Representation of Multiculturalism and Issues in V S Naipaul's 'The Middle Passage'

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of human race, basic movements form one place to other in search of food, shelter has been common. Later, man shifts from its primal search to establish individual identity and existence in form of race, religion culture and tradition. Emerging needs, limited resources, quest to prove one's superiority, search of knowledge, resources, subjugation for domination and there might be countless reasons that propel originating the term 'migration' which has become one of the major phenomena in the world history as well as in present context. Over a period of time the definition and dimensions of migration has been changed. Forced migration has always created an existential threat to migrant individual and communities who become the victim in the process of displacement and assimilation in the alien culture. This paper will highlight the plight of the people who became the inhabitant of Caribbean land after displacement and among various ethnic groups lost their identity. The problem of assimilation rises due to geographical- social and other factors that make one race or group differ from others. Indian immigration in Caribbean countries began due to its economical insecurity and a trend of supply of labourers. Immigration in the Caribbean countries began in the middle of the 19th century; with Indians arrival at Caribbean countries, they came in direct contact with the other ethnic groups or with similar migrant groups. These groups were Indian, Muslim, Christian, African slaves and colonial British masters including the native communities. After displacement, each ethnic group strived to establish their own distinctive identity and wanted to revive their original cultural superiority to others. Western people took racial policy as dominating tool to confirm their superiority over these migrated people from India and Africa whom they considered inferior. Racial imposition and class struggle further widened the socio-psychological rift in the multicultural society.

2. DISCUSSION: MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY AND ISSUES IN 'THE MIDDLE PASSAGE'

In his travelogue, The Middle Passage, Naipaul's witnessed the irregularities in these communities even after democratic dawn and independence. Having a diasporic heritage and

being a part of multiple displacements, it could have developed his perspective to review his Caribbean journey to Trinidad, British Guiana, Suriname, Martinique, & Jamaica that he made in 1962 that could remind him the unchanged grimness of the places, "Most of the evils in the sugar industry can be traced back to the fears of labour shortage. The indenture system which replaced slavery and brought over hundreds of thousands of Indians to the West Indies (MP 118-19)".

There are many issues which a multicultural society had to counter as in case of Caribbean land. First is social life where even the basic amenities and opportunities were missing and life of displaced people was murky, "The workers' houses, standing on slits, and sheltered by many fruit trees, give the impression of being chocked together" (MP137). In A Houuse of Mr Mr. Biswas, the main protagonist, Mr Biswas once had a similar experience as a deplorable proletariat, "The barrackyard, with its mud, animal droppings. . . . The barracks has no bathroom . . ." (HMB 218). Having stricken with limited option, the immigrated indentured labourers largely remained secluded in creole society. Improper systems, illiteracy and lack of money deterred their involvement in employment in the participation of business. Earlier, in colonial regime, these problems aroused by slavery system that continued till author's revisit to his native land, "There is history as well. Slavery lasted for three hundred years and was of exceptional brutality: In this matter of slavery the Dutch record is even blacker than the French" (MP118). In Surinam, the conditions of the displaced were same. Life was full of chaos; men and women had to suffer with new system of slavery. Migrants from thousand miles away to this land faced severe problems of social disorder and frequent irregularities in maintaining and sustaining relationship in this society. Many Caribbean countries are still undeveloped and seeking hope where social fabrics are on the verge of collapse. Increasing population and large scale unemployment were a major issue which exists still today. In The Middle Passage a article in Caribbean Quarterly by Dr. Kenneth Boulding describes the small societies 'road to ruin':

> Population grows unchecked, doubling every twenty-five years. Emigration can not keep pace and in any case skims off the cream of the people. Farms are sub-divided and sub-divided until the country produces far more people than it can take and the people crowd into huge city slums where there is large-scale unemployment. Education collapsed under the strain of poverty and flood of children. Superstitions and ignorance increase, along with pride (242).

Jamaica is the country where more than twenty thousand Indians had been migrated, from 1873-1917, as labourers to work in its plantations. The system of indentureship continued in Jamaica until the end of second decade in twentieth century. ," There are as the once real houses packed to bursting point, houses so close in streets so narrow that there is no feeling of openness filth and rubbish are disgorged everywhere; everywhere there are puddles; and on the rubbish dumps latrines are forbidden by law (MP 225)".

