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Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur*: A Discourse of Aspiration and Expatriate Sensibility

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V.S. Naipaul, a great expatriate writer, has championed, has championed the issues of dislocation, fragmentation, rootlessness and consequent loss of identity in diasporic literature. An expatriate writer is one who voluntarily moves to reside abroad but at the same time maintaining his national identity, with a view to return to his native land. Thus, an expatriate is more privileged than a refugee. Naipaul's expatriate sensibility accounts for his "willed homelessness" with the least possibility to return to Trinidad. His expatriate sensibility is greatly affected by his marginalized existence. Naipaul is wholly alienated and hence, a citizen of nowhere and everywhere. Exile has been the basic urge behind all his creative writing.

The Mystic Masseur (1957), Naipaul's first published novel, is considered to be his maiden effort in presenting the expatriate sensibility and the most serious picture of native to his maiden effort in presenting the expatriate sensibility and the most serious picture of native Trinidad. He won the John Llewellyn Memorial Prize for this book. *The Mystic Masseur*, is an account of a typical aspirant (Ganesh) to power and prestige gravitating to politics as supreme possibility. The novel narrates an account of life on the island at the time of the first general election in 1946. The protagonist Ganesh in this novel passes through a stage of metamorphosis from a failed school teacher, to a clumsy masseur claiming some mystic healing powers and slowly taking to politics. The purpose of my paper is to show how Ganesh, plays a variety of roles and finally in this process, he loses his identity and from Ganesh Ramsumair he changes into G. Ramsay Muir.

N. Ramadevi, in his critical analysis of Naipaul's works pointed out that "It unravels the humorous history of Ganesh Ramsumair, a hero of the people" (23). *The Mystic Masseur* and *Suffrage of Elvira* is laid in rural Trinidad, with the Port of Spain providing the stepping stone to the fascinating Metropolis of London, which every Trinidadian aspires. *The Mystic Masseur* is a success story decorated with deep satirical touches. Ramadevi further remarks that "It traces the attempts of a displaced and mediocre individual, to achieve recognition and success, in pursuit of which he changes variety of roles" (23).

"*The Mytic Masseur*", remarks Madhurima Srivastava, "is a remarkably gripping work, revealing Naipaul's plentiful promise and potential as a novelist bringing into play Naipaul's diasporic sensibility" (168). He is unassailable as a novelist in the treatment of diasporic themes. Manjit Inder Singh, a noted literary critic, expressing his views on "Colonial Mimicry Colonized Selves" remarks that;

"The Mystic Masseur is Naipaul's first full-scale, East Indian novel, exposing the poverty and peripheral existence in Trinidad. Hence, the Indian protagonist in Ganesh is naturally guided by the Indian gestalts

and cultural-racial features, he carried with him into the Trinidad Environment" (99).

The Mystic Masseur is the story of Ganesh, a failed school teacher turned mystic. In the words of the narrator 'the life of Ganesh-a quack masseur, a false mystic, a phoney author, and corrupt politician becomes an allegory of the "history of our times" (*The Mystic Masseur*, 18). Here Naipaul is concerned with the survival of the individual, the postcolonial individuals getting a foothold in the New World Ganesh is a representative of a community, which according to Naipaul, is a:

"Peasant-minded, money-minded community, spiritually static because cut-off from its roots, its religion, reduced to rites without philosophy, set in a materialist colonial society: a combination of historical accidents and national temperament, has turned the Trinidad Indian into the complete colonial even more Philistine than the white" (*The Middle Passage*, 89).

The story of *Mystic Masseur* is narrated by a child. He meets Ganesh first when he is in school in 1939 and last when he is a university student-so that the growth of the narrator from childhood to youth implicitly accompanies the story of Ganesh's rise from a struggling masseur to M.B.E. The earlier part of the story is occupied with Ganesh as an ambitious and independent young man, yet idealistically and poetically inclined with a driving passion for books. He asserts his freedom of thought by rejecting his superstitious, materialistic and garrulous society. Ganesh aspired for freedom from his social reality. His callous treatment of Ramlogan, his father-in-law, exemplifies his treatment of Trinidad. Even his autobiography, *The Years of Guilt*, is an indirect denial of Trinidad, for he attributes his success only to the 'hand of Providence' i.e. England, so that the narrator and Ganesh both meet as representatives of a society, which they both reject in their rejection of each other. According to C.B. Joshi.

"Masseur is in a way, the equally painful story of a man's repudiation of his origins. It tells the opposite tale of the process, not a recovery, but a loss-of how Ganesh Ramsumair, a Brahmin of Indian origin, becomes G. Ramsay Muir-a mimic man" (114).

