

## Socio-cultural study of Indian Diaspora

### In V.S. Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur*

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V.S. Naipaul is a great writer in his studies of society and culture of Indian diaspora. Among non-western twentieth century writers of English Naipaul has gained a wide and varied readership. Few writers have been as prolific as he has been in the genres of both fiction and non-fiction. Generally considered the leading novelist of the English speaking Caribbean, Naipaul is the winner of the Nobel Prize in literature in 2001. Naipaul's writings dealt with the cultural confusion of the Third world and the problem of an outsider, a feature of his own experience as an Indian in the West Indies, a West Indian in England, and a nomadic intellectual in a postcolonial world.

V S Naipaul, being a Trinidad born Indian, articulates the predicament of East Indian immigrants who are uprooted and have gradually lost their Indianness due to a long exposure to the influences of the Creole culture as well as to the cultural colonization under the imperial powers. In his early novels that form the Trinidad tetralogy — *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958), *Miguel Street* (1959) and *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) Naipaul deals with the East Indians' experiences in the West Indies. These novels present a poignant picture of their struggle to preserve their past identity in an alien environment; the inevitable

disintegration and loss of their selfhood with no hope of some substitute identity any more.

*The Mystic Masseur* (1957) is set in Port of Spain and the rural areas of Trinidad amidst Indians. The narrator speaks its theme as “the history of Ganesh is, in a way the history of our times.”<sup>1</sup> It is a comic study of the Postcolonial political rise and expatriate Indians’ response which smacks of mutual self-deception. Ganesh, the hero of the novel, is a representative figure of East Indians in Trinidad in their move towards city life and their subsequent Creolization. The novel is an allegory of the history of the Hindu community and Ganesh represents the first generation of the East Indians to come under the influence of the Western education which acted as a potent force for cultural colonization. It is the need for education that brings Ganesh to the Creole world where there is a different value system. Mr. Ram Sumair, Ganesh’s father, makes special preparations for the day, Ganesh, in spite of all his awkwardness, is to be enrolled in Queen’s Royal College:

Mr. Ram Sumair made a lot of noise about sending his son to the ‘town college’ and the week before the term began he took Ganesh all over the district, showing him off to friends and acquaintances. He had Ganesh dressed in a khaki suit and a khaki Toupee and many people said the boy looked like a little Sahib.<sup>2</sup>

The novel centers around the meteoric rise and metamorphosis of Ganesh, the protagonist, who represents the East Indians under the process of acculturation. Ganesh feels awkward and experiences a humiliation when the boys make a fun of his dress and country manners. This awkwardness comes to him, as the narrator points out, more because of his Indian name. He comes to realize the marginalized position of Indians and even tries to hide his Indian identity: “Ganesh never lost his

awkwardness. He was so ashamed of his Indian name that for a while he spread a story that he was really called Garethth.”<sup>3</sup>

Through Ganesh’s character the narrator is expressing his views about the contemporary Trinidadian Hindus whose ancestors had indentured here from India and who lived a very circumscribed life as labourers. Set in the West Indies on the eve of its independence, this novel highlights displaced and mediocre East Indian individuals in pursuit of recognition and success. Ganesh is a representative of the community which, according to the author, is peasant-minded, money-minded, spiritually static but cut off from its roots and set in a materialist colonial society. The subtle process of cultural colonization has already begun with the moment of Ganesh’s contact with colonizing culture. Four years of his stay at college have influenced Ganesh quite enough to go against the traditional custom of marriage. When Ganesh refuses to accept his father’s selection of a bride for him he gets a strong warning, rather an ultimatum, that if Ganesh doesn’t want to get married he must consider himself an orphan. Instead of returning home Ganesh disobeys his father and gets enrolled in Government Training College for teachers. He finally returns home only when he receives a telegram and on the arriving at Fourways, he gets the news of his father’s death. The short interlude between Ganesh’s disagreement with his father and his return from Port of Spain is significant because it provides a glimpse of a typical colonial school. The headmaster of the school gives Ganesh a brief lesson on the purpose of education.

