

A Study of the Autobiographical Elements in V. S. Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur*

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In the first phase of his writing, Naipaul has extensively and meaningfully made use of his personal experiences as a boy and adolescent in West Indian society. In V. S. Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) we shall see how Naipaul has represented his personal experience in his writings. We have to bear in mind that the representation of personal experience is always enriched by some form of a tone, i.e. the writer's attitude to the experience. It is clear that Naipaul has refused the traditional base of the society and adopted some kind of attitude which is ironical or sarcastic or there may be also a touch of rebellion and protest. Naipaul organizes his autobiographical material in a chronological and intelligible manner. Helen Hayward comments: "The autobiographical element forms a substantial component of Naipaul's output, appearing not only in explicitly autobiographical works, but also in fiction and travel books" (6). Naipaul's memories of his whole life experiences are covered in the autobiographical material, represented in his writings. This paper will concentrate on such extensive autobiographical elements, which are found in V. S. Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur*.

To begin with, *The Mystic Masseur* is V. S. Naipaul's first published novel. It is a dramatic fictional biography in which the autobiographical elements are blended in a way that, Ganesh, the protagonist of the novel, represents events and actions that are real in the life of both Naipaul and his father. The boy-narrator of the novel, an admirer of Ganesh, seems to play no

role in the story. Naipaul uses him as a first narrative technique, in which the composition appears coherent and developed. The boy-narrator is also reminiscent of the boy-narrator of

Miguel Street:

But one who adopts the posture of a biographer, or mock-biographer, as Kenneth Ramchand describes him. Both the tone and the fact that the narrator's source material is primarily made up of the protagonist's autobiography and self-promotional publications immediately establishes the satirical cast of *The Mystic Masseur*. (Mustafa Naipaul, 44).

The novel is set in Trinidad and it highlights Ganesh's success chronologically, showing his ostensibly struggle after accomplishing his study at Queen's Royal College, a Christian school in Port of Spain, where Naipaul himself studied before travelling to England. Through Ganesh, Naipaul has depicted his dislike of the thread ceremony, which was held during the holidays of his family, because he was afraid of being extremely embarrassed to face his schoolmates at the college with a shaven head. At the College, Naipaul himself, as other Hindu migrant students, was subject to the same humiliations that Ganesh is experiencing in the novel: "But the episode is significant. His head was still practically bald when he went back to school, and the boys laughed so much that the principal called him and said, 'Ramsumair, you are creating a disturbance in the school. Wear something on your head'" (*MM* 11). Naipaul expressed the same personal experience through Anand in *A House for Mr. Biswas* that "during the long holidays... Anand, shaved and thoroughly Brahmin, but ashamed of showing his bald head, stayed in Port of Spain" (*HMB* 404), and "no boy with a shaved head could go to a predominantly Christian school" (*HMB* 403).

In most cases, Naipaul's description of those rituals is satirical in a way that they seem to lack spiritual meaning. Ganesh failed as a pundit but to let people believe in him as a religious

man: “It was a strain for him to talk correctly and the woman noted, with obvious satisfaction, that he was moving his lips silently before every sentence, as though he were mumbling a prayer” (MM 114). Similarly, Anand told his father that “he was unable to offer up the usual prayers with sincerity, since the words had become meaningless” (HMB 403). Mr. Biswas is sarcastic and ironical that when he was learning to be a pundit, “Mechanically he cleaned the images, the lines and indentations of which were black or cream, with sandalwood paste; it was easier to clean the small smooth pebbles, whose significance had not yet been explained to him (HMB 52). Naipaul shares Seepersad’s attitude of such rituals. This is clearly expressed in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, in which Anand’s most “male cousins had undergone the Brahminical initiation, and though Anand shared Mr. Biswas’s distaste for religious ritual, he was immediately attracted by this ceremony” (HMB 403). In this connection, Naipaul’s “depictions of casual, almost ritualistic violence in his writings grew not on his own behavior, but on what he had observed during his childhood” (French 17).

Naipaul reflects his understanding of the East Indian community in *The Mystic Masseur*, which spans nearly twenty-five years (1929-54) of the first migrant generation of the East Indians, concerning the problems of “arranged marriages, the inevitability of one’s *karma* or fate, tradition versus modernity, and the act of writing as a means of appropriating one’s reality” (Cudjoe 37).

