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## **8. Presence of superstition in V.S. Naipaul's work *The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited***

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### **Abstract**

V.S. Naipaul holds a prominent place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century diaspora literature for the exceptionally influential works penned by him that portray the issues of immigrants settled in different parts of the world. The author has vividly thrown light upon the problems such as rootlessness, displacement and the trauma of being an outsider experienced by thousands of Indians settled abroad. Naipaul won the most sought-after Man Booker Award in the year 1971 for his work titled *In a Free State*, an extraordinarily insightful work which reflects the harsh realities of the postcolonial world. The prestigious Nobel Award was conferred upon V.S. Naipaul in the year 2001 for his exemplary contribution to the field of literature. Naipaul is well-known for his straightforward way of presenting views on various topics pertaining to diaspora community which make a writer of great merit. The work titled *The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited* is a work of great importance which presents a beautiful blend of narrative related to history, memoir and travel writing. *The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited* primarily focuses on the journeys undertaken by V.S. Naipaul to the Caribbean countries as well as the fascinating mixture of the cultures of African and European countries. Naipaul presents before the readers a critical view of the social realities of the Caribbean region such as corruption, poverty and the obstacles present in the path of nation building. In *The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited*, the author throws light upon a spiritualist dance of Paramaribo, a South American country in which one of the dancers becomes possessed because of the sound of drums which are being played. The person who is possessed is considered to have received a message from God. He starts showing signs of restlessness and later on washes himself. This person then applies white clay all over his body since white is the colour which symbolizes the ancestors. In simpler terms, the dancer is having a séance which shows the present of beliefs which are superstitious. Thus, *The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited* quite vividly discusses the element of superstition and blind faith which has a long-lasting impact upon the readers.

**Keywords: Diaspora, Rootlessness, Trauma, Spiritualist-dance, Possessed, Séance, Superstition, Blind-faith**

### **Introduction**

Superstitions and beliefs based on folk tales are hold great in tribal cultures across the world. Although mankind has made significant progress in the field of science and technology, there are still many regions of the world where people are not willing to embrace modernity and



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develop a progressive mentality. Relinquishing traditional ideas is something that the forest dwelling people can never imagine. In many countries belonging to Africa, there are practices which the tribal hold close to their hearts. Indeed, preserving one's identity in the form of culture is quite praiseworthy. Tribal cultures are characterized by folk dances, songs and important ceremonies which may not be accordance with the modern way of living and thus, can be termed backward and superstitious. Some tribes still believe that good and bad luck is associated with certain animals and some tribes view natural events like storms, eclipses and earthquakes as outcome of the anger of spirits or the wrath of mythical gods. In order to avert such unfortunate events, these tribes perform certain rituals to please the god. Witchcraft and black magic are prominent characteristics of many tribal cultures. Some tribes follow the tradition of sacrificing animals so as to please certain gods. To cure an ailment, these people take the help of sorcery and medical practices based on blind faith which shows the unshakable faith of the tribals in superstitious practices.

The narrator of V.S. Naipaul's book titled *The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited* discusses a dance performed by the tribals living in Paramaribo, a South American country. In order to communicate with their ancestors, the tribals enthusiastically perform this spiritualist dance. An interesting point that must be taken into account here is that the music which accompanies the dance is itself quite mesmerizing as well as mysterious. The speciality of this music is that the sound of the drums played during the dance has magical effect on the dancers. It so happens that while dancing, one of the dancers becomes possessed by a spirit. According to the beliefs held by the tribals, this dancer is talking to gods and also trying to communicate with the ancestors. To ensure a flawless conversation with the spirits, this dancer first washes himself with water and then, daubs himself with white clay as it is believed by the tribals that white colour represents the ancestors. The dancer covered in white clay then establishes a séance with the ancestors besides receiving the message from God. To convey the message of God to the fellow tribesmen, the dance starts singing.



