Decoding of a Gendered Marginalized Discourse in V.S. Naipaul’s A House for Mr. Biswas

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Abstract:

Focusing on Sara Mill’s Feminist stylistics in A House for Mr. Biswas (1961) by V.S. Naipaul (1961), the article provides an alternative understanding of the novel through the lens of the undertaken framework to reveal marginalization on gender basis. The disparity of the socio-cultural roles of men and women in the novel through a particular use of language divulges gender inequality in a society. The preference of masculinity engrossed in of preferable patriarchal titles, names, generic pronouns and professions leads to a gender labeling. The disparaging portrayal of women in the fictional representation of a postcolonial work manifests that women are discriminated against. It is substantial, therefore, to highlight gender representation through the application of “toolkit” (Mills, 1995, p.2). It is also one of the significant theoretical frameworks that critiques a literary piece to unearth concealed objectives wrought in an implicit and explicit
language-use. Naipaul in the selected work represents through a language use - word, phrase/sentence, discourse to demonstrate how rampant socio-cultural gender norms play a pivotal role in upholding gender inequality. Therefore, the study concludes that submissive role of women through the specific use of discourse makes the application of feminist stylistics more pertinent to highlight the stereotypical gender norms that are used to strengthen patriarchal hegemony. Hence, socio-cultural gender norms with the collusion of a specific discourse used in the novel are coded for dominance of patriarchy and segregation of women subsequently.

**Keywords**: Gender, feminist stylistics, discourse, patriarchy, toolkit

**Introduction:**

**Background Knowledge:**

The role of a language is not merely restricted as a medium of communication; rather it has multiple roles to perform. The usage of a literary language to unfold a hegemonic agenda has been a matter of scholarly debate and research. Feminist stylistics is also one of the significant theoretical frameworks for investigation of a literary piece to question/ highlight concealed intents for gender hegemony. The portrayal of a culture, politics, and gender have become one of the substantial concerns of modern contemporary disciplines of feminist, gender studies and feminist stylistics. The major objective of researchers and scholars associated with the feminist stylistic school of thought is to denaturalize an implicit and explicit gender representation in a discourse laden with motifs, language-use, sexism and stereotypical socio-cultural norms. To challenge gender stereotyping, more relevantly to say, in a literary text in the light of Sara Mill’s feminist stylistics is the focal concern of the present study. The study, therefore, is an attempt to problematize gender concerns in V.S Naipaul’s *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) through the undertaken theoretical framework.

The recent research development on gender, identity, language-use and culture has fused an interdisciplinary and multidimensional appeal in the discipline of feminist stylistics. That is why; the said framework is theoretically concomitant with other disciplines sharing its common area of concern. The multidisciplinary nature of gender studies has attracted scholarly attention of researchers, and theorists of related disciplines (Sunderland, 2006). Different multiple schools of thought of gender and feminism have explored it from their different viewpoints. Post-modern
approaches of gender have challenged the traditional schools of though that interpret gender in their specific conventional ways. Consequently, traditional understanding of gender has failed to highlight gender stereotyping that is vogue all around. (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). Nobel Laureate in Literature in 2001, Sir Vidiadh Surajprasad, who is identified generally as V.S. Naipaul, is a Trinidad and Tobago born British novelist, essayist and short story writer. His works richly are multidimensional and dialogical in form, content and themes as his early novels portray the comic facets of life that were set in Trinidad. His next works, quite opposite to the novels written on laughable traits of life, are grave and grim ones that unmask the bleaker colour of life full of alienation. He opted for prose to paint his vision of life that was widely acknowledged and applauded. The list of his published works goes on to more than thirty within fifty years of his life. Naipaul’s later works like The Mimic Men (1967), In a Free State(1971), Guerrilla(1975) and Bend in the River (1979) represent the struggle and resistance against colonization that led toward decolonization discourse finally.

His masterpiece, A House for Mr. Biswas (1961) is Naipaul’s the fourth but the first work that earned him international recognition. The novel is “one of the most moving and autobiographical of his works”(Padhi,1984, p.461). The book was included to be one of the best 100 English Novels from 1923 to 2005. Naipaul’s master piece, A House for Mr. Biswas, can precisely be named that represents the concern of loneliness, frustration and denial of an individual. (Parag,2018) Naipaul remarks about His work, A House for Mr. Biswas by saying, it took his three years for the completion of the work. (1983)

The plot of the work has somewhat his personal and autobiographical previews. The major character in the novel, Mr. Biswas represents the novelist’s father and another character who is Mr. Biswas’s son is Naipaul’s representation. The plot mirrors the struggle of the protagonist, Mr. Biswas to attain a house of his own. Actually, Mr. Biswas’s life is a series of hardships and challenges to confront. His birth with an extra finger is declared by a pundit that the child will be ill-fated to his family, parents and people around him. Therefore, his birth is professed as a bad omen for his family. Later, he became the cause of his father’s death as he is thought to be drowning and in the meanwhile his father drowns in the stream while looking for his son.

