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Naipaul’s “My Aunt Gold Teeth”, and C.L.R. James’ “La Divina Pastora”:
The woman’s place in Colonial Trinidad.

By Shelley Cole-Nimblett

These two short stories by well-known Caribbean authors, V.S. Naipaul, and C.L.R. James, seem to have little in common, but a familiar cord threads through both narratives, (which both feature women as central characters), and that is the plight of women in closed, restricted societies, in this instance, colonial society in Trinidad. These women are from disparate backgrounds, but they follow similar paths in their search for their place in society: the traditional roles of wife and mother, using similar avenues to achieve their desired goals. For both characters, their restrictive and restricted societies have led to a loss of identity, and they seek validation through unions with men, and in occupying the traditional role of wife/mother. They both also see religion as a means of securing their desires, without truly seeming to have an understanding of the tenets of their respective faiths. Trinidadian colonial society, which forms the background for these stories, was already an amalgam of different ethnic groups and cultures, sharing a land, in almost all cases, far removed from their country of origin, in culture, society, and in some cases, religion. For both groups examined here, there has been a disconnect from religion, brought about by the experience of immigration, (Hindus), or from an indoctrination that is perhaps not truly understood, (in the case of the Amerindians). Naipaul's protagonist is a married, Orthodox Hindu woman, living in central Trinidad, a community dominated by descendants of the East Indian indentured laborers, while James' character is a Catholic, likely of Amerindian/Spanish descent. Though the women are at different points in their lives, one long married, the other, as yet unmarried, we see how their limited choices in life, the pressures of society, and their reliance on religious practices they do not understand, lead to similar fates for both.

“I never knew her real name and it is quite likely that she did have one, though I never heard her called anything but Gold Teeth.”

Naipaul’s opening sentence of the short story, “My Aunt Gold Teeth”, summarizes, in painful irony, the situation of the narrator’s aunt, within the young boy’s family and in their extended Hindu, Indo-Trinidadian community. She is a woman, who has forfeited her real name, and substituted one that denotes and reinforces her status in her society, for she was called Gold Teeth, because of the sixteen gold teeth with which she had replaced her own perfectly healthy teeth, to show the world, after her marriage, “that her husband was a man of substance.” He was, after all, not only a prominent pundit in his community, but seemingly, a man of decent economic means. Yet, in spite of this seeming success, Gold Teeth is a woman burdened with a dismal sense of failure, because of her inability to have a child.

While for many women, being unable to have children is regarded as a matter of personal regret, for Gold Teeth, it symbolizes much more than that, for in Hindu society, especially among Orthodox Hindus, being barren is looked upon with disdain, disfavor, and in some cases, hostility. In the article “The Hindu Marriage (Past and Present), by V. Jayaram, he explains the stigma associated with childlessness, particularly for Orthodox Hindus such as Gold Teeth and her family:

“Orthodox Hindus do not approve childlessness and consider it to be very inauspicious. Women without children have to face social discomfort and questioning looks from friends and relations. Newly married
couples have to deal with peer pressure if they fail to produce children within a reasonable time after their marriage. Childlessness causes great hardship for both men and women in Hindu families...While for men it is mostly a problem of their virility and manhood, for women it is the stigma of barrenness and the absence of the pleasures of motherhood. Barren women are not allowed to participate in certain rituals and on some occasions their very presence is considered inauspicious, which adds to the stigma of infertility.”

So though Gold Teeth begins her life as a woman with a successful marriage, her inability to have children casts a pall on her life, which can only be lifted by having a child. She turns to religion to aid her cause. She is, however, while considered to be quite devout, ignorant about her own religion.

“Of Hinduism she knew little apart from the ceremonies and the taboos, and this was enough for her. Gold Teeth saw God as a Power, and religious ritual as a means of harnessing that Power for great practical good, her good.” pg.40, MAGT, Island Voices, Stories From the West Indies.

In Naipaul’s semi-autobiographical, “An Area of Darkness”, he speaks of the lack of understanding of many Trinidadian Indians about Hinduism. For colonial Hindus, as for many of the transplanted peoples of colonial Trinidad, they have experienced a disconnection with the culture of their ancestors, and consequently with their own religion, where though many of the rituals have survived, few understand the true meanings, as they live in a larger society where the predominant religion is Christian, mainly Catholic, and their own religion is frowned upon. So even though Gold Teeth is:

“…in no doubt whatsoever that Hinduism was a superior religion. She was willing to select, modify and incorporate alien eccentricities into her worship;”

She is attracted by the dominant religion, Catholicism, in her quest to achieve her goals. Ultimately, Gold Teeth’s attempt to blend the two religions is unsuccessful. She becomes guilt-ridden because she thinks her practices have caused the illness, and ultimately the death of her husband, which leads to further shame, when her family discovers her proclivity for praying to Catholic saints. She loses the one claim she had to dignity and success in life, her husband, and now has to deal with the further shame of being thought to have caused his death, by dabbling in the Catholic religion, which is even more disgraceful; also, as a widow, she now has no possibility of having children.

In the case of James’ character Anita Perez, though from a different community (those of Spanish/Amerindian descent, living in North Trinidad on the cocoa plantations), for her, like Gold Teeth, marriage is seen as a process of personal validation and also in the wider community. She longs for marriage to bring her security in life and help cement her place in society as a respectable woman.

“She had one earthly aim. She considered it her duty and business to be married as quickly as possible, first because in that retired spot it marked the sweet perfection of a woman’s existence, and secondly, because feminine youth and beauty, if they exist, fade early in the hard work on the cocoa plantation.”

In her small and closed society, Anita, like Gold Teeth, has no sense of self, and sees few options for happiness. She lives a life of uneducated drudgery, working on the cocoa plantations, and does, seemingly thoughtlessly, what her parents before her have done, and has little expectations beyond that. She longs for a life like that of her aunt, who was,

“…secure in the possession of three children and a husband.” Pg. 175, LDP, Island Voices.
She too, in desperation, prays for her dreams to be realized, and eventually, at the urging of her aunt, makes a special journey to another village, some distance away, to make a special request of the saint, “La Divina Pastora” (the Divine Shepardess), to grant her wish that Sebastian Montagnio would marry her. At first, it seems like Anita’s wish will be granted, but at the close of the narrative, Anita and Sebastian’s coming together seems to be foreshadowed with the possibility of failure as “…the first little cloud between them” appears on the horizon.

Through these brief insights into the lives of these two different characters, we can see that for the colonial Trinidadian woman, her fate was akin to many other women of her time. In a society plagued by the inheritance of slavery, and dealing with deep divisions of class and race, she often struggled to find her identity. Though observing the tenets of religion was regarded as essential, these tenets she often misunderstood. She inhabited a sphere that was severely limited, and saw a union with a man as a way of gaining security, stability, and the respect of her community. Once these avenues became closed, her future prospects were considered bleak and dire.

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