

V.S. Naipaul's "The Mystic Masseur": A Study of Post- Colonial

Myth and Reality

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Abstract

The Mystic Masseur is one of the V.S. Naipaul's finest comic creations in which we see immense sensibility, humour, success, politics and endless inventive imagination that have become the hallmarks of the author's genius. It is Naipaul's first novel that depicts the story of the rise of Ganesh Ramsumair, from failed primary teacher and struggling masseur to author, revered mystic and M.B.E. It is a journey memorable for its hilarious and bewildering success through politics. V.S. Naipaul has made the claim that the story of Ganesh Ramsumair is the history of their time. In each step of the career of Ganesh Ramsumair the author has satirized the rise of power of a representative of the country, called Trinidad which was about to achieve its independence from the British colonial rule in 1962. Beneath the muchness and manyness the author traces the romance and realism, imagination and fact of the "rise" and "decline" of Ganesh Ramsumair. The story of the novel is not only the life history of Ganesh Ramsumair; rather it is a story of social and economic life of the Indian islanders. The author shows his alienation and rootlessness of the people migrated from India to Trinidad. Here he puts stress on the importance of imagination for survival. The question is whether the novel The Mystic Masseur depicts the real Trinidad, the question is answered in King's observations in his book. "Those familiar with Trinidadian history should recognize how Naipaul has used local events, characters and such politicians characters and such politicians as Uriah Butler, Albert Gomes, Arthur Cipriani and Naipaul's two uncles, Rudranath and Simbhoonath Capildeo in his novel. Naipaul's early fiction is based on memories of Trinidadian cultural and political life before he left for England in 1950." (King 29) My paper proposes to examine how V.S. Naipaul uses the post-colonial myth and reality in his novel The Mystic Masseur.

Keywords: independence, identity, nonpolitical society, politics, individual, success, Post-Colonial Myth, Reality.

Introduction

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul was born and brought up in Trinidad. He is one of the remarkable West Indian novelist of Indian descent. His famous novels are -1. *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), 2. *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958), 3. *Mignel Street* (1959), 4. *The Mimic Men* (1967), 5. *A House of Mr. Biswas* (1961), 6. *Companion* (1963), 7. *I'm a Free State* (1971), 8. *Guerillas* (1975) 9. *A Bend in the River* (1979), 10. *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), 11. *A Way in the World* (1994). Besides novels he wrote criticism, journalism, autobiography, and travelogue. His works are marked with personal and political freedom. His critical outlook is often very acidic and exposing. He got the Nobel Prize for literature in 2001. *The Mystic Masseur* is his first novel. The novel "*The Mystic Masseur*" is a study of Post-Colonial Myth and Reality. The novel tells a story of a humble man Ganesh Ramsumair, the protagonist in the post-colonial era. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English defines Myth as "a story that originated in ancient times, esp. one concerning the early history of a people or explaining natural events such as the seasons." It is the story of Ganesh Ramsumair from humble beginnings to member of the Legislative Council over whom he can triumph as a champion. Largely self-educated Ganesh is able to establish himself as a masseur and then as a mystic. V.S. Naipaul narrates the story in a clever manner. He introduces a narrator who records the history of Ganesh Ramsumair to distance himself from the actual scene. He acquired a unique intellectual freedom that took him out of his "colonial shell" (Naipaul, 1985, p.12) and enabled him to judge the Caribbean space with "...an enigmatic mixture of nostalgia and patrician disdain." (Bhabha-2001) In the opening sentence of the novel *The Mystic Masseur*, the boy-narrator defines Ganesh's career as a success story: "Later he was to be famous and honoured throughout the South Caribbean; he was to be a hero of the people and after that, a British representative at Lake Success" (p.7). The novel explores the political, economic and social experiences, and various other aspects of Ganesh's life.