Naipaul studied at Queen’s Royal College, where for the first time in his life he discovered his marginality as an Indian. At the College, Naipaul became ashamed of his cultural background and he tried to hide his Indian identity as well. This is expressed through Ganesh, who, like Naipaul, was sent to study at the Queen’s Royal College for four years: “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 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" (MM 10-11). At the end Ganesh, like Naipaul, could not stand it in Trinidad and travelled to London, to the center which he was searching for. In London, Ganesh is ashamed of his Indian name, which he changes from "Ganesh Ramsumair" to "G. Ramsay Muir" (MM 208).

Ganesh starts his career as a teacher, which he cannot cope with. He returns to his village after the death of his father and unsuccessfully tries his luck as a pundit. This incident reminds us of Seepersad's father's funeral, which Naipaul depicts clearly in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. In fact, Naipaul was not able to visit his ailing father or to attend his funeral in 1953. Naipaul's depiction is considered as a wish that he had been able to visit his dying father or to attend the funeral. This wish has been also recorded in a passage in Naipaul's *Beyond Belief*, in which the protagonist Rashid returns home to visit his dying father. In this novel, Ganesh's aunt, like Seepersad's aunt, comes not only to take control of his father's funeral "but had also paid for it all" (MM 41). But the funeral ceremony of Ganesh's father ends in cremation, which is not the fact that Naipaul has reflected in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, in which the coffin is buried.

Ganesh's marriage is also reminiscent to that of Seepersad's, whose in-laws trapped him in marrying their daughter without a dowry. The story starts with Ganesh befriending Ramlogan, whose relationship with Ganesh goes through ups and downs. Ramlogan's method of marrying Ganesh can be compared to that of Mrs. Tulsi's. It is noticeable that the wedding rituals and dowry are more factual in *A House for Mr. Biswas* than *The Mystic Masseur*. Therefore, the marriage story is an autobiography of Naipaul's father and his struggle with his in-laws.

Ramlogan, like Mrs. Tulsi, tries to deceive Ganesh into marrying his daughter, Leela, without giving him a dowry: “‘You is not like Soomintra damn fool of a husband’ Ramlogan told him. ‘You is a modern man and you must have a modern wedding.’ So he didn’t send the messenger around to give the saffron-dyed rice to friends and relations and announce the wedding. ‘That old-fashion, he said’” (*MM* 38). Ganesh appears more intelligent than Mr. Biswas and he is aware of his father-in-law’s trap. When Ramlogan starts setting the trap, Ganesh assures him that “‘If is the dowry you worried about, you could stop. I don’t want a big dowry” (*MM* 40). Although Ganesh has seen Leela once before the night of their wedding, “both he and Ramlogan pretended he had never seen her at all, because they were both good Hindus and knew it was wrong for a man to see his wife before marriage” (*MM* 37). Unexpectedly, after announcing Ganesh and Leela as husband and wife, Ganesh refuses to eat the kedgerree unless he gets a very big dowry, which makes Ramlogan gets mad (kedgerree custom happens in the morning after the wedding, when the girl’s father gives the groom a plate of kedgerree in front of people and keeps offering money to the groom till he finishes eating the plate). This is another wish that Naipaul hoped his father could get a dowry from his in-laws that would help him live in a house of his own, instead of moving from one house to another. Naipaul’s wish is fictionalized through Ganesh that:

In the end Ganesh got from Ramlogan: a cow and a heifer, fifteen hundred dollars in cash, and a house in Fuente Grove. Ramlogan also cancelled the bill for the food he had sent to Ganesh's house. The ceremony ended at about nine in the morning; but Ramlogan was sweating long before then. (*MM* 45)

Naipaul’s depiction of Ganesh as a pundit runs parallel to that of Seepersad’s Gurudeva, who was uneducated and regarded as a pundit. Ganesh and Mr. Biswas started their careers as

pundits but both of them failed. Ganesh, a mystic masseur, is sarcastic and ironical, in which he seems as a pretender to religious enlightenment. However, he was capable to offer his patients “spiritual solace and comfort” because he was regarded as “the only true mystic in the island” (MM 143, 128). It is important to show that Naipaul’s depiction of Ganesh’s Eastern experience of mysticism, which is totally different from that of the West, is autobiographical in the first place. That is to say, Naipaul [resents the East Indian mystical experiences in the West through Ganesh in an autobiographical mode, exposing facts of the real historical condition in East Indies, when Ganesh “found himself a mystic when Trinidad was crying out for one” (MM 193).

