The abandonment ultimately undercuts and mocks the christening of the hybrid baby, a seeking for official sanction. Compared to the Maltese who do not step out of their ethnic clique, Ralph Singh seems more “cosmopolitan.” He always picks out the Continental girls (Norwegian, Swedish, French and German Swiss) in his sexual encounters in London. However, his involvement is superficial.

Like the Maltese, Ralph Singh refuses an open stance toward others as well. His random interracial sexual liaisons, which show “his inability to be part of or to lose himself in someone or some group beyond himself” (King 74), force upon him alienation, bewilderment and corruption.

In his confession of the anxious nature of his interracial

sexual failures, Ralph Singh forms a new connection—his pursuit of sex and his disillusionment with London. His awareness of the social isolation within which he exists is evident:

How right our Aryan ancestors were to create gods. We seek sex, and are left with two private bodies on a stained bed. The larger erotic dream, the god, has eluded us. It is so whenever, moving out of ourselves, we look for extensions of ourselves. It is with cities as it is with sex. We seek the physical city and find only a conglomeration of private cells. In the city as nowhere else we are reminded that we are individuals, units. Yet the idea of the city remains; it is the god of the city that we pursue, in vain. (*The Mimic Man* 17)

London—“the great city, centre of the world” (17), the symbol of colonial hope and promise—is shown as a scene of lost and abandoned individuals, lonely and helpless in distress. The physical greatness of the metropolis that has nothing to do with the colonials/immigrants only reminds them of their powerlessness. In John Clement Ball's words, “The phantasmic metropolis that Ralph Singh experiences highlights the dissolution of community into atomized individuals and dissolves individuals into nothingness” (145-46).

Ralph Singh's feeling of rootless isolation is a common experience shared by the ethnically segregated immigrants. They are shunned by the host society, have no community to fall back on, and at the same time are afraid of stepping out of their home culture to get involved with others. Similarly, Naipaul writes about his early London life in *An Area of Darkness*:

Here I became no more than an inhabitant of a big city, robbed of loyalties, time passing, taking me away from what I was, thrown more and more into myself. All mythical lands faded, and in the big city I was confined to a smaller world than I had ever known. I became my flat, my desk, my name. (*An Area of Darkness* 38)

In *The Mimic Men*, the immigrants' forced status of being unattached in their two-dimensional metropolitan life provides an “advantage” for them. They can invent their identity as they wish. As Ralph Singh tells the reader, “There was no one to link my present with my past, no one to note my consistencies or inconsistencies. It was up to me to choose my character” (*The Mimic Men* 19). To compensate for their anonymity in the metropolis, the immigrants offer “simple versions of themselves” (13) by reference to upper-class, European respectability.

In Isabella since his childhood, Ralph Singh knows that

“it was a disgrace to be poor” (*The Mimic Men* 89). Although he sympathizes with his alienated father (a poor schoolteacher), he prefers to lay claim to his mother’s family. His mother’s family is “among the richest in the island” and belongs to a small group known as “Isabella millionaires” (89). They own the Bella Bella Bottling Works, and are the local bottlers of Coca-Cola. They sponsor two popular radio programmes, and organize schoolchildren to visit their factory, distributing free Coca-Colas at the end of these educational tours.

If London is the testing ground for Ralph Singh’s colonial fantasy, Isabella is the testing ground for Sandra’s elitist cosmopolitanism. Upon the couple’s return to Isabella, their mixed marriage is instantly shunned by Ralph Singh’s maternal family. But they do not care, because they soon find it easy and comfortable to operate in a “neutral, fluid” group of people similar to themselves:

The men were professional, young, mainly Indian, with a couple of local whites and colored; they had all studied abroad and married abroad; on Isabella they were linked less by their background and professional standing than by their expatriate and fantastically cosmopolitan wives or girl friends. Americans, singly and in pairs, were an added element. It was a group to whom the island was a setting; its activities and interests were no more than they seemed. There were no complicating loyalties or depths; for everyone the past had been cut away. (*The Mimic Men* 57)

With the passage of time, the elite cosmopolitans in Isabella in *The Mimic Men* eschew the local people and culture in favour of the perceived global standards of excellence. Ralph Singh and Sandra grow apathetic to the beauty of Isabella after listening to their friends’ pastoral odes to the West—the sunset in Mississippi, the snow in Prague, and the English Midland landscape at dusk. The sense of place and community—an assemblage of fragments and a shared fantasy—of the cosmopolitans in Isabella is forged through their sense of themselves as the elite, as travelers, as touched by the charm and magic of worldliness and metropolitan life. The power of the myth of the metropolitan centre further displaces the periphery. Later, when all the consumption activities in self-repetitions become boring, the elite cosmopolitans begin to complain about “the narrowness of island life: the absence of good conversation or proper society, the impossibility of going to the theatre or hearing a good symphony concert” (69). Thomas F. Halloran comments:

