
Social Political Alienation in The Mystic masseur The suffrage of Elvira and The Mimic men

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Abstract:

V.S.Naipaul has been criticized for concerning himself only lightly with the racial problem of the West Indies. But Naipaul sees the problem differently: ... to see the attenuation of the culture of my childhood as the result of a dramatic confrontation of opposed worlds would be to distort the reality. To me, the worlds were juxtaposed and mutually exclusive. One gradually contracted. It had to; it fed only on memories, and its completeness was only apparent. It was yielding not to attack but to a type of seepage from the other."¹

The dissatisfaction of the West Indians arises from the destruction of culture in Naipaul's novels. In *The Mystic Masseur*, *The Suffrage of Elvira* and *The Mimic Men* Naipaul examines the Hindu society in Trinidad loses the rituals that it had brought from India. The feeling of dislocation is universalized in these novels. The characters attempt to escape the chaos. For them, genuine self-knowledge is only possible through acknowledging their failure. Indeed, the irony that dominates these novels is the condition of turning the protagonists into confessional archetypes.

In these novels, Naipaul concerns himself with the political reality of Trinidad just before and after independence. His depiction of Trinidadian politics is amusing. His method is to invert and treat ironically what influences and concerns him. Naipaul's reminiscences help to create a friendly atmosphere as he reaches out to people of divergent political, social, and religious positions.

The Mystic Masseur (1957) is Naipaul's first published novel. It presents the picture of West Indian society and its crisis-arid challenges more systematically. As M.K.Naik points out, "Naipaul's main aim in *The Mystic Masseur* seems to be to exploit the comic absurdity in the lives of the transplanted Indians in the West Indies."² The novel describes the successful life story of Ganesh Ramsumair, a hero of the people. At the novel's opening, a young boy, the narrator of the story, is taken to visit him. "Later, he was to be famous and honored throughout the South Caribbean; he was to be a hero of the people and, after that, a British representative at Lake Success. But when I first met him, he was still a struggling masseur at a time when masseurs were a penny in Trinidad."³ This gives a glance that Ganesh rose to fame in Trinidad from a struggling masseur to a national figure. His career

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is entirely made up of his efforts - "dutiful, devious, unscrupulous -each where it is necessary - to give this greatness a chance to shine out."⁴

Firstly, the novel presents the significant problems of most of Naipaul's work, i.e., the duality of the East Indian's experience in Trinidad. The second part of the text depicts Ganesh's first encounter with the urban world, i.e., Port of Spain. The safety and identity granted to him by the country district and his Hinduism give way to insecurity and a threatened loss of identity in the city.

The alienation created by his confrontation with the urban center contrasts with his people's attempts to revive the rituals of their former Indian world, that is, to be "good" Trinidadians yet to remain faithful to their Indian tradition. The point is made when the college Principal ridicules Ganesh for disturbing a class on his return from being initiated into Brahmanism. The contradiction of these two worlds exists not only at the level of mythology but also at the level of social practice.

The third movement of the text begins when Ganesh, unable to cope with the urban world, returns to the countryside and meets Mr Stewart, an Englishman, who advises him to find the "spiritual rhythm" of his life. Stewart's ideas have a significant influence on him.

Narayan's attack helps Ganesh to take up politics. His first step towards politics is forming a representative assembly of Trinidad Hindus. This paves the way for his successful emergence as an MLC in the Island elections. Even as an MLC, he shrinks into himself when venturing into the alien world of Port of Spain. At the Governor's dinner, he finds the whole ritual mortifying: "The meal was a torture to Ganesh. He felt alien and uncomfortable. He grew sulkier and sulkier and refused all the courses. He felt as if he were a boy again going to the Queen's Royal College for the first time" (p.209). Later, Ganesh found Port of Spain a pleasant place for an MLC. He bought more books on political theory and had long discussions with Indar Singh. He became successful as a politician by the grace of Providence. He rose to fame. "But by this time, Ganesh was a public figure of great importance. He was always in the papers; he was constantly photographedEverything he did or said was News" (p.207). He introduced 'walk-out'. He was described as an essential political leader by the Colonial Office report on Trinidad.