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**Séance: An important characteristic of the tribal culture of Paramaribo**

*The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited* throws ample light on the customs and rituals related to the tribes of Paramaribo. A séance refers to the ritual in which ghosts and spirits are summoned. Although this practise is not supported by any scientific evidence, it has been followed by tribals for centuries. It is strongly believed by many people that séances provide extraordinary relief and comfort to those who have lost their near and dear ones. The spiritualist dance of Paramaribo is a subject of great importance because V.S. Naipaul was fascinated by the mystical beauty of the tribal culture of Suriname, the capital of which is Paramaribo while he was touring the Caribbean region with the motive of knowing his roots. This dance is common in the cultures of Africa and Paramaribo and hence, holds cruciality in the novel. According to Naipaul, this spiritualist dance is an inseparable part of the culture of Suriname. The tribals perform this dance on religious occasions which involve large social gatherings. Naipaul describes the traditions and ceremonies of Suriname in a detailed and emphatic way since this book showcases the important aspects of Caribbean culture to a large section of readers interested in diaspora literature. The observations made by V.S. Naipaul during his visits to countries such as Suriname underscores the spirit of creativity and sturdiness of the inhabitants of these countries. Naipaul appreciates the indomitable attitude of the tribals who countered the attacks made by the White colonizers on their culture. The spiritualist discussed in *The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited* is indeed, an extraordinarily shining characteristic of the Afro-Surinamese identity.

The spiritualist dance of Paramaribo also represents the strong bond of love that exists among the members of the tribe. It also points to the importance of spirituality which is not given attention in the materialistic urban world. How deeply connected are the tribals with their ancestors is something that is extremely close to the heart of the author because he himself held a strong desire of exploring the land of his ancestors and their way of living. The element of superstition is quite significant since the religious ceremonies and rituals such as the spiritualist dance are primarily based on folk tales which are not backed by any scientific evidence. A superstition may be considered a sign of backwardness and something that promotes irrationality but for the tribals, practices based on superstitious beliefs represents cultural pride. In fact, the practice of Séance is a glaring example of blind faith which is not acceptable in the civilized world. There are many rituals of the tribals which directly portray their superstitious mindset. The author stresses that colonialism had a deeply disturbing effect on the cultural identity of the tribal people. Since the region had been ruled by the White colonizers for decades, the original culture of Paramaribo suffered in a great deal. Naipaul puts forth the argument that in order to heal the psychological wounds of inflicted upon the native by the White colonizers, the tribals take the help of certain practices which display superstition. For them, superstitious beliefs form the backbone of their tribal culture. The Caribbean culture is full various spiritual traditions which create a sense of awe among the readers besides highlighting the highly superstitious mentality of the forest-dwelling people. The author in an



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extremely meticulous way describes that such practices instil in the tribals a sense of security besides making them confident. Although, such type of rituals, for instance, the spiritualist dance of Paramaribo, hold importance to the tribals, a significant point that appears here is that these practices symbolize cultural stagnation. Superstitious beliefs grow in the absence of proper education and a reluctant attitude towards embracing new ideas.

*The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited* throws light upon superstitious traditions which passed on from one generation to another. It is indeed quite difficult to do away with certain rituals which have been in practice for centuries. Once such rituals and customs become an inseparable part of the everyday lives of a community, no one can challenge such customs. Superstitions weaken the mentality of an individual in such a way that he becomes extremely reluctant to welcome any idea or thought which opposes his superstitious mindset. Superstitious beliefs are deeply rooted in the social fabric of the Caribbean region and is forms a crucial part of the history of the Caribbean people. Another significant point in this context is that superstitions play an important role in strengthening the community bonds which is why, the tribals staunchly support them. *The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited*, in an emphatic manner throws light on the element of primitivity. In the following passage from the novel, the author carefully describes the spiritualist dance of Paramaribo:

“Messages to the living may also be conveyed through a person who has become possessed in the course of dancing to the drums. The possessed conveys the message by singing. Apparently, a person may feel that his god wishes him to convey some message to the living and in consequence feels a restlessness. This prompts him first to wash and then daub himself with 9iwhite clay, white being the colour of the ancestors...On the auspicious day, the person bedaubes himself with more white clay, and perhaps some of the more participants in the ceremony too, and then prepares to go into a trance so that the god can speak through him. The rhythm of the drum helps to bring on possession.”