Body of the article

V.S. Naipaul's "*The Mystic Masseur*" is an account of a typical aspirant to power and prestige gravitating to politics as the supreme possibility. It is a story of "rise" and "decline" of Ganesh Ramsumair, the protagonist. The story of the novel is set in Trinidad which is one of the group islands together known as West Indies. Trinidad has a mixed population. There are white men who are included the English, the French, the Spanish and the Portuguese settlers. There are also colour people who are chiefly native Africans and Indians whose forefathers came from India to Trinidad

to work as laborers in the sugarcane fields. In this novel Naipaul concerns with the political reality of Trinidad just before and after independence. Independently the novel examines different aspects of the reaction to political independence of the individuals and the group. The novel dramatizes a particular feature of Trinidad in ability to go back to colonial security or to generate national identity. In the novel there is an arrested movement of reality which is not a final assessment of the situation. The novel can be seen as the document to an emerging maturity of vision. It discusses the politics of mutual self-deception which flourishes untended in a nonpolitical society. Such a system gives the impression of self-sufficiency until a crisis reveals its hollowness and unreality. In Trinidad there were no parties, only individuals. Corruption, not unexpected, aroused only amusement and even mild approval.

The novel dramatized the period of transition from colonial rule to self-government. The turbulence of this period is the consequence of the loss of the colonial order. But it is not a political novel in the usual sense of the term. The political background does not become a metaphor for philosophical, psychological and politics as ideology or government by consent does not exist in Trinidad either in fact or in knowledge. Electioneering is viewed in a social context- a form of participation in public life which creates the opportunity for success. Trinidadians had retained a confused racial and cultural memory but no political memory. Whatsoever, in the novel Ganesh Ramsumair, the protagonist, as politicians expresses the Trinidadians' greatest conflict with objective reality. Ganesh comes up against situation to which he must submit. He can only huff and puff at his humiliation as M.L.C., when he is invited to the governor's dinner, but he can't deny it. It is his first experience of cultural shock. The novel, in spite of its claims of objectivity is a subjective account of the island politicians in 1950s. For Ganesh politics has success of a kind. Ganesh as M.B.E. can't forget his political defeat by Indarsingh, the propagator of social induigm.

Obviously Naipaul can't take the novel as a serious realistic statement of accusable offence of a colonial society, but as a superbly humorous blown up of human flaws and fanciful fashions. The novel is a funny book; eccentricity, failure, inefficiency and immaturity are gently mocked. The novel has its setting of in rural Trinidad with Port of Spain providing to stepping stone to the metropolis which is London. London provides the distinct scope which guides the subconscious and conscious thinking of Ganesh and others. The people immersed in physical labour and material existence are content to live circumscribed lives. Naipaul attempts to reconstitute in colonial sense of success in full view of questing and questioning. He presents Ganesh as a man of excellence who knows when it is time to move on. The novel is the history of Ganesh Ramsumair and shows

how he raised from a failed primary teacher, struggling masseur to the author of books, revered mystic, an M.L.AC and an M.B.E. It is truly ironical that a series of failures lunches Ganesh into international eminence. It is his failure as a teacher that turns him into a masseur, and his lack of success with massaging away even ordinary pains that nudges him towards mysticism. What is in his favour, however, is his strange belief in his own genius, no matter how frequent his failures. Ganesh, optimistic visionary aims to transform apparent hopelessness to hope and to point to the inevitable light at the end. Ganesh believes that he was supposed to give up his teaching job at that moment because he was destined to do something far greater in his life. Ganesh has decided to take every chance he is offered to change his career which helps move even deeper in order to attain fame and fortune. Indeed he revolts against *failure*.

The novel tells thereal story of Ganesh Ramsumair belonging to Trinidad. In the character of Ganesh the author has presented the crisis consisting to the problem of reconciling between two conflicting views-i) in Ganesh's early life events happen to him but he made no effort to direct or control the events. He was almost passive in actions. Even he married to Leela Ramloganas her father decided upon her match. During this period Ganesh believed that the success or achievement in life depends on God's will or as destiny prescience. He has found himself as a failure primary school teacher, a masseur and an author. But soon he realized the truth. ii) He realized that the success or achievement in life depends on deliberately planning, and accurately and energetically execution of the plan. From this point of view his success in life has grown. Soon he becomes a successful businessman. Now he moves on the business venture regarding his success as a religious and psychological adviser or a pundit. His fame spreads over the whole of Trinidad. This fame later opens a new vista in his life. In 1946, when the first election was held on this island, he manages to catch his popularity in the island and gets elected as a member of the legislative council. In his new role, he shows himself as a great patriot and a defender of the rights of people of Trinidad. He refuses even to participate in the rituals of the British rulers of the island. He even supports the strike of the sugar-workers, expressing some vague Marxist ideas. Ganesh "asserts his independence of thought again and again, rejecting his superstitious, materialistic and garrulous society" (Kamra 61). However, when he is roughly handled by the crowd, his sympathies turn in the opposite direction; as a consequence, he adopts the clothes and attitudes of the Britishers. When he is no longer an elected member of the Legislative Council, he is nominated to that body and afterwards receives the title of M.B.E. Finally he appears in England under the name of G. Ramsay Muir. Ganesh rejects his Indian name and adopts an English name to go with his political career. There he transforms so thoroughly from the Caribbean Ganesh Ramsumair to G. Ramsay Muir