Finally, what is significant in the structural design of *The Mystic Masseur* is the notion of 'discovering' the English language and the English book. Manjit Inder Singh observes, "The acquisition of literacy through the colonizer's language becomes a technique to conquer the empty spots, the vacuum in the colony that only waits to be filled by the intelligent mimic like Ganesh."⁵

In *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958), Naipaul highlights the social, political, and racial prejudices in the then-West Indian society. *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Suffrage of Elvira* have a setting in rural Trinidad. The

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Suffrage of Elvira has been described as "the most conventionally plotted of all Naipaul's novels."⁶ It dramatizes the political awakening in the village of Elvira. It studies the functioning of the promising political system in the developing Elvira. Many critics regarded *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Suffrage of Elvira* as social comedies. Here, Naipaul presents his socio-political understanding of the "crazily mixed up" societies of the West Indies, which he can demonstrate in the event of Elvira's second general election after independence in 1950: "Things were crazily mixed up in Elvira. Everybody, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, owned a Bible, ... the Hindus and Muslims celebrated Christmas and Easter... Everybody celebrated the Muslim festival..."⁷ He describes the degree of disorder with oblique understatement in these lines. The same kind of disorder can be seen in *The Mystic Masseur*. As a rich and respected mystic, Ganesh cannot seek how his universalizing instincts lay the groundwork for his ultimate fraudulence. "He was not a bigot. He took as much interest in Christianity and Islam as in Hinduism. In the shrine, he had pictures of Mary and Jesus next to Krishna and Vishnu, a crescent and star representing iconoclastic Islam. "All the same, God. He said." {*The Mystic Masseur*, p. 139) These are the breakdown of religious values in those societies.

As in *The Mystic Masseur*, Naipaul also Naipaul also exposes the text's major conflict through a central image. On the wall of "the big drawing room" of Chittaranjan's home, where the Indian leaders have gathered for the first time to develop an election strategy, there appears "a large framed picture of the Round Table Conference with King George V and Mahatma sitting together, ... the picture made Harbans' easier. He had a picture like that in his drawing-room in Port of Spain ..." (p.31) This picture, like the one in Ganesh's hut, becomes the novel's central controlling device. Selwyn Cudjoe points out: "the image of the Round Table Conference is mentioned at strategic moments during the Suffrage of Elvira, serving to demonstrate the concerns militating against the development of the East Indian community in Trinidad."⁸ The Indians in Trinidad, like those in India, attempted to solve their problems through elections.

Peggy Nightingale's discussion of the political background of this novel refers to the complaint of Naipaul's uncle "that many elements of Harbans story are based on his election campaign." She also mentions the sociological and historical studies that deal with the relation between "the structures of the Indian community" and East Indian politics in Trinidad, which help to explain "the belief that everybody in the society is pursuing the interest of his own family" as well as his interest, to the exclusion of the "outsider."⁹

Naipaul also presents many social elements along with main political themes. They shed significant light on the ways and manners of people, making Elvira a 'funny world.' People, in general, were unenlightened and orthodox and

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had a profound belief in obeah and magic, Jharay, and 'spiritual fumigation.' "Nearly everybody else in Elvira had some experience of the supernatural" (p.72). Superstition, another heritage of slavery, is another method used to control votes when Foam uses five dead black puppies to plan on the superstitions of the voters of Corboda and to win back their votes from two American Jehovah's Witness ladies, who have persuaded them not to vote. "It is simply a matter of black magic out doing white magic in terrifying the people"¹⁰ "The dog cancels out the witnesses" (p. 133), as Chittaranjan puts it. All these clearly showed his attitude to supernatural ghosts and the superstition of the people, but there can be no doubt that Naipaul believes firmly in the ability of the past to haunt and control the present" (Boxil, p.33).