As has been discussed in the above-mentioned passage, V.S. Naipaul focuses on the performative aspects of the dance which draw the attention of the readers in a significant way. The fascinating music and the unique emotional expressions of the people involved in the dance are quite interesting. Just like the Red Indians (Native Americans) and the Africans, the Surinamese tribals display high regard for their traditions and values. A crucial point that arises here is that the spiritualist practices which are present in Paramaribo and Suriname have their roots in an Afro-Surinamese tradition called Winti. The followers of Winti are highly religious and strictly adhere to the customs of their place of origin. Winti is based on a system of beliefs which is characterized by complexity. It also involves healing as well as receiving messages from the ancestors. During the colonial era, the Britishers forcibly converted a large number of Africans to Christianity and hence, traditions such as Winti fell prey to cultural onslaught. *The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited* is a meticulous presentation of the typical tribal lifestyle of the natives of Suriname. V.S. Naipaul deftly underscores the uniqueness of the tribal traditions which, despite being based on blind faith, are followed by the natives of Paramaribo. A crucial characteristic of the novel is that it also instils among the readers awe as well as fear



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since it discusses the ritual of communicating with persons who are dead. As a result of the extraordinarily impactful writing style of the Nobel laureate, the novel arouses a sense of curiosity among readers from different parts of the world.

*The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited* plays an important role in disclosing the unknown secrets of tribal culture which do draw the attention of readers. To the tribals of Paramaribo, Seance provides divine comfort and makes them realize that they are not alone. The author focuses on the sensitive nature of the natives who display immense love for their age-old rituals. One of the most significant characteristics of such a mindset is that it keeps all the members of the community united till their last breath. Under no circumstances, the natives think of leaving behind their fellow tribals who crying for help when they are in danger. In fact, such kind of affection and strong bond can inspire the people living in urban areas who are materialistic and do not have time to talk to their near and dear ones. The novel underscores the essence of cultural values even if they are based on blind faith or are not appropriate in the modern society. V.S. Naipaul constantly emphasizes on the theme of cultural roots and original identity in his novels besides incorporating the element of the supernatural, a speciality that makes him an exceptionally prolific author.

### Conclusion

*The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited* is a novel that reaches the remotest corners of the African continent, carrying out a crucial analysis of the practices prevalent in the tribal culture, which are based on superstitious beliefs and have been followed since times unknown. The spiritualist dance of Paramaribo and other such rituals which are characterized by superstitious thinking are indeed subjects that hold major importance and create curiosity among the readers. This dance also includes the characteristics of Séance, which refers to the way of communicating with dead people. It may seem strange that in the modern era, when the



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world is moving fast towards modernization and relinquishing old customs, old ideas and thinking, there are still communities living in some parts of the world who are deeply attached to their age-old beliefs. For them, preservation of their culture and maintaining the uniqueness of their identity is more important than material progress. In many tribal cultures across the world, there are practices which are completely based on blind faith and black magic, yet those tribes are comfortable with such lifestyle. The author is quite impressed with tribes and hence, describes the beauty of the tribal dance with enthusiasm which makes the work extraordinarily fascinating. The strange way in which the dancers first daub themselves in white colour and then start conversing with the departed souls of their ancestors portrays the limitless affection of the tribesmen for their forefathers. *The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited* closely explores the psychology of the tribal community which prefers the primitive way of living over the modern way of living.

The novel depicts nature worship which is a vital feature of the culture of forest dwellers. The element of mysticism makes *The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited* an insightful and engrossing work. It opens the window to the world of spirituality, faith and antiquity. Naipaul sheds light on the fact that despite being believers of blind faith, the tribals display unity and love. Indeed, there is a dearth of love and affection in the urban society, which under the influence of Western culture, only believes in materialism, where the sole objective of life is earning money and getting rich. In many of the works authored by V.S. Naipaul, including *The Mimic Men* and *The Mystic Masseur*, the ill-effects of Western culture can be seen in the form of blind mimicry of the English lifestyle. In these works, the characters lose connection with their roots and as a result, suffer identity crisis. Unlike these works, *The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited* presents the tribal world in which, although there are superstitious beliefs but here, people show a strong sense of love for their roots and have immense love for their ancestors.



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