Second issue in a multicultural society like Caribbean was social discrimination and religious identity among ethnic groups. It existed in two ways. First, colonial masters use discrimination as a tool to impose their superiority to migrants groups. Second, every ethnic group or community wanted to prove their traditional and cultural superiority among by negation of others culture widens the gap in communities. People from European background rarely been confined even if they involved in sever crime, while the coolies was quite easily thrown in jail. To expect social justice was far cry. Physical and psychological torture was

quite common in these colonial jails. From 1873 to 1902 various movements led by Indians, Africans and other oppressed ethnic group against whites but in vain, "It was always the white planteners manager assisted by the army which confronted the fighting coolies, who were sometimes led by women . . . who came to repress a revolt in 1884" (Bali 18). A Caribbean writer says about this complex situation, "I think that for four centuries our people have been victim of political, cultural and economic domination. Consequently, they are in the process of totally losing their voice. They are threatened" (Conde 280). Religious identity is the another issue of confrontation, "Besides the social and racial stratification of the Jamaican society, the worst institutional discrimination face by the Indian was non-recognition of their religions- Hinduism and Islam (EIPS 25). Cultural practices were forbidden and de-recognized, "There was thus an official excuse to abuse and ridicule Hindus and Muslims and indeed to admonish those who participated in Indian cultural activities" (Ehrlich 123). Displaced communities struggled to establish their cultural and religious identity which was one of major issues in a Multicultural society. This religious discrimination is still present in today's context as many societies are involved in such discrimination and have hatred feeling for others. In Caribbean context, though these diverse communities strived for assimilation and development by setting up their system by it failed. After 1930,in these countries "On the plantations the Indians immediately set upon organized society of their own, a mini- government in panchayat which ensured smooth social life, inter communal and inter caste relations and family structures and life"(Mansingh 13).

A third issue of a multicultural society like Caribbean was racial discrimination. Racial ideology based on the false theory that a person black by colour is not a human being but an inferior to a white man. This ideology continued with a system of exploitation mainly based on physical repression of the labourers which created "psychological gulf" (Mansingh 319) among different ethnic groups. Later, expectation imposed that in order to match with white they have to follow white people; Naipaul describes this ideology which runs with a system of exploitation:

> No attitude in the West Indies is new. Two hundred year before, when he would have been a slave, the tourist would have said the same. 'The Creole slaves; says a writer of 1805, 'looked upon the newly imported Africans with scorn, and sustained in their turn that of the mulattoes, whose complexions were browner; while all were kept at a distance from the intercourse of the whites.' On this ship only the Portuguese and the Indians were alien elements (MP18).

Indians inhabitant felt racial discrimination all the time in Trinidad. The image of the Indians in Trinidad was considered as a group which should work as a labourers and if they try to involve in others business they were deterred and considered inferior, "This new immigrant in influx altered the dynamics of power in the plantation society and economy, for although power remained entrenched in the class of the master, it complicated the relations between the classes where new indentured laborours were seen as interloper and competitors". (Breton 6). If one Indian lives an affluent living life, his image was created as a man of cheap knowledge who got everything through wrong deeds. This is the entrenched image of colonial in the mind of colonized even after independence as Ismith Khan; a Caribbean writer describes this disparity in the land:

> Some years ago I showed up at mayor with a fishing pole. People at first thought that I was a foreigner. When they learnt that I was a Trinidadian, they thought I

> was a funny man, some laughed . . . . It was generally felt that these were the sports of the white man and it was uppity of a black man to engage in them (ISLWIW 51).

Racial discrimination is still present in today's context though we talk about globalization and consider world as a village. But still in the same village, people are considered different on the basis on colour, culture and social practices they follow. Discrimination still continues but in different forms. It is not uttered through words but by acts. Though Caribbean world has stepped into cultural upliftment and hope for advancement; still rejection and denial seems intact, "With all that is spite of the cultural growth in these islands since the last war, we are still being identified on a level which does not seem to rise above cricket, calypso steelband and limbo. Although we have artists and writher and technology who have achieved international renown, we are still a long way from being accepted as a contributing factor to world culture (Salvon 39)". For Indian, racial discrimination was on two levels; first, they came from a land which was under burnt for British imperialism and secondly, after coming to new land the racial prejudices against each other communities. In British Guiana, "The blacks felt that the coolies takes bread from the Negro labour and lowers the price of labour" (Roadway). An additional reason for this anti-Indian feeling was the fact, that East Indians were culturally and physically quite different from the rest of the population in Caribbean. Eurocentric society regarded themselves superior while Indian were inferior, "The Trinidad paper new era carried a number of article during March and April of 1871 which described Indian as dangerous elements, Standing as a menace to the whole society and responsible for crimes of violence" (Samaroo 107).

