

# Contextualising Marginalisation and its Implications in V.S. Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur*

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## Abstract

This paper adopts V.S. Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur* as a point of reference to analyse the socio-culturally marginalised position of the displaced but aspirational protagonist. The narrative focusses on the displaced people who are trying to survive and find their identity. The main character, Ganesh, represents a transplanted East Indian community that is in a capitalist colonial society and is spiritually stagnant due to being cut off from its roots. The lives of the East Indians in Trinidad are the main subject of the novel. The absence of socio-political reality hindered the marginalised from exercising political freedom and governing democratic societies after independence. This resulted in centuries of imperial domination over the region, shattering people's intellectual, physical, and economic foundations.

**Keywords:** identity, survival, postcolonial, marginalisation

V.S. Naipaul is one of the most influential English authors of post-war generation from the West Indian literary canon. His status as an Indian diaspora postcolonial writer is distinct. He is still a living, breathing human being on this planet. It is imperative to conclude from a close reading of his works that his primary interest is the universal human plight of the socio-culturally shattered, rootless, and fragmented figure. Possessing a strong personal progressive vision, he has concentrated on the shortcomings of Third World civilisations that are being torn from their cultural traditions. His writings address the issue of immigrants from the Third World and show him to be an investigator of postcolonial histories and communities.

The tone and melody of the transplanted marginalised man's battle for existence and identity construction are whispered about in postcolonial literature. In the dislocated Caribbean World, the concept of anchoring is emphasised in an alienated soul for self-discovery. Ganesh, the protagonist, is a displaced person whose attempts

to integrate into the new society are adorned by *The Mystic Masseur*. He is a self-made man who possesses the potential and useful qualities needed to forge an identity and a life through perseverance. Ganesh is an aspirational man who dreams of power, existence, and survival. He uses the Fuente Grove's intellectual and physical backwardness to his advantage to become a political hero.

The novel tells the tale of a mediocre person's accomplishment in a world gone crazy. Tricks and a practical attitude are qualities that Ganesh embodies and are necessary for living in the Caribbean world's picaroon society, which is defined as "never setting into any pattern always retaining the atmosphere of the camp" (58). On the Caribbean islands, when slavery took hold of people's minds, it was a time of profound change. They were confused individuals who were a part of a warped civilisation. The yearning to construct identity and life is shared by such socially inferior, doubtful, silly, culturally degraded, and individually divided figures as Ganesh.

The protagonist is a masseur and a mystic, as implied by the title *The Mystic Masseur*. He is an aspirational and resourceful agent who shifts into several roles and professions to survive in the socio-culturally disrupted land. *The Mystic Masseur*, according to Landeg White, is "written primarily to illustrate a thesis with the character chosen to support a comic but intellectual framework" (66). It is almost impossible to establish self-existence in the socially complex and obscure world of the colonised Caribbean, but Ganesh makes it happen by transitioning into politics. Though Naipaul ultimately leaves the reader with little doubt that Ganesh Ramsumair is a charlatan, the double-edged ironic approach compels one to see him as both hero and villain. *The Mystic Masseur* charts the progress of the picaroon hero, Ganesh Ramsumair, from East Indian nonentity, to unsuccessful masseur, successful 'mystic masseur,' radical politician, and finally colonial yes-man.

In *The Mystic Masseur*, Fuente Grove, Port of Spain, Trinidad, and a 1946 political scenario serve as the setting. Ganesh, a representative of the picaroon society, was deeply affected by the incident at school because he is an East Indian. The displaced figure preferred to forget what happened the next day when he was taken to school, where the old boys laughed and he felt uneasy in his khaki-suit even though he had not worn the khaki topee. Then, in the principal's office, his father was seen making gestures with his umbrella and white cap, saying, "The English principal was patient at first, firm, and finally irritated; the old man was furious and muttering" (99). What more

can Ganesh do, though? For his survival, he must put up with and tolerate such repulsive statements about his social inferiority. He gives himself over to time and place after realising his limitations.

Ganesh is acutely conscious of his altered surroundings. the same that he turns to his side and succeeds with. He spent four years as a student at Queen's Royal College. His awkwardness - his East Indian attire and rustic ways - is made fun of at the campus. His marginal position has greatly humiliated him: "He was so ashamed of his Indian name that he spread a story that he was really called Gareth for a while" (20). He tries his hand at teaching but, regrettably, fails, and he ends up riding his bike aimlessly while surviving off the oil royalties his father left for him after his death. He then founds an institute of culture. Mr. Stewart, a billionaire British man seeking enlightenment, is the one who truly presents Ganesh as a mystic. He marries Leela, Ramlogan's daughter. He has a lot of prospects due to the dowry.