Mr. Biswas happens to marry the Tulsi family’s lady who symbolizes a communal system of life to lead. Now this is an opportunity for Biswas to fulfill his dreams and lead comparatively a comfortable life ahead however, his ego does not let him to be submissive As he thinks that his
self-esteem would be hurt for his dependence on his in-laws who are a colonial large family. The constant struggle of Mr. Biswas to have a house of his own and to start an autonomous livelihood of his own by joining journalism seems to be a failure in future. His expectation of his children’s better future, especially his son, Anand, who gets a scholarship for his career for England, could not bear fruit due to his health concerns. Moreover, Mr. Biswas’s lifelong dream to have his own house ended up in failure as he falls into debt that he takes to afford the luxury of a very tattered house. At the end, Mr. Biswas’s death of his cardiac attack signifies his optimism to have his own house ended up with a pessimistic ending of the novel that earns nothing for the hero.

**Research Questions**

1. What is so substantial in *A House for Mr. Biswas* to be explored through the lens of Feminist stylistics to highlight gender concerns?
2. How gendered language can be decoded at the level of word, sentence (phrase) and discourse levels to add knowledge about gender construction?
3. Why does V.S. Naipaul use a specific style of gendered language?

**Literature Review**

As a prolific writer, Naipaul has attracted scholarly debate and criticism on various aspects of his literary works. Some critics and researchers find faults of conservatism, lacking earnestness, cynicism and gender partiality in his art. While, other group of critics appreciate his art to generate an international appeal. To know the tilt of the two groups of criticism on Naipaul’s art, the following significant works are reviewed chronologically to show the present research is different from the works done already on him.

“Literature ankd Society in Modern Africa: Essays on Literature” by Nazareth (1972) is significant work on V.S Naipaul. The researcher presents in his study that Naipaul tends to be pessimistic and cynical. The Marxist framework is applied for analysis of his art. There is no solution to the problems that can be highlighted in his work. Besides, no ideological substance can be found in Naipaul’s works. The researcher belongs to the category of critics who find faults in his works.

Boehmer (1995) is another researcher who finds pessimism and duality in Naipaul’s art. Her study titled, “Colonial and Post-colonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors”(1995). In her view, the novelist needlessly represents the West Indian culture as faulty due to his fascination of the
Western culture. Literature became a tie of connection between his own culture and western society but he failed to understand it as a colonized one because the colonizer’s cultural legacy was witnessed but it was never fully comprehended(77). His loyalty to the colonizers can be highlighted as Mr. Biswas is required to learn English to be at par with the Tulsi family.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o in “Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics”(1972) appreciated Naipaul’s treatment of Mr. Biswas’s quest for identity and order in the novel. The portrayal of women and use of satire are not emphasized.

Pate in “At Home in the World: Masculinity, Maturation, and Domestic Space in the Caribbean Bildungsroman” (2012) discusses that V.S. Naipaul uses Bildungsroman genre for critiquing colonial impact on male members of society who attend schools under colonial supervision. Consequently, these subjects got their intellectual and academic growth shaped by the colonial curricula and gender notions. The usage of space, land and houses show their quest for identity and recognition. Pater argues that Naipaul fictionalizes colonialism’s impact on people lives by highlighting its weaknesses. Bildung cannot be materialized for Mr. Biswas because he is in a vague state of affairs, neither to be categorized a man nor a woman, nor an infant, nor a grown up person (2012).

To conclude the review of literature on Naipaul, it is evident that A House for Mr. Biswas has not been approached as a feminist stylistic discourse. Gender portrayal in a colonized society has a paramount significance but it has not been delved into. Thus, the article would be an effort to fill the research gap highlighted by the preceding studies reviewed in this section of the article.

**Theoretical Research Framework**

This segment of the study throws light on the research framework that is to be applied to attain the set research objectives. It is a qualitative and analytical research that investigates the textual analysis of the novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas* through the perspective of Sara Mill’s Feminist stylistics. Mills(1995) is the theorist who contends to examine the gendered language that is used implicitly or explicitly for disguised ideological intentions and drives for imposition of hegemony and power. The framework helps unmask gender construction that is used in a coded language of a literary or non-literary text. Therefore, it is to highlight and decode textual language of the novel under study concentrating on ‘toolkit’ (1995). For this, the framework suggests different steps/stages to be taken for exploration of a text. This analysis of feminist stylistics starts
from the investigation of a word, phrase/sentence and discourse level to unearth manipulation of gender construction through the tool of a language.