The concluding paragraph of the novel sums up the nature of the political game:- "So, Harbans won the election, and the insurance company lost a Jaguar, Chittaranjan lost a son-in-law, and Dhaniram lost a daughter-in-law. Elvira lost Lorkhoor, and Lorkhoor won a reputation. Elvira lost Mr Cuffy, and Preacher lost his deposit." (p.240) Naipaul sees the desire for power as the most significant human motivation.

Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* (1967) marks a critical phase in his fictional career. The novel is significant for various reasons. N.Rama Devi says that "it is perhaps the clearest expression of the themes that shape Naipaul's novels, namely, the escape of the third world into fantasy on being poverty-stricken and isolated on the fringes of power, the sprouting up of various political and religious movements which, though ineffective, offer a sense of drama and empty excitement, finally ending up in disorder, politics dominated by appeals to race and color, the absence of real power, myths, culture or competence which have resulted in a tendency to mimic and a feeling of homelessness and identity crisis."¹¹ *The Mimic Men* also seems to provide a reply to criticism that charges Naipaul with being an exponent of the metropolitan values and ideologies, "The Mimic Men marks the end of an absorption with his (Naipaul's) personal homelessness, a final release from a barren cycle of events"¹² as Naipaul in this novel seems to be concerned with the rootlessness and placelessness of a typical modern man, let alone a colonial individual.

The form Naipaul chose for this novel is that of a fictional autobiography. The putative author is Ranjit Kripalsingh or Ralph Ranjit.

Kripalsingh, as he prefers to be known, is the only son of a Hindu family on the fictional Caribbean island of Isabella. He is a man with an uneasy childhood, a disturbed youth, a broken marriage, and a failed political career behind him. He now sits writing his memoirs in a room in a suburban London hotel. He reveals himself as a man with a psychological wound that makes him incapable of love and intimacy and completely selfish; he is incapable of forming meaningful or

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lasting relationships. "He has, too, a passion for order and coherence which finally defines itself as an interest in history and which impels him to write his personal history in a search for order and meaning in the apparent chaos and disorder of his life."¹³

The source for this novel can be traced to his father's Gurudeva. The first part of Gurudeva reveals Seepersad Naipaul's reverence for traditional beliefs of rural life, and the second part is his ambivalence regarding changing religious and cultural attitudes through various characters. Even Gurudeva, "turning satirist himself, says V.S.Naipaul, "begins to approximate to his creator; at the end, abandoned by wife and girlfriend and left alone, he is a kind of Brahmin, an upholder of what remains of old values, but powerless ("Foreword"). This convergence continues in fictive transformation in V.S.Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*, in which the narrator's father takes the name Gurudeva when he leaves his family and job to lead a protest movement of people with low incomes.

Naipaul depicts political confusion and corruption in the society. The political situation reveals the growing alienation between the protagonist and society. The narrator/protagonist of *The Mystic Masseur* directs his irony at Ganesh as an approved representative of his society. Harbans is similarly aware of a gap between his society and himself, which the narrator does not further explore, for the novel is to present democracy in practice. Kripalsingh, in *The Mimic Men*, realizes that though his political career in Isabella has ended, life as a writer offers different satisfaction. Shashi Kamra aptly remarks that 'in Naipaul's novels, man lives in fear of change in significance and alienation, and the characters attempt to escape into an ideal static vision of the self.'¹⁴ Ganesh, Harbans, and Ralph ultimately fail because their own reality does not support their symbolic acts. The final responsibility for order lies with the individual, not the society: 'The chaos lies all within' (p.230). The escape is finally not from society but from the self. *The Mimic Men* ends more hopefully because Singh has lost hope in society and has managed to salvage himself. Naipaul is primarily interested in developing Singh's personality as he wrestles with the difficulty of finding reality, conditioned as he has been to settle for mimicry.

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