The pastorals of the centre—the cosmopolitan voice that critiques Isabella’s lack of centres of

national and cultural arenas—exemplify the power of Western writing to influence the imagination of the colony and create a hierarchy of culture, whereby the colony defines itself on the colonizer’s terms. This construction is particularly powerful because it is the colonized who lust for Western commodities and traditions. (124)

Sandra’s ethnocentric illiberal attitude toward race further exposes the fraudulence of elitist cosmopolitanism. When the cosmopolitan charm wanes in Isabella and commonness engulfs her again, Sandra begins to assert a higher view of herself through a contemptuous labelling of others, according to their national or racial background. She pejoratively calls her Swedish friend “common little Lapp”, a Dutch girl who marries to a Surinamese “subkraut”, and a Latvian girl “sub-Asiatic” (68), among all, Isabella is “the most inferior place in the world” full of “inferior expats” (71).

Ralph Singh feels more and more uncomfortable with her “fixed judgments and attitudes” (68). In his eyes, when the metropolitan certainty that he seeks in Sandra is shown to be nothing more than emptiness and ennui, she becomes as vulnerable as himself in London. When the desperate self-defense behind her fake elitist cosmopolitanism becomes clear, she becomes superfluous. Sandra soon leaves Ralph Singh for Miami with her American lover. The quick failure of their marriage (a pattern of dependence and pretension) symbolizes the infeasibility of the metropolitan, elitist model of cosmopolitanism in the Third World.

Ralph Singh’s business success leads him into the local politics for Isabella’s independence. Unlike his cosmopolitan friends, he actually participates in the local milieu. But this involvement further dehumanizes him, and eventually confirms his disillusionment with his colonial fantasy. Ralph Singh argues that politicians on the whole are hollow people clinging to some form of artificial power to create the illusion of success through manipulation:

Politicians are people who truly *make something out of nothing* (my emphasis). They have few concrete gifts to offer. They are not engineers or artists or makers. They are manipulators; they offer themselves as manipulators. Having no gifts to offer, they seldom know what they seek. They might say they seek power. But their definition of power is vague and unreliable. Is power the chauffeured limousine with fine white linen on the seats, the men from the Special Branch outside the gates, the skilled and deferential servants? But this is only indulgence, which might be purchased by anyone at any time in a first-class hotel. The politician is more than a

man with a cause, even when this cause is no more than self-advancement. (*The Mimic Men* 37)

Ralph Singh observes that colonial politicians, in fear of losing the abstract power, push their bluff further in frenzy. In *Isabella*, colonial politicians are puppets manipulated through the Queen's representative, the Governor, numerous English expatriates who "virtually monopolized the administrative section of our civil service" (228), and higher technical experts on short-term contracts. They cannot stand on their own in the "fragmented, inorganic" society where real powers "come from the outside" (224). Their unstable foundation rests with the metropolitan centre.

The biggest development that Naipaul makes in *The Mimic Men* is that he for the first time reflects on the corrosive, damaging effect of colonial education on the sensibility of students, especially students like Ralph Singh and the colonial politicians who enter the elite strata of the society. Colonial education brings about escapism and fantasy, and leads them to hollow mimicry and a denial of their environment and of themselves. In his 1964 article "Jasmine", Naipaul criticizes the built-in alienating effect of the formal practice of studying English literature. It divorces a reader from relating literature to real life and breeds experiential separation.

There is a distinct dichotomy in their life at school and outside of school. They choose to withdraw into the private but unreal sphere of school life, banishing actual everyday life. In doing so, they are further alienated and fragmented, as Ralph Singh combines fantasy and reality together:

In my imagination I saw my mother's mother leading her cow through a scene of pure pastoral: calendar pictures of English gardens superimposed on our *Isabella* a villages of mud and grass: village lanes on cool mornings, the ditches green and grassy, the water crystal, the front gardens of thatched huts bright with delicate flowers of every hue. She was as brightly coloured a storybook figure as her husband. (95)

Although Naipaul makes transnational migration in the form of hybridity the primary ground for the intermingling of cultures and identities, he does not naively contend that mere coexistence of people of heterogeneous cultural, national, religious or other identity formations in the metropolis guarantees the uptake or expression of cosmopolitan openness. Probably because of his own immigrant experience, he is skeptical about the immigrants' capability to float above the bounded-ness of their primordial communities and national fantasies.