**Exploration at the Word level**

As is recommended by Mills in her book, Feminist Stylistics (1995), words or lexical items used in a discourse are examined to question gender disparity if it is found out in their usage. This can help unmasking the hidden motive of a speaker or a writer in their choice of words that can expose ‘sexism’ (1995). The manifestation of sex-specific pronouns, titles, terms to address someone, generic nouns and pronouns are studied by a scholar to show how a gender disparity is promoted through the inherent usage of words(Mills, 1995).

**Investigation of Generic Pronouns**

The next stage of analysis in the feminist stylistics is to examine generic pronouns that are mostly sexist-language centric. They (pronouns) are used with a cause for support of patriarchal hegemony. At the same time, these gender-specific pronouns are used for subjugation of women. Through the specific practice of generic pronouns, men are granted a universal role to play whereas women are assumed to be restricted into a forced and individualistic label, as Mills contends that the linguistic elements which present masculinity as a universal and feminine as a divergent (1995). Consequently, the use of the titles and specific terms about a sexist language shapes social perception. For illustration, ‘he’ is referred to both masculinity and femininity but the fact is ‘he’ is understandably a masculine pronoun that is a sex-specific term reserved for men only. Similarly, the generic pronouns used for various occupations like professor, doctors, scientists, politicians and engineers etc. stereotypically used in favour of men being sex-specific in nature. For Example, if a physics teacher requires an assistant in Lab but secretary is allowed to do smoking but in her office (Mills,1995).Moreover, Mills tries to further clarify her proposition by another illustration, she comments, Likewise, when the sex of a person you are taking about is unknown, it a stereotypical practice to decide that the person referred to would be surely a male. For the further clarification, the following example is mentioned here, the situation where B does not know the sex of the director:

**A:** I’m going to complain to the director.

**B:** Do you think he’ll be able to do anything?’(Mills, 1995, p.66).

**Investigation at a Phrasal/ Sentence Level**

The investigation at the phrasal or a sentence stage is to know their background and
contextual usage is done in the said framework to highlight implicit motives behind particular meanings in a text or discourse. Some phrases or sentences have their historical background to impact and shape the intent in a particular way. As it is fact that words create meaning and sense grammatically in a specific contextualization they are used in. For Example, the word ‘girl’ may be taken as a neutral in a particular context it is used in, as is here mentioned ‘She goes to a girls’ school’, but the same word in a different context may carry sexist connotations; for instance, when a crying little boy is addressed ‘Don’t be such a girl’, or if it is stated, ‘The school she goes to isn’t very good: it’s only a girls’ school’ (Mills, 1995, p. 98).

**Examining the Discourse used in the novel**

As per Milll’s recommendation, discourse level’s investigation requires focusing on a text of a discourse (written, spoken) to decode the structures. It is not like the analysis done in the previous heading that does probe only at micro level but it is additionally a macro-level study to unearth the concealed designs intended for gender discrimination. As Carter and Simpson (1989) argue that discourse analysis not only focuses on the micro-contexts that carry their meanings within the domains of words and sentences but it should also concern with the macro-contextualization of having social impact. Thus, the previous investigation at the phrasal /sentence level is scrutinized to analyze how their usage to generate an inherent dogma is. It examines how characters’ construction is done in a discourse. Sara Mills argued that the choices of a particular language are used for description of female body. It is the process of stereotypical conception about assigning biased gender roles. (1995, p. 123).

**Discussion and Analysis**

The plot of *A House for Mr. Biswas* represents gender disparity that gets much implication to manifest the gender ideals rampant in the society painted in the work. It is pertinent to highlight that gender is referred and associated to men only. The very title of the novel manifests male’s gender hegemony over women, “*A House for Mr. Biswas*”, the addition of ‘Mr’ in the title with a name of a male protagonist suggests that this kind of the privileged title for a male with whom the novel is named at, ranks men as a superior being in a social circle. Moreover, the word “a House” is connected with a male member of the family. Actually, the story of Mr. Biswas is his thrilling brawl and utmost ambition to have a house of his own. (Naipaul, 1961). Mr. Biswas’s wish to get a house for him symbolizes not only his struggle to have a material independence but he also wants to get freedom from his wife’s family, the Tulsi family. As is explained by Kath
Woodward,

identity is closely linked to place, to key places and often to the place that we call home. In this sense the map is a useful metaphor for understanding the formation and representation of identity in relation to location and situation as well as movements and translation (2002, p.65).