The country like Guiana appears more racially affected than other part of the Caribbean. Though initially, Negroes and Indians tried friendly alliances but soon the discord between them arises after 1950. Naipaul in his The Middle Passage presents caricature of Mr. Jagan's dual approach to get support from both the communities but later ". . . the party which had come to power so completely in 1953 split in 1955 along racial lines, Indians on one side, Negro on the other. His success depends on how she tackles racial problems and maintains social balance, but her image was complex, "For some he is to be distrusted because he is a communist; for other he is to be distrusted because he has ceased to be a communist . . . . For some he is a racial leader. For some he is failing to be a racial leader" (141). Race had, in fact, now become a major issue in British Guiana. (91)". On the other hand, African society experienced alienation, and for them seeking independence is important in hope to get rid away form trouble and mental unrest, "The African, as result, is passionate for independence, and for him independence is not so much as assertion of pride as a desire to be left alone, not to be involved (118)". In Guiana, Negroes feel their insecurity due to low population than Indians, "New Amsterdam was predominantly Negro and the Negroes were afraid of Indian dominance" (128). In Jamaica, these racial agitations took a dangerous shape and led to a class war to prove assertions of black community through 'rejection' in European land which is, "Ras Tafarians" (227). "In actual sense, it is a type of communal neurosis in black against white and in other races. Under the leadership of Haile Selassie in 1930, a contemptuous move was taken which was named, "death to whites" (227). And in 1960, its horrific face has been appeared with severe violence. The agitation of blacks is quite different in Surinam, ". . . a movement of intellectuals, rejects the culture of Europe. Ras Tafarianism in Jamaica is nothing more than a proletarian extension of this attitude, which it carries its crazy and

logical limit" (227). On the other hand, "It is regarded by brown Jamaican, black lower-class contagion" (227). So, having a large black populace in Jamaica, "Race in the sense of black against brown, yellow and white, in that order-is the most important issues in Jamaica today" (228). Thus, the rift created by racial difference has been prevalent in Caribbean world. The policy of racial difference is first practiced by whites against black and Eastern people and later, it shifted to other groups in the society. This gap not only deterred development but also widened the gap among diverse groups. In Trinidad, "However the rifts exist and it had divided the country racially, creating a situation which reflects, as in a mirror, the Trinidad situation . . . the country is dangerously weakened. Racial antagonism, endlessly acting and reacting upon one another . . . (134)."

Surinam is the neighboring country of Guiana and a perfect blend of all the races including Negroes, East Indian, Dutch Chinese, and Javanese where population seems to live cordially through assimilation but, "The political parties are racial" (168). The Government got the coalition of all parties representing all groups but racial wound are also carried by blacks in their hidden heart. Still, Nationalism seems as un-established and in irregular order. Here colonialism is a scourge on displaced people, "Colonialism distorts the identity of the subject people . . ." (169). Though socially, Surinam seems to provide a secure place for economic growth and social security for its folks, but blacks still face this bewilderment in assimilation because, "Racial equality and assimilation are attractive but . . . to accept assimilation is in a way to accept a permanent inferiority" (169). Further, every group is given chances or each trying hard to spread out their language to establish identity and distinct cultural practices, "Despite all the talk of culture, however, Surinamers have little idea of the diversity . . ." (175). Nationalist feeling in the county is so much confused and biased that some groups advocate other's presence as a stumbling block in development of this region. Naipaul observes, "One nationalist even suggested that the existence of Javanese and Indian culture in Surinam was a barrier to the development of a national culture. This pointed to the confusion and the unexpected racial emotions that lie at the back of the Nationalist agitation" (175).

Naipaul calls it more dangerous aspect of Caribbean in the postmodern period also. Here withdrawal from a society is almost impossible and to live in accord with races is quite querulous. Social and psychological prejudices towards other communities deterred making a complete society, ". . . social revolution was dissipated in racial rivalry, factional strife and simple fear, creating the confusion which is today more dangerous to Guiana than the alleged plot of 1953" (142). Naipaul in The Middle Passage also observed class struggle in Trinidad. This quest for becoming an elite among other brings in Caribbean a, ". . . collision with white, colored Chinese Syrian and Jews in Jamaica, white colored in Martinique, Indian in Trinidad" (76). This thirst later becomes a cause of animosity between groups. Between Indian and Negros, the rift widens with the span of time, ". . . with Indian entering the civil service and small-island. Negroes muscling in on the taxi business, there has been a certain rivalry" (76). In present context, class conflict is the major issue in a multicultural society which has divided people into various sections and the objective to achieve harmony among diverse culture sometimes seems difficult.

3. CONCLUSION

Naipaul positioned himself with these multicultural communities to find the cause and effect of a complex social milieu. Cultural diversity and hope for social inclusivity makes the

existence of multiculturalism, a phenomenon. In Caribbean context, the influx of multiple ethnic groups at one place creates questions of existence and identity. Inheritance from slavery, migrant background, and colonial dominance were the major factors that propel these communities to revive their identity in a new culture where incessant class conflict and other social hassles are common threats. The quest 'to become better and superior than others' has been perpetual in each ethnic group not only in Caribbean context but in every multicultural society where the notion of equality, diversity and inclusivity is hampered due to racial discrimination and class conflicts.

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