The most important step that Naipaul has taken in *The*

*Mimic Men* is his reflection on the damaging effect of colonial education, which builds unreal colonial fantasy and leads the colonials to hollow mimicry of the elite. Presenting the process of Ralph Singh's disillusionment, Naipaul suggests that only the realistic knowledge of both the First World and the Third World can lead the colonials out of their colonial shell. Ralph Singh's final acceptance of exile as a universal human condition is in accord with Naipaul's criticism of the immigrants' self-encapsulation: to enact the cosmopolitan identity project, the incompatibility between nomadic ideals and the countervailing desire for meaningful connections to people and places, a sense of communal belonging and stable, comfortably familiar routines has to be overcome.

*The Suffrage of Elvira* not only exploits the prevalent caste system but it also depicts underlying racism and persisting class conflicts in a multiracial and multicultural society. The novel reveals his understanding of the local scene and his capacity to reinforce with comic irony. *The Suffrage of Elvira* poses the distortions of personality and corruption of an individual under the pressure of reality. It also poses the societal level by exposing the distortion of such concepts as democracy and independence and the large-scale corruption of the society. The novel demonstrates Naipaul's "gift of atomizing the experience of a community into the intransigent particulars of colonial action and finally draws our attention from the community to the individuals who constitute it" (Madhusudana 15).

Naipaul traces the awakening of the people of "Elvira State" in this novel and brings to a focus the prospects and possibilities harboured by democracy in a corrupt and dishonest society—a maze of deals and inducements. And before going to explore what democracy in *Elvira* is as Naipaul represents it, it is worthwhile to note what he has to say on the political situation pervading in Trinidad or any other society around that time:

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. To understand this is to understand 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. The new politics were reserved for the enterprising, which had seen the prodigious commercial possibilities. There were no parties, only individuals. Corruption, not unexpected, aroused only amusement and even mild approval. (*The Middle Passage* 78)

Given this analysis and also what Naipaul says very early in the novel about the prospects of democracy, it is easier

to notice the distorted use to which the ideal of democracy is put:

Democracy had come to Elvira four years before, in 1946 but it had taken nearly everybody by surprise and it wasn't until 1950, a few months before the second general election under universal adult franchise that people began to see the possibilities. (*The Suffrage of Elvira* 13)

The novel talks of a pure political process and it also speaks of social and religious state of Elvira. The people of Elvira share their buffoonery in common with the people of Miguel Street. Naipaul deliberately dwarfs them; he sees the Euro- American life style as the ideal mode to be followed. Therefore his interpretation is rarely pleasant according to Satendra Nandan, "Of course the writer may not give a pleasant interpretation of his experience (that is his prerogative), but it is profoundly compelling one, often poignantly moving" (Trivedi 64).

In describing West Indian dependence upon other countries as models of democratic action, Eric Williams underlines the very concept of mimicry that Naipaul conceptualizes, "Political forms and social institutions were imitated rather than created, borrowed rather than relevant reflecting the forms existing in the particular metropolitan country from which they were derived" (501). Naipaul writes about the breakdown of religious values in Elvira thus:

Things were crazily mixed up in Elvira. Everybody Hindus, Muslims and Christians owned a Bible; the Hindus and Muslims looking on it, if anything with greater awe. Hindus and Muslims celebrated Christmas and Easter. Everybody celebrated the Muslim festival of Hosein. In fact, when Elvira was done with religious festivals, there were few straight days left. (*The Suffrage of Elvira* 66)

In a society like this, religion is no longer a matter of spirit but becomes something that could be exploited in a variety of ways to meet the ends of selfish people. The names of the Baksh children also are suggestive of the mixed-up nature of religion in Elvira. The Baksh chose Christian and Muslim names alternately for their children as if it were a concession to their environment. The boys were named Foam, Iqbal, Herbert, Rafiq, Charles, and the girls, Carol and Zilla.

Money is the main value of the society, and those who obtain money by cunning or cleverness are applauded irrespective of the means by which they earned it. No one has any scruples—honesty, selflessness, sincerity have long since fled. It is in portraying such a society in its true colours that we see Naipaul's awareness of the Third-World malaise.

The novel is a dramatic account of the political awakening of the village of Elvira— remote, unconnected, and dingy. "Elvira" is the short form for the the Elvira Estate "named after the wife of one of the early owners" (10-11) of cocoa estate. In this novel, as Anthony Boxill points out, "Naipaul makes an elaborate attempt to make the disordered past more concrete" (31).