His quest for a house of his own depicts emancipation from a life controlled by women at the Hanuman house – Tulsi family. Mr. Biswas wants to exert an authority of his own. Naipual’s portrayal of a life of a man in control of women has no worth at all. It signifies his gender language-use that leads to an inequitable state of affairs. Mr. Biswas attains his self-proclaimed authority of “giving notice”(1961) to Tulsi family where he is living and surviving. Even he starts cursing the decision to enter Tulsi house. But he is counter-argued by Mrs. Tulsi with the words that Mr. Biswas came to join our family at a plight having no clothes and shelter.(Naipaul, 1961).

In the light of Feminist stylistics, the lexical titles used which are sexist in language tend to phallocentric society. This has been illustrated in the novel under analysis repeatedly. Even the women characters got used to addressing male characters not by their names but by their ‘sexual statuses’. “Shama got up from the four posters and said, ‘Man, man’ ”(Naipaul, 532).

The novelist has negatively represented the Tulsi Family’s women as abusive, authoritative and imposing while talking to their son-in-law who moved his family to Hanuman house family due to his financial wretchedness. This symbolically demonstrates that men depend upon women for their livelihood. Is this a gratitude you are returning to us to be taken to our house. You were taken by us at a time of your wretchedness. You were given one of our daughters. You were fed and you were given a dwelling here. This unfortunately resulted in your ungratefulness, now you have started insulting us.(Naipaul, 1961, 104)

Moreover, there are some other notable feminist stylistic features to be dug out in the novel that help the study to prove its contention. Women have been portrayed as more garrulous and talkative than men in their conversation. Men are supposed to have subordinating role while women are to lead the talk (Tennen, 1990). Mrs. Tulsi is represented by Naipaul as she is delivering a lecture to Mr. Biswas; the matter of fact is they are conversing with each other. The description of Mrs. Tulsi’s character with long sentences in comparison with short and brief responses by Mr. Biswas reveals how negatively women are signified through a gendered
language-use. The following extract from the novel carries relevancy to the analysis undertaken by the present article.

We never had a quarrel’. Mrs. Tulsi said. ‘Suppose I wanted to go to Port of Spain, and he did not. You think w’d quarrel about a thing like that? No. We would sit down and talk it over. And he would say. “All right, let us go”. Or I would say. “All right, we won’t go.” That’s the way we were, you know. (Naipaul, 1961, p. 89).

From the discourse perspective of Feminist stylistics, the above-mentioned extract of the novel portrays women as the chatty, irrational, and lacking in confidence, and dependent upon men for the clarification of their notion. While men as is the case of Mr. Biswas is characterized as a sober, relevant, restrained and rational being.

Mr. Biswas’s quest to have a life of his own, meaningful and independent has been portrayed as the only option unless he gets freedom from the Tulsi family or the Tulsi women. His rebellious attitude is “misdirected and unproductive” (Pate, 2012, p. 111). The family of his wife has not robbed his dream to be on his feet; rather they have facilitated his wife and his children with care, food and accommodation during Mr. Biswas’ long absence from his family. The reality he is constantly failing to realize and know that these are not Tulsi people that make him dependent upon them rather his very particular condition that has left no chance for his survival except to reply upon Tulsi family (Pate, 2012). The protagonist blames the Tulsi family, his wife and his children for his failure to have recognition.

Conclusion:

The research problematized gender representation through the application of ‘toolkit’ (Mills, 1995, p. 2). The language-use in the novel was coded by socio-cultural gender norms for a specific purpose to maintain hegemony of masculine discourse. The said discourse got its force from the reserved titles, names, generic pronouns and occupations in the novel. The study decoded the language at the three levels. The undertaken framework questioned the language-use in the novel to unfold submissive women’s role in collusion with stereotypical gender norms for patriarchal hegemony. It is to conclude that the manifestation of sex-specific pronouns, titles, terms to address someone, generic nouns and pronouns show how a gender disparity is promoted through the inherent usage of words (Mills, 1995). By the application of Sara Mill’s Feminist stylistics in A House for Mr. Biswas (1961) by V.S. Naipaul (1961), the article offered an additional perspective of the novel different from the given survey of researches already done to unearth the
gender segregation of humans through a specific language use. The inequality in the stereotypical assumed socio-cultural roles for men and women differently through the support of a particular discourse highlights gender disparity in a society. The partiality and fondness of preferable patriarchal titles, names, generic pronouns and professions categorize a specific gender labeling.

References