In her critical analysis of Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur*, Madhurima Srivastava has drawn attention to the fact that, "The acute conflict between the Oriental and Occidental hemisphere is indubitably a momentous dimension of diasporic sensibility which figures prominently in *The Mystic Masseur* throughout" (169). When the novel opens, Ganesh Ramsumair is a struggling masseur, "at a time when masseurs were ten a penny in Trinidad." (11) Naipaul then proceeds to recount the life of the protagonist to us, from boyhood to manhood.

Ganesh Ramsumair is the son of an Indian immigrant to Trinidad, who seems to be blessed by fortune. He is a representative of the first generation of the Indians in Trinidad to have come under the influence of Western education. The first generation Indians, as a matter of fact, confronted a severe identity crisis. They were exposed to a totally different value system in school, whereas their socializing system had been in their own traditional culture. The need for good education brings Ganesh into contact with the Creole world of the Port of Spain. Ganesh's father Mr. Ramsumair, takes pains, to send Ganesh to Queen's Royal College for admission, "He had Ganesh dressed in a

Khaki suit and a Khaki toupee and may people said, the boy looked like a little sahib" (30).

In the beginning Ganesh felt awkward when he entered the Queen's Royal College. This awkwardness came to him, as the narrator points out, because of his Indian name. The messy character greatly highlighted in the following passage.

"Ganesh never lost the awkwardness. He was so ashamed of his Indian name that for a while, he spread a story that he was really called Gareth. This did him little good. He continued to dress badly, he didn't play games and his accent remained too clearly that of the Indian from the country. He never stopped being a country boy" (20-21).

Through the character of Ganesh, the narrator is expressing his views on the contemporary Trinidadian hero, that is, the politician. According to Bruce King, "*The Music Masseur* is parody *bildungsroman* and a mock models autobiography of a hero of the people"(30). However corresponding to this observation of Bruce king, Yashoda Bhat's remarks sound more appropriate:

"It (The Mystic Masseur) in an anti-*bildungsroman* of the politics of the Third world, illustrative of Naipaul's technique of both imitating the Western models and parodying and subverting them. They portray the authentic reality of the post colonial Trinidad."

The way Ganesh spreads a story that his name is really Gareth and not Ganesh shows how tenacious he is to employ crusade methods to realize his goal. His career is built on his own efforts. He is, in the opinion of William Walsh "dutiful, devious, unscrupulous each where it is necessary to give this greatness a chance to shine out."

His father's death forces his return to fourways. Ganesh is happy to get away from Port of Spain. "He had spent five years there but he had never become used to it, or felt part of it. It was too big, too noisy, too alien." (31) Even as a teacher in Port of Spain, he had been vulnerable to the comment made by his Creole colleagues, "This teaching is an art, but it has all sorts of people, who think, they could come up from the cane-field and start teaching in Port of Spain" (26) and this remark coincides with the news of his father's death which makes him turn his back on Port of Spain for the next twelve years. He is not successful and, therefore, he resigns his position for a life of idleness. His father bequeaths him some land and royalties from an oil company which frees him from the need to work, "So he plays no part in the life of the village, seeing in his detachment the proof that he is not apart from something big."

When Ganesh attends his father's funeral, he meets his aunt, who is nicknamed as "the Great Belcher." She not only organizes everything but also bears the entire expense of the cremation. She has a strong influence on Ganesh and is the first person to convince Ganesh that he has the potentials of the mystic. She says "Ganesh you have the power-I could see it in your hands, your eyes, in the shape of your head" (116). She is the principal organizer of Ganesh's marriage. After the death of his father, Ganesh becomes a regular visitor and diner at Ramlogan, an unpleasant owner of a rum shop, and gets married to his daughter Leela. After his marriage Ganesh moves to Fuente Grove to live in the house he gets as dowry from Ramlogan. Ramlogan's dowry seems

providential. It is another remarkable coincidence that gives Ganesh fresh evidence that big things are ahead of him.

According to R.S. Pathak, "Wife beating has a social sanction here' and it is evident from the following episode which took place on the day after Ganesh's marriage and may be taken to provide an apt prelude to his married life:

"Leela continued to cry and Ganesh loosened his leather belt and beat her. She cried out, Oh God! Oh God! He go kill me today self!"

"It was their first beating, a formal affair done without anger on Ganesh's part or resentment on Leela's and although it formed no part of the marriage ceremony itself, it meant much to both of them. It meant that they had grown up and become independent."