Naipaul presents both his politicians and the electorate as tricksters and exploiters. Democracy becomes merely a guise for self-advancement. The candidates do not have a policy for the platform. Harbans's strategy is to get the Hindus to vote for him and to persuade the Muslims to do so through Baksh. Though people talk about unity, religious and racial chauvinism always take precedence over ideology. The politicians, in fact, make the people more and more racially conscious to meet their ends. The bitterness that exists between Hindus and Muslims is nothing else but racial prejudice. For instance, when Chittarnjan gets onto a fight with Baksh, he says, "Every Hindu's blood is pure blood" (114). He goes on: "Muslim is everything and Muslim is nothing . . . Even Negro is Muslim" (114).

The novel records the experiences of Surajpat Harbans, a PWD contractor, and the owner of a quarry and a transport service named after him, who now wants to test his fortune in the elections. Though John Thieme and Landeg White describe Harbans as innocent repeatedly tricked and betrayed by the public. His sole aim is to win the elections. He submits himself to the exploitative demands of the people of Elvira. Harbans has to resort to demeaning and corrupt practices to appease different kinds of people in Elvira. To get the Hindu votes he has to please Chittaranjan by agreeing to marry his son to Chittaranjan's daughter, Nelly, though it never materialized. To get the Muslim votes away from his rival, Preacher. The election strategy of Harbans further includes distribution of petrol and rum vouchers, posters, and banners. Baksh demands two hundred dollars and a loudspeaker van and seventy five dollars per month for his eldest son, Foam, who is to be the manager of the campaign.

Harbans's path to the legislative council is further complicated by the appearance of the two self-styled witnesses of Jehovah and the dog Tiger; this brings to a focus the crucial role that Obeah and black magic play in such societies which are not yet ready to come out of their ignorance and superstitious tendencies.

On the polling day, given the fickle nature of the people, Harbans has to see that they would not change their minds in the last minute. His men have to take care of the agents and clerks at the polling booths who would otherwise stagger the polling process. Some men of tried criminality have to be appointed to see that the ballot-boxes reach the warden's office without any problem. All these make him so desperate that he looks only "sad and absent minded" (192) even in the moment of triumph.

After the victory, Harbans leaves Elvira but reappears at the function arranged by Ramlogan, who intends to resent a case of whisky to the winning candidate. He appears in an outfit that transforms his appearance completely. He drives a different vehicle too, a brand new blue and black Jaguar instead of the old Dodge lorry at the function, the crowd go berserk and set fire to his car, which is not even a week old. Greatly agitated Harbans says "Elvira, you a bitch" (206) a second time in the novel and he comes no more to Elvira. Harbans's repeated imprecation "Elvira, you a bitch" (206) can be taken to refer both to the person and to the town for, as Anthony Boxill notes, "Like the original Elvira, the village is a bitch in the way she seeks to sell herself over again to Harbans" (54). In addition, as Elvira murdered her child, so her spiritual heirs subvert democracy for a few dollars. The people of Elvira as well as Elvira are wantonly destructive.

It is the characterization which transforms *The Suffrage of Elvira* into a genuine and impersonal piece of criticism of a society that is just coming out of colonial rule but incapable of freeing itself from colonial influence. Naipaul "offers us a mock-biography of his society by exposing its middle-class manners and morals, its philistine coarseness and vulgarity" (Madhusudan 72). All these evils surface during the election time. Democracy, the chief ideal to usher in order and social equality, can only give rise to confusion and chaos. Elections tend to cause dissensions or worsen existing prejudices and rivalries among the individuals, races, and religions. The kind of notions these ignorant, mentally immature, and irresponsible people entertain about democracy and election are worth-noting.

Chittranjan's observation is that everybody wants bribe these days becomes an ironical comment on the beginnings of the concept of democratic equality. The novel is in fact a consistently satire treatment of the human absurdities that men are capable of performing in the name of ideology. Connivance and corruption consequently become common denominators for the rich and the poor alike.

To some like Mrs. Baksh, democracy and the gift of franchise stand as symptoms of bad times. Hence she keeps on warning her people many times in the novel:

Nobody is listening to me. She said, 'Everybody just washing their foot and jumping in this democracy business. But I promise you, for all the sweet, it going to end damn sour. Is this election sweetness that sweetens you up, Baksh? But, see how this sweetness going to turn sour. See. (*The Suffrage of Elvira*82)

The people of Elvira are anti-democratic in spirit and pay only lip service to democracy. To them, election is a carnival, and democracy a farce rather than a passion or

a lasting value. The unity of masses proves to be a shaky one, not grounded on a genuine historical or social awareness.