The narrator writes about Ganesh with timely comments, juxtaposition and humorous deflation to reveal the absurdity of the society. In ironic words he observes: “Ganesh gave up trying to teach the boys anything and was happy enough to note a week-to-week improvement in his record book.”<sup>4</sup> Through the medium of the narrator within the novel Naipaul demonstrates his own

technique as a novelist since he

remains detached and allows the characters to damn themselves. From the point of Ganesh's return to Fourways until his final move to Port of Spain, the narrator oscillates between Fourways and Fluent Grove and traces the progress story of Ganesh up to his victory in election and his first appearance as an M.L.C. and then his rise in position to M.B.E. Thus, the narrator makes it clear that political power is ultimately an embodiment of the dream of power, possession and self-realization of the colonized peoples. However, the narrative identifies the destiny of the country with the personality of the gradually emerging political leaders like Ganesh. HariharRath in his critical essay on the novel has written thus:

Strongly enough all the qualities of Ganesh are not really virtuous, but the only working expediency which is most indispensable and suitable for any individual to succeed in the Caribbean society during the transitional period between the disappearance of the older values and the appearance of a new cultural loyalty and standard.<sup>5</sup>

Ganesh's aunt, who is nicknamed as 'the Great belcher' is a constant presence in the novel and she is the first person to convince him that he has the potentials of a mystic. Apart from this she has great organizing funerals and marriages in her own community and we get the feel of the community life of the East Indians in Trinidad. However, we are also made aware that the inner bastions of the East Indian culture have begun to collapse. The section of the novel also focuses on the scene of cultural upheaval already set in motion by the colonial education and how it got the momentum through the modernizing forces unleashed by the Second World War. The economic boom precipitated by the American presence in Trinidad, together with rapid urbanization, acted as potent external force boosting this disintegration. The writer articulates the predicament of stagnant society that

the East Indians had managed to recreate in Trinidad. It was an India in isolation and its insulator fell away and was shattered to pieces during the Second World War. In *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) Naipaul relates the story of Ganesh an ascent-infatuated individual in a non-holds-barred rag-to-riches framework. Though there is nothing to fault in individual's attempt at escaping his existential obscurity and social non-entity, yet at another level of the sardonic commentary of the narrator Naipaul also brings forth the dichotomy in the lives of the East Indians in Trinidad. The biographical account of Ganesh is double-edged as it takes the lid off the Trinidadian world of chicanery, betrayal and falsehood.

The degradation in the religion of east Indians, which has been reduced merely to rites without philosophy, becomes evident during Ganesh's initiation ceremony, his practices as mystic, his marriage and his behaviour at the temple that is constructed in Founte Grove to attract the American soldiers. When Ganesh undergoes the initiation ceremony to become a real Brahmin as per Hindu custom his head is shaved and he is given a little saffron bundle and asked to go to Banaras to study. When Ganesh keeps on walking away and does not turn back his steps all are bewildered. In keeping with the custom, Dookhie bursts out in anger:

Cut out this nonsense man. Stop behaving stupid. You think I have all day to run after you? You think you really going to Banaras? That is in India, you know, and this is Trinidad.<sup>6</sup>

These reactions make clear the mimicry and the limitations of the make-believe world of the East Indians who are adhering to distant traditions just for the sake of their illusionary Hinduism. The narrator's formal treatment of the history of Ganesh is really a carefully controlled piece of satiric inflation. Ganesh's manner of treating the narrator who comes to the masseur for