Selwyn Cudjoe writes:

The Mystic Masseur is not in keeping with the tradition of “Hindu mystical classics” because it is couched as an autobiographical statement and records the activities of Ganesh. The author, however, is forced to use this autobiographical style precisely because he is in the Wilderness. “The mystic” in a new land is forced to compromise. (44)

Naipaul’s strong belief in predestination and karma runs through his entire work, showing characters’ interactions with certain circumstances. In the current novel, Ganesh’ autobiography shows that he naturally believes in predestination, which plays a big role in his success:

The autobiography shows that he believed strongly in predestination; and the circumstances which conspired to elevate him seem indeed to be providential. If he had been born ten years earlier it is unlikely, if you take into account the Trinidad Indian's attitude to education at that time, that his father would have sent him to the Queen's Royal College. He might have become a pundit, and a mediocre pundit. If he had been born ten years later his father would have sent him to America or Canada or England to get a profession- the Indian attitude to education had changed so completely and Ganesh might have become an unsuccessful lawyer or a dangerous doctor. (MM 193)

Fortunately, Ganesh's career succeeds as a masseur and he becomes very famous on the island. He gains a lot of money and he becomes a man of name and fame. This helps him to be a Member of the Legislative Council and later a Member of the Order of the British Empire. The novel shows his efforts to develop the Hindu Indian community in Trinidad, in which he plays a major social and cultural role for Hinduism, "not as a system of belief, but as the resident Hindu institution" (Mustafa Naipaul, 45).

Naipaul's belief in predestination is also present in his letters to his family: "I firmly believe that I firmly believe that what I am to be has been cut out for me. That if I have to die tomorrow, I will die tomorrow. So I never worry. It is my only superstition, but I feel it deeply, and I am secure in it" (BFS 58). Selwyn Cudjoe refers to Victor Ramraj's *A Study of the Novels of V. S. Naipaul*, which shows that the "sense of fate is present in embryonic form in all the early novels of Naipaul" (239).

Therefore, it is implied that Naipaul instantly steps in the world he depicts in his books. It would be interesting to refer to Naipaul's use of the concept of fate which is rooted in Hindu belief. In this connection, Mircea Eliade remarks that "When one approaches an exotic spirituality, one understands principally what one is predestined to understand by one's vocation, by one's own cultural orientation and that of the historical moment to which one belongs" (qtd. in Weiss, 8). *The Mystic Masseur* reveals that Naipaul is a fatalist and, to some extent, he has anticipated his future that he would not have children and he would devote himself to books. Naipaul published the present novel after two years of his marriage to Patricia Hale. Through his replica, Ganesh, Naipaul states that his wife "couldn't have children. These disappointments, which might have permanently broken another man, turned Ganesh seriously, dedicatedly, to

books” (MM 64). On the other hand, Naipaul stresses on the strong Hindu belief in fate in his writings. In this very novel, when Ramlogan comes to know that Ganesh has beaten Leela he attributes the case to fate: “Is your fate, Leela. Is my fate too. We can’t fight it, Leela” (MM 52). Naipaul reflects same situations in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, in the first generation believes in “Fate. There is nothing we can do about it” as well as the second generation believes that women “have to live with their Fate. Mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law. Idle husbands. Wife-beaters” (HMB 11, 209). Additionally, Naipaul derives the story of wife-beating from his father’s *Adventures of Gurudeva*. In *The Mystic Masseur* we notice that Ganesh’s anecdote matches up that of Gurudeva. Ganesh bears in mind that such rituals establish his manhood:

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. Ganesh had become a man; Leela a wife as privileged as any other big woman. Now she too would have tales to tell of her husband’s beatings; and when she went home she would be able to look sad and sullen as every woman should (MM 49).

Ganesh is disappointed after a year of his marriage as it becomes clear that Leela cannot have children. Sarcastically, “He lost interest in her as a wife and stopped beating her” (MM 63). Furthermore, Naipaul depicts the ritual of wife beating in his later works. In *Miguel Street* most men beat their wives and they are beaten by their wives at the same time. Hat acknowledges that it “Is a good thing for a man to beat his woman evey now and then, but this man does do it like exercise, man” (MS 108). But in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, for example, Naipaul depicts regular quarrels between Seepersad and Drobotie, father and mother, which end in beating. Anand watches joyfully his father beating his mother several times: “Anand came running on tiptoe into

Mr. Biswas's room and whispered joyfully, "Daddy is beating Mummy" (*HMB* 487). Mr. Biswas shows how ladies are proud of beating rituals:

But most of the women he knew were like Sushila, the widowed Tulsi daughter. She talked with pride of the beatings she had received from her short-lived husband. She regarded them as a necessary part of her training and often attributed the decay of Hindu society in Trinidad to the rise of the timorous, weak, non-beating class of husband. (*HMB* 153)