that he becomes "...a complete colonial even more Philistine than the white," (Naipaul.1969, p89) He rejects his Indian culture and allows him to fully embrace the British culture because that culture would not earn him the money that he was making as a politician. Soon he becomes a true politician fully ensconced in the British culture. "Here Naipaul employs almost Swiftian irony to belittle Ganesh's assumption of a new national identity" In each step of his career Naipaul satirizes the rise to power of a representative of the people in a country which is about to achieve its independence from British rule. In the novel V.S. Naipaul shares his own experiences as an Indian in the Caribbean island, a Caribbean in England and a nomadic intellectual in the post-colonial world.

While the others characters of the novel influence Ganesh's change greatly, the transformation of his character is best shown through Ganesh himself. Ganesh Ramsumair is a product of Indian Hindu Tradition in which he was raised and the western values he learns in his student life at Queen's royal collage. He moves from the Indian culture to the British culture and changes himself according to the circumstances, forced him to change. He has been formally educated to only a low level; but he has read widely and by making use of this wide reading, he is able to establish himself in his later life. Charda B. Joshi comments on the existential condition of Ganesh: "Ganesh's sense of displacement and his groping towards a solution are presented with full understanding of his predicament, caught as he is between an Indian past and Creole present. To see Ganesh merely as a character in a face does not quite do justice to the author's treatment." (1994:116-117) throughout the novel Ganesh reveals alertness to the demand of the educated and the uneducated. This is shown in his skill with which he manipulates people and events to his advantage in the novel. Fortunately or coincidentally he has become successful as a mystic. He is regarded as "the only true mystic in the island." V.S. Naipaul employs a characteristic bathetic humour of foreground how the "fullness" of the stereotype is always conditioned by a "lack". The journey of Ganesh's life is the journey from socio-cultural self to the real self that has been set in the background of the reality of life. Ganesh's "struggle for existence" teaches us amidst many difficulties and failure one should have positive outlook towards the future and venture for the next with optimism and visionary power. Naipaul's work is very relevant in the world in which we all are facing complexities.

Conclusion

V.S. Naipaul's intention, therefore, is probably to tell the world about the reality. He has merely presented the world of Trinidad that he saw and knew to be real; a world which he saw to be laced

with nihilistic tendencies. In *The Mystic Masseur* Ganesh seems to move between two cultures- Indian and Western; he moves from the Indian culture to the British culture. Cultural background of the novel is equally lively, based on much of the time on Naipaul's first hand knowledge of how East Indians lived in Trinidad. The novel records the failure and highlights the success in Ganesh's life, and tells us how Ganesh changes throughout the novel. Each time that Ganesh moves to a different career in his life, marks a shift in the socio-culture of Trinidad. Ganesh struggles to find his place in the economical establishment in Trinidad. Ganesh serves as representation of cotemporary life in Trinidad. While we see the changes Ganesh undergone we realize more and more that the chances were time's demand. Ganesh ultimately was able to overcome all hurdles of his life. Naipaul also offers Ganesh sympathy and admires him for his persistence to rise above his situations. Ganesh's wife Leela is seen as a major influence on his life throughout the novel. The narrator and the other characters in the novel served as a background on which Ganesh could be evaluated and influenced.

Methodology: The work is mainly based on secondary source of information, such as published documents, books, review, autobiography, journal, critiques etc. My methodology in this paper is partly structuralist and partly post-structuralist, as I approach narratives first to construct and classify and then deconstruct them. In the process, I do not simply define the concept but also discuss how it deviates from other forms of narrative. The major purpose of my paper is description of the state of affairs as it exists from the novel "*The Mystic Masseur*" written by V.S. Naipaul. My approach is primarily in the manner in which the novel reflects the dramatic evaluation of Ganesh Ramsumair, the protagonist in the post-colonial point of view. The primary text for my paper is Naipaul, V.S. *The Mystic Masseur*. London: Picador, 2002. Print. Only the page numbers of these editions have been mentioned here.

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