Ganesh's life grew more difficult, and to survive, he began writing books. His friend Beharry, the Great Belcher, Leela, and his aunt all supported his choice to publish the book. In his autobiography *The Years of Guilt*, Ganesh writes, "Everything happens for the best. If, for instance, my first volume had been a success it is likely that I would have become a mere theologian, writing endless glosses on the Hindu scriptures. As it was, I found my true path" (112). Ganesh shares with the readers his experience as a writer. His understanding of Hindu philosophy was expanded through reading the Gita. He is moved by the spiritual teachings and makes the creative and spiritual decision to build a Hindu temple. His desire to become a pundit was sparked by his philosophical and religious zeal. Both Leela and the Great Belcher feed the spirit. There was no one left who could carry out and transmit the Hindu rituals after his father's passing. She offers him papers on the palm strips and books in Hindi and Sanskrit. He uses his supernatural abilities to heal Hector, the black youngster. The news was circulated by the neighbourhood news source, the Niggeram, which was a quick, nearly prescient news source.

As the Niggeram spread the word overseas, Ganesh's achievements were amplified and his abilities elevated to Olympian levels. The mystic Ganesh began healing many people. He skilfully handles every kind of issue, even spiritual ones. He becomes well-known with his book *101 Questions and Answers about the Hindu Religion*. *The Trinidad Guide* brings him wealth. In addition to Hinduism, Ganesh spoke with assurance about

Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. One Hindu industrialist supports Ganesh for spreading the knowledge of Hindu culture on the island.

*The Mystic Masseur* narrates the rise of politics on the Islands. Electioneering has been thought by him as a scope to establish his existence, an ideology of power amidst chaos and disorder. Politics was thought as way to survival during the period of great transition in the Creole community after the Second World War. Ganesh is alienated in the hostile and faceless society. Hence opportunity, brain-working and planning are essential for existence. In the hostile environment Ganesh feels trapped and helpless. Only London, the capital of the world was thought as a resting place by the immigrants.

All the characters that matter in Naipaul's novels have the experience of labouring for the benefit of another, of necessity, being at the losing end. The people immersed in physical labour and material existence, the world of challenges for removed, are content to live their circumscribed lives requiring nothing of themselves or their surrounding; the minimum level of survival becoming the maximum limit of possibility. Ganesh is more conscious of his dislocation. Hence becomes a trickster. It is a need of such transplanted moment. He wears the Indian attire of dhoti, koortah and turban, otherwise appears a British citizen in Western clothes.

The mimic nature of the socio-culturally exiled figures is authentically depicted by the narrator at the time of the dinner of the newly elected members of the Legislative Council. The West Indian, Creole world is multiracial society - the East Indian indentured labourers, the Negroes and the Caribbeans. It is socially governed by slave mentality of the mimics and marginals. The East Indian is aspired to form identity to come to terms with the Negro-Creole world in Trinidad, or with the East Indian world in Trinidad, or with the greyness of English life, or with life in India itself, where he went in search of his root.

Aspiration for climbing the ladders of success or existence, like Ganesh, becomes the life ideology of the derelict man in derelict land. For success he does not hesitate to practice the British culture and language - English. To his wife he says, "Leefa, is a high time we realize that we living in a British country and I think we shouldn't be shame to talk the people language good" (71). The culturally rootless Ganesh Ramsumair, ashamed of his Indian name, adopts the colonial culture by calling himself G. Ramsay Muir and thus creates his new mimic, identity. The

headmaster's remark "... the purpose of this school is to form, not to inform" (121) at Ganesh focuses on the colonial strategy of education system to convert the immigrants to colonial culture. The foundation and functioning of the colonial education system that aims at to set out to create a middle class serving as an agency of imperialist economy and administration and through it, to initiate social change through a process of differentiation.

The aspired protagonist is well-versed with social and economic backwardness and feels humiliated when it becomes social reality. His heart was broken into pieces when a lady on the railway station in Port of Spain ridiculed at his father's "dhoti koortah, white cap and unfurled umbrella" (15). To come out of the predicament he anglicized himself as 'Gareth' at his stay in Queen's Royal college. G. Ramsay Muir too is a part of the ideology of existence and identity in the multi-dimensional milieu at the Creole- world. His leaving the job of teacher from the Port of Spain School and turning back to masseur, to mystic masseur by writing on Hindu religious philosophy, throwing himself into taxi business, his marriage to Leela and opening of a modern restaurant for her all are ways to survival, identity, and existence. His victorious start in the political career has created his identity as colonial yes-man.

An exiled figure like Ganesh struggles to anchor himself, obsessed with the ideology of the root he tries to create meaning out of disorder and meaninglessness by hook or crook. Ganesh shows an awareness of the world, intelligence, sense of humour and endlessly inventive and sustaining imagination. He has the knowledge of various fields - religion, psychology, philosophy, history, literature, and writing. His success is of great value in the dull uncreative milieu of the Fuente Grove, Trinidad, where socio-cultural-ethnic values are on stake. Paradoxically Ganesh rises himself from masseur to radical politician, M.L.C. and finally M.B.E. Ganesh nurtures his hopes in the sterile environment.