Naipaul's memories of his life experience are scattered in his writings. In the existing novel, when Ganesh is elected as a Member of the newly Legislative Council of Trinidad in 1946 and is invited like other members to have dinner with the Governor, he becomes afraid of the modern table manners which he has none: "Nah, nah. Fish knife, soup spoon, fruit spoon, tea spoon- who sit down and make up all that? The governor's wife is deliberately cruel with her inexperienced guests. (*MM* 194) As soon as the waiter brings the meat soup: "'Take it away,' Ganesh said with quick disgust" (*MM* 196). So, Ganesh is uncomfortable with the menu and returned home hungry: "The meal was torture to Ganesh. He felt alien and uncomfortable. He grew sulkier and sulkier and refused all courses" (*MM* 197). In fact, Naipaul encountered the same comic and embarrassing situation in 1949 when he was invited to the Old Boys' Association Dinner. He reported the same incident in a letter to his elder sister, Kamla Naipaul:

I can count those hours as among the most painful I have ever spent. In the first place, I have no table manners; in the second, I had no food. Special arrangements, I was informed after the dinner, had been made for me, but these appeared to have been limited to serving me potatoes in various ways- now fried, now boiled. I had told the manager to bring me some corn soup instead of the turtle soup that the others were having. He ignored this and the waiter brought up to me a plateful of pale green slime. This was the turtle soup. I was nauseated and annoyed and told the man to take it away. This, I was told was a gross breach of etiquette. (*BFS* 3)

We also observe satirical attitudes in his portrayal of Naipaul's father's writing and short stories in *The Mystic Masseur*, which conceals Naipaul's literary debt to Seepersad. Ganesh, Seepersad's replica in this situation, is mockingly portrayed as man with college education who possesses "books, books, here, there, and everywhere" (MM 5), but he is incapable of producing sufficient texts, a book. His relatives and friend do not believe in him when he says he could write a book: "And then, stupidly, almost without knowing what he was saying, 'And one day I go write books like these. Just like these.' Ramlogan's mouth fell open. 'You only joking, sahib'" (MM 34). Rather, he publishes three booklets in his whole life: *A Hundred and one Questions and Answers on the Hindu Religion*, *The Guide to Trinidad*, and *What God Told Me*. Ironically, he thought the first two books "made his name a household word in Trinidad" (MM 152), while he cannot sell more than ten copies out of a thousand. When he submits the manuscript of the first book (as he thinks of it as a book) to the printing shop, the printer says "You does write on nice paper, you know. But is only a booklet you have here, man. Come to that, it more like a pamphlet than a booklet" (MM 84). Since the book includes very simple information, his father-in-law suggests that this "sort of book, sahib, they should give to children in school and make them learn it off by heart" (MM 90-91).

Humorously, Ganesh is more interested in the physical shape of books than their contents, the quantity more than the quality. Ganesh is amazed by his third booklet *What God Told Me* more than the previous ones because it is "printed on thick paper, with a cover of brightest yellow decorated with a lotus, established Ganesh finally, without question" (MM 153). Ganesh and all the characters seem to misunderstand the significance of "books". Leela comments on new purchased books as: "But they was big books, big big books. Six to seven

inches altogether” (MM 5). Naipaul shows how migrants have superstitious beliefs in Ganesh’s mystical power and healing capabilities. In fact, clients become amazed by the image of Ganesh’s books, which helps him gain success and reputation as a masseur.

It seems reasonable to conclude that Ganesh, the protagonist of *The Mystic Masseur*, presents double mixed autobiographical elements of Naipaul and his father. Such elements of personal experiences are not represented chronologically as the way Naipaul has arranged them in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Naipaul presents the accounts of Ganesh and wants us to believe that “the history of Ganesh is, in a way, the history of our times”, though “there may be people who will welcome this imperfect account of the man Ganesh Ramsumair, masseur, mystic, and, since 1953, M.B.E.” (MM 8). Furthermore, Naipaul expresses his love for India via Ganesh: “But India was his great love. It became his habit, on examining a new book, to look first at the index to see if there were any references to India or Hinduism. If the references were complimentary he bought the book” (MM 102).

Abbreviations:

- *A House for Mr. Biswas*. (HMB)
- *Between a Father and Son: Family Letters*. (BFS)
- *Miguel Street*. (MS)
- *The Mystic Masseur*. (MM)

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