
**Impact of Colonialism on Indian Diasporic Community in Trinidad: A
Close Study of *The Mystic Masseur***

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Abstract:

This paper examines the impact of colonialism in *Mystic Masseur*, focusing on psychological condition of Indo-Trinidadian society. The novel displays a community established by displacement, fragmentation and affect of imperialism. Naipaul highlights how Indo-Trinidadian community created by the consequence of Girmitya (Indian Indentured Labour) system. After the abolition of slavery, many Indians were taken to Trinidad under manipulative colonial contracts which resulted in dislocation of culture and fragmentation of identity. The characters of *The Mystic Masseur* reflect how this historical rupture shapes psychological and cultural condition of Indo-Trinidadians in postcolonial society. Through satire and irony, Naipaul denigrates both colonizers and colonized for keeping entire system unfair. Ganesh gets success not by his real talent but by pretending colonial manners and using subaltern's innocence. Locating research within postcolonial frameworks through Spivak's concept of epistemic violence, Antonio Gramsci's concept of subaltern, Laura Mulvey's concept of male gaze and Ashcroft et al.'s concept of abrogation and appropriation, this paper examines the politics of authority over subaltern. This paper further reveals that colonizer's knowledge in *The Mystic Masseur* serves as a source of social status rather than genuine empowerment. The study highlights Ganesh Ramsumair's use of language and discourse to highlight dual function of language as a tool of resistance and dominance where colonial epistemologies both mute indigenous knowledge and provide few opportunities for social mobility.

Keywords: Colonialism, Postcolonialism, Girmitiya System, Diasporic Consciousness, Male Gaze, Epistemic Violence, Subaltern

Introduction

The Girmitiya (Indian Indentured Labour) system came after the slavery was abolished which led to transportation of Indians under manipulative contracts. In fact, Postcolonialism is a reaction against colonialism. It interprets how colonialism shapes identity, language and social hierarchies even after independence. Scholars like Frantz Fanon and Edward Said have described that colonialism does not come to an end with political independence but goes on through internal colonialism and epistemic violence. Postcolonial theory questions the established authority created by colonial masters. It questions from the side of subaltern whose voices are silenced. It deals with the lives of protagonists and other characters who are marginalized and neglected. In *The Mystic Masseur*, Naipaul describes Ganesh as colonial product. It is set in East Indian Community. This novel is a symbolic representation of Hindu community living in Trinidad. It shows the disappearing of shibboleth customs and existence of new, symbolic ways for characters to assert independence. In the beginning, Ganesh is a failed schoolteacher but he becomes a successful masseur by mimicking speech, manners and aplomb of respected religious figures. He represents second generation migrants of colonial Trinidad, striving to find a place and establish their identity. Early Indian migrants kept their culture intact through religious rituals and community network. The practices started decaying with the time. Easier and more relaxed practices were adopted often mimicking western culture in their daily life. This novel deals with the challenges of identity formation for Indian migrants of Trinidad. Ganesh personal life reveals transition of displaced community from religious traditions to cultural adaptation and mimicry in colonial environment. Despite the colonial influences, some displaced communities retained their culture, The novel spans the period of 10 years (1940 to 1950). The novel is set in Port of Spain surrounded by displaced Indian community. It is a comic study of life in Trinidad in Postcolonial politics which is based on beguiling as well as of self. The novel comes through the eyes of narrator with Ganesh as a “struggling masseur.” The narrative starts in time to his school days going through different events in his life till he becomes a politician and later he comes across the narrator in London. The narrator presents the story as a kind of biography by quoting from Ganesh’s autobiography

The Years of Guilt. This novel shows an Indian community striving to settle itself in alien culture and, in the process, is on the verge of losing original Indian culture. Indian community starts feeling inferior under colonial rule. Due to this, they start copying European ways and lose confidence in their own culture.

“Post-colonial has to do with the past, but is being reinterpreted towards the future: ‘post’ does not, cannot shut off historical process” (Walder 82).

Ambivalence and Formation of Ganesh's Colonial Identity

The novel revolves around Ganesh Ramsamir, a Trinidadian Hindu in his struggle to achieve fame and recognition in the society that is in the process of transformation. Ganesh has no innate talent but has aplomb in his calibre to get success. It is a novel of creole society of Trinidad which is full of trouble. He has no exceptional intelligence with which he can achieve success. The author interprets the development of Ganesh from a student of Queen's Royal College to M.B.E. Although Ganesh is brought up around traditional Hindu society, he cannot avoid the influence of colonialism and modernity. His modern life gradually separates him from tradition. Ganesh's personal journey reflects the condition of Indo-Trinidadian community. He becomes a masseur, guide and psychological healer. He becomes famous around Trinidad. During election in 1946, he converts his religious followers into political supporter and becomes a Member of the Legislative Council. Despite being a Brahman, he has clash between western and traditional ideas. He is neither fully Indian nor fully Western. In front of Britishers, he appears under anglicized identity as G. Ramsay Muir. Ganesh attempts to adopt surrounding culture by preserving his ancestral roots. In the beginning, Ganesh had genuine motive to maintain social stability by eliminating inequality and poverty. All of a sudden, he shifts his allegiance towards British Empire due to unpleasant experience with sugarcane labourers. Noticing his growing impact in society, authorities give him the title of M.B.E. Ganesh is allured by western books and ideas. So, he continues to purchase and read. Even then, he does not fully give up his indigenous culture which shows that he is confused and divided. Ganesh's first book is called *The Years of Guilt*. He fails as masseur due to large number of masseurs in Trinidad and knows about his limit that he has no magical power. Doubts were raised by younger generations, but he was still successful in getting respect from people of Trinidad. Both older and younger generations respect his love for reading. Paradigm shift can be seen in the journey of Ganesh when it comes to profession. East Indian community is in transition from feudal life to capitalist life. The community is nonplussed. They get

status and success in lieu of losing culture. Ganesh is mediocre. He gets success not through his talent but with his prowess of beguiling. Due to his colonial influence, he is ashamed of his Indian identity. He tries to become Western by changing his name from Ganesh to Gareth. Religion is confined to rituals without any philosophical depth. Naipaul derides to expose reality behind materialistic success in colonial society.

“Naipaul portrays Trinidadians as a pragmatic people lacking in ideals, to whom bribery is a way of life and to whom the successful fake or trickster is a hero” **(Nightingale 33)**.

Ganesh exposes the space between Indian religious fantasies and material success Indian Trinidadian community. Ramlogan's reaction interprets his foolishness of considering that Hindu rituals can still be practised in Trinidad. These moments expose the false pride, self-deception, nonplussed community caught between original culture and borrowed culture. Banaras is a renowned city of Hindu pilgrims' and Hinduism