Mazururs Baksh, the Muslim tailor is a man of power who starts and ends as a trickster. All his energies are directed to extract the largest possible bribe from Harbans in return for the promise of the Muslim vote. Though he has no dignity as a leader, he is popular among the Muslims, probably because he is a big talker. People call him "mouther." He also "mixed with everybody" (13). He has long been a swindler. Years before the election, he contrived fraudulent practices such as the shirt-making scheme in which he sold cheap, one-size shirts as exclusively tailored.

Chittranjan, the goldsmith, is the leader of the Hindus in Elvira. He is another power center in Elvira, a man aloof and stiff. He becomes an important figure in the local politics because he has control over three thousand Hindu votes and one thousand Hindu votes and one thousand Spanish votes:

As a Hindu Chittranjan naturally had much influence among the Hindus of Elvira; but he was more than the Hindu leader. He was the only man who carried weight with the Spaniards of Cordoba (it was said he lent them money); many Negroes liked him; Muslims didn't trust him, but even they held him in respect. (*The Suffrage of Elvira*24)

Chittranjan is a popular man in Elvira because he is rich and owns the biggest house in Elvira. In the election, Chittranjan is a staunch supporter of Harbans, and of course, he has his own selfish reason for it. He wants to marry his daughter Nelly to Harbans's son, though Harbans is not keen on this alliance. In spite of this Chittranjan chalks out all the election schedules and helps in devising certain strategies to win the votes such as taking care of the sick people of Elvira and providing monetary help to the poor and the sick.

Foam is another important figure in the election drama. He is the eldest son of Baksh. He works hard for Harbans in the elections, "He worked not so much for the victory of Harbans and the defeat of preacher, as for the humiliation of Lorkhoor and Teacher Francis" (40). He is appointed the Campaign Manager at seventy-five dollars a month. He is a loyal and responsible supporter, unlike his deceitful father.

Lorkhoor, the childhood rival of Foam, is called by Teacher Francis as "a born writer." Teacher Francis helps him to become the star of the Elvira social and Debate Club as he is a talented boy with a gift of the gab and a creative hand. He secures the job of advertising for the cinema in a loudspeaker van through Teacher Francis which otherwise would have gone to Foam. This intensifies the enmity between them.

Lorkhoor acts as the campaign manager for preacher and betrays him in the end. He is self-centred and sells his votes to Harbans. Finally he elopes with "doolahin," the daughter-in-law of Dhaniram, and leaves Elvira for good. Baksh and Lorkhoor reveal the self-centredness and the centrifugalism inherent in the West Indian society, which surfaces at the time of elections.

Preacher, the Negro candidate is another eccentric character. He has the supporter of two thousand Negro votes besides some Spanish and Hindu votes wooed by Lorkhoor. He is "a tall Negro with high frizzy hair, long frizzy beard, and long white robe" (37). His campaigning includes energizing and long walking-tours with a Bible in one hand, and a stone in the other. He is not disheartened by his defeat, but goes round briskly from house to house, thanking the people. Once the elections are over, he fades into anonymity.

Dhaniram and Mahadeo are two other supporters of Harbans who play minor roles in the novel. They are included in the committee "only to keep them from making mischief" (42). Dhaniram is a Hindu pundit in Elvira who lives in a wooden bungalow with his paralyzed wife and his meek young daughter-in-law, who was deserted by Dhaniram's son just two months the marriage.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, it is evident from the study of discussed novels that there is an overall atmosphere of despair among the characters of different caste and ethnicity in a fragmented society. The denizens of Central Africa can have no leap in the dark to a higher order of living as a permanent answer to existential anguish. And the novel explores the beleaguered identities of the colonized and the colonizers alike in two different landscapes—Caribbean and African. The work delineates the trauma of an Eastern African's displacement towards the bush culture and resultant confrontation between the natives and aliens on the basis of caste and ethnicity. These novels establish Naipaul as a novelist constantly evolving and exploring newer regions confronting certain colonial/postcolonial dichotomies.

## REFERENCES

- Naipaul, *The Mimic Men*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1967. Print.
- . *The Suffrage of Elvira*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1958. Print.
- . *An Area of Darkness*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1964. Print.
- Panwar, Purabi. *V. S. Naipaul: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2003. Print.
- Boxill, Anthony. *V. S. Naipaul's Fiction: In Quest of the Enemy*. New Brunswick: York Press, 1983. Print.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice Colonial Literatures*. Rutledge: London, 1989. Print.
- Cooke, John. "A Vision of the Land: V. S. Naipaul's Later Novels." *Journal of Caribbean Studies* 24.1 (1980): 140-61 Print.
- King, Bruce. *V. S. Naipaul*. London: Macmillan, 1993. Print.