*The Mystic Masseur* is a discourse of existence of a marginalized figure in the period of transition. He used tricks for existence in the picaroon and nomadic society. In an alienated surrounding he labours hard and creates glamour out of gloom. He enjoys the state of an elite class when appointed by the British Government as M.B.E. to look after and pave colonial thoughts in the colonies. Ganesh is a typical Picaro in several ways: his life is a series of episodes, in which he dons and doffs roles according to circumstances.

The immigrants from the Third World are idealised people who want to send their kids to school. Ganesh's father also enrolled him in school. Ganesh uses the material environment that is changing quickly to disguise himself and adapts. He tells his wife, "There are going to be great things in Fuente Grove. Regarding the existential philosophy of Ganesh, the mystic masseur, his transition from masseur to mystic to M.L.C. may have elements of the force about it, but the episode that initiates Ganesh's mystic status has nothing farcical about it; rather, Ganesh devotes himself to his first case with seriousness and dedication.

The Caribbean society is made of the peripheral figures. They are men without power, possession, education, and are mimics whose prospects are conditioned to the colonial situation with the socio-cultural-linguistic obstacles. Hence survival becomes the primary aim of the wanderer. Ganesh's wit and virtues are positively highlighted by the boy narrator. Ganesh makes use of the native psyche for his success by transforming the dull, disillusioned social milieu into decorative one. The idea of anchoring gets foregrounded in the mind of an exiled figure, particularly in the dislocated world. An individual of such world pines for self-discovery.

The society is a materialist immigrant society, continually growing and changing, never settling into any pattern, always retaining the atmosphere of the camp, not an expanding society but a colonial society ruled autocratically if benevolently. Ganesh belongs to the first generation of the East Indian immigrant community. These transplanted figures deprived of socio-ethnic values, face identity crisis. His whole career is shaped by his relationship not just because they limit his opportunities but because he depends on their inspiration. While climbing on the ladder of success G. Ramsay Muir surrenders himself to socio-cultural mimicry, and run after 'whiteness' which is a collective madness of the transplanted societies. The young narrator says, "The history of Ganesh is in a way history of our times" (18). Dislocation, mimicry, and artificiality result in cultural bankruptcy that produces fragmentation on individual and social level. *The Mystic Masseur* is an allegory of the history of the Hindu community in Trinidad. It is narratives of man's survival, identity formation and existence in the squalor and poverty-stricken atmosphere. It is hard for the East Indian Hindus because at their orthodox, ignorant and Brahminical ways to survive in derelict, dull Creole world of nothingness.

The Caribbean islands in the fictional world of Naipaul are featured with racial and social complexities as

people of different races, language, colours, and cultures are brought as indentured labourers. Due to multiculturalism and cultural colonization the immigrant communities have forgotten their origin and accumulate themselves with European cultures and have become the mimic figures. The cultural disintegration makes them fragmented. The use of Hindi is discarded from the East Indians' day to day life and its place is taken by English. English becomes the language of their rituals. The colonized man's life is featured with linguistic and cultural ambiguity. He lives in the milieu and moment of rejection. In the racially divided society the East Indians, Negroes, Muslims and Chinese celebrate the Hindu festival of Light, Deepawali and also the Muslim festival of Hussein and the colonizers' Christmas.

Ganesh has brought the successful combination of Eastern spiritualism and Western learning in his profession of masseur. Besides Hinduism his interest in Islam and Christianity grows. His room is decorated with the portraits of Merry, Jesus, a crescent and a star-symbols of Islam, besides Lord Krishna and Vishnu. Beharry, Suruj and Poppa advise him to stop wearing trousers, shirts and vests instead of dhoti, koortah and turban as a mystic masseur. Paradoxically Ganesh anglicizes himself as G.Ramsay Muir and wears the modern English clothes when he visits the Registrar General's Office in Port of Spain. *The Mystic Masseur* narrates the parables of immigrant communities' marginalized conditions in the Caribbean islands.

The forced migration and indentured labour by the imperial power-centre have brought fractured and fragmented consciousness among Third World colonized communities. The transplantations of the people resulted into alienation, rootlessness, and socio-cultural milieu. Modern colonialism colonizes minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces within the colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once for all. In the process it helps to generalize the concept of the modern West from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category. The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside, in structures and in minds. Imperial school education had brought duality in the colonized and he suffered from fractured and fragmented consciousness.

The imperial vision basically concentrates on "de-culturation" of the oppressed and turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. The socio-cultural-ethnic-political inferiority myth in the colonies is aptly carved by Bhabha: "Colonial power produces the colonized as a fixed reality which is at once a

‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible” (111). The basic aim of the coloniser is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types based on race origin. Perhaps powerlessness leaves the Third World, the ex-colonial world, with no choice but to imitate those systems offered to or forced on it by the major powers. Most Third World politicians are trapped in the concept of a world proposed by those who rule it. It resembles a form of narrative in which the productivity and circulation of subjects and signs are bound in a reformed and recognisable reality.

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