treatment of his hot and swollen foot — his laying the body on a blanket on the floor, examining him, mumbling a Hindu couplet over his body and diagnosing the disease as nothing but bad blood — is all symptomatic of a quack whose chicanery is quite apparent. The dichotomy is further exemplified during Ganesh's marriage. In a traditional Hindu marriage, the groom is not supposed to see the bride before marriage. However, Ganesh and Leela have already met each other. So Ramlogan, Leela's father and Ganesh have to pretend that Ganesh has never seen Leela otherwise in Trinidad they shall no longer be looked as good Hindus. It is most important that he does not eat until he extracts a sizeable dowry from Ramlogan. They can only act like good Hindus because of sentimental values attached to their traditions knowing fully well that at Founte Grove he will succeed as a businessman if he increases his reputation as a spiritual healer and he leaves no stone unturned to achieve it. It is ironic that he becomes a member of the legislative assembly by virtue of his mystical character. He is clever in climaxing his political campaign by organizing a seven day recitation of Bhagwat because he knows the religious leanings of his people. The duplicity of his character comes to the surface when he condemns the labour movement of the people by supporting the British colonialists. After achieving political motifs by manipulating his Indian heritage he kicks it by changing his name to G.R. Muir. Thus *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) illustrates Naipaul's stance on mimicry as a theme. In the words of the narrator the life of Ganesh — a quack masseur, a false mystic, a phony author and a corrupt politician — becomes an allegory of the history of the time and the novel as a whole, is an account of the apotheosis of one man who represents the whole community. It is also interesting to note that to highlight his mysticism and to deceive people he wears Indian dhoti and kurta, but he prefers to wear European dresses on other occasions. His house has a Hindu exterior but the interior has all of the modern European scientific gadgets. Thus, hero in politics is also its

villain. HariherRath and K.C. Mishra have also commented in their article ‘The mystic Masseur: A Study in Third-world politics’ as:

It is also seen that Naipaul is adopting similar technique of incorporating images and symbols to highlight Ganesh’s imitation and fraudulence. His portrayal gives us an impression that even though he is victimized, he rises to be the master of all confusion.<sup>7</sup>

The cultural disintegration is wide spread among the East Indians and even his political rivals also anglicize their names as Beharry and Cyrus Stephen Narayan for similar acceptance.

The theme of political decadence has been intensified by the choice of images and symbols. The setting of the novel, thus, emphasizes the way Trinidadians have been alienated from their surroundings, suggesting that their identities have been disintegrated. The East Indians themselves are unable to see the contradiction because the process of cultural colonization has worked on them unconsciously. It is this aspect of the society of Trinidad that Naipaul has tried to capture in the novel. ChampaRao Mohan also agrees with this opinion when she writes:

Naipaul draws attention to the inadequacies of colonial societies which are often characterized by a lack of acumen for specialization. Trinidad is portrayed as a society in upheaval, where the old order is giving way to new forces of modernity and the East Indian community of which Ganesh as a representative is particularly vulnerable. Ganesh’s success story is really the story of the disintegration of the East Indian Community, which under the conflicting pull of the Eastern and Western world, makes the final choice in favour of the Western civilization.<sup>8</sup>

Most eminent critics are of the opinion that all the major protagonists of Naipaul's novels like Mohan Biswas in *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) and Ralph Singh in *The Mimic Men* (1967) and especially Ganesh Ramsumair in *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) present different aspects of the immigrant Indian's socio-cultural mindset and psychological implications. To say, the separation from their land leads to inner conflict and split as the forlorn spirits wander in the wilderness of the rootless world and their epical search for order and authenticity in life leads them nowhere to exist in limbo. The firsthand experience of this novelist expresses his own enigma and exploit to carve an authentic identity and to shape a relentlessly truthful writer in the same ambiance.

### References:

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2. Ibid., 9
3. Ibid., 10
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5. HariharRath and K.C. Mishra, 'The Mystic Masseur: A Study in Third World Politics, V.S.Naipaul: Critical Essays' Vol. 1, (edit.) Mohit K. Ray (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributers, 222), 18
6. Naipaul, V.S. *The Mystic Masseur* (London: Picador – an imprint of Pan Macmillan Ltd. 2002) 11
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8. ChampaRao Mohan, *Postcolonial Situation in the Novels of V.S. Naipaul* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributers 2002), 33