For more than two years, Fuente Grove proves to be unpromising with Ganesh continuing in his job of masseur, taken up on the advice of his aunt the Great Belcher and Ramlogan. But soon he was disappointed with masseur's trade and the urging of his friend Beharry and wife Leela turn him towards writing books. After producing a book, he said that the book was just a primer, because the people of Trinidad are "Just like children" (94). Ganesh seems to be greatly impressed by his own *Everyman* library. He, in a way, exploits the fact that, he is the author of a book and that he owns a large library to the awe of the people of Trinidad.

"Leela, Ganesh said," the boy want to know how much book it have here."

"Let me see," Leela said . . . 'Four hundred *Everyman*, two hundred *Penguin*-six hundred and one hundred *Reader's* Library, make seven hundred. I think with all the other books it have about fifteen hundred good book here (15) ".

According to Helen Hayward "In *The Mystic Masseur*, Ganesh can be seen as akin to Seepersad in his aspirations to be a writer; this is an aspect of his fraudulence, and he has difficulties in producing enough text to fill even a slim booklet". Much humour is extracted is extracted from the misplaced priorities of his reverential attitude towards the printed words. He further remarks that, "he is more interested in the physical qualities of books than in their content." Ganesh's aspiration to be a writer furnishes Naipaul with an opportunity to expose the absurdity of literary pretensions in the Trinidadian world.

Naipaul dexterously works into the novel a significant aspect of diasporic sensibility, as he underscores Ganesh's attitude to religion, which is attributable to the tolerant stand of Hinduism. As an immigrant, Ganesh is left with no option but to display his secular stance:

"He was no bigot. He took as much interest in Christianity and Islam, as in Hinduisim. In the shrine, the old bedroom, he had pictures of Mary and Jesus, next to Krishna and Vishnu; a crescent and star represented iconoclastic Islam. All the same Good," he said, Christians liked him,

Muslims like him, and Hindus willing as ever to risk prayers to new gods, didn't object." (139).

Ganesh's ultimate prosperity as a politician is unfortunately grounded in his early failures as masseur and a mystic, and as a writer, whose works instead of being wise are meant for exploiting a credulous populace. The way Narayan, Ganesh's political rival, is defeated, shows the manner in which Ganesh has structured his political ideology. In order to hood-wink Narayan, Ganesh's political rival, is defeated, shows the manner in which Ganesh has structured his political ideology. In order to hood-wink Narayan, Ganesh planned to bring a news in the 'Sentinel' that he was "planning the formation of a representative assembly of Trinidad Hindus to be known as Hindu League" (185). This may be taken as Ganesh's first step towards politics.

As Ganesh's fortune rises and he achieves success and prosperity, Leela starts mimicking upper-class respectability which reflects an important aspect of diasporic sensibility. After becoming the president of the Hindu Association, Ganesh contests the election and becomes an M.L.C. He attends a dinner party at the Government House, which reveals how the East Indians attempt to mimic, the upper-class respectability which contradicts their social reality.

Ganesh's experience at the dinner is a torturous one. He is left feeling "alien and uncomfortable" (209) throughout the party. He felt as if he were a boy again, going to the Queen's Royal College for the first time. In this scene Ganesh happens to wear the traditional Indian clothes, - "Dhoti and Kurta and Turban" (207) for the last time.

Soon after dinner party, Ganesh moves to the Port of Spain, where he starts putting on Western clothes. As an M.L.C. he frequently stages walkouts on several occasions and he becomes the most well-known man in Trinidad. Ganesh succeeds in attracting the attention of the Colonial Office, when he ascribes the on-going strike in the Sugar Estate to the Communist and declares his iron will to combat them. Consequently he becomes the representative of the British Government and he starts speaking in defence of the colonial rule and this finally fetches him the title of M.B.E. The novel ends with the final transformation of Ganesh Ramesumair to G. Ramsay Muir.

On the whole the novel is an account of the apotheosis of one man who represents the whole community. *The Mystic Masseur*, charts the progress of the picaroon hero, Ganesh Ramsumair, from an East Indian nonentity, to an unsuccessful masseur, a successful mystic masseur, a radical politician and finally a colonial yes-man. The irony is that Ganesh switches from role to role, from identity to identity in quick succession-he fails as a student, as a teacher, as a writer and as a politician-inventing and reinventing himself time and again, only ruefully realizing that he can not find a secure and permanent position in any of his self-inventions. The series of failures Ganesh undergoes, apart from betraying a sense of frustration a sense of desperation, strongly underscores the crisis of identity and the failure of a quest for identity in diasporic existence which has inexorably obsessed Naipaul all along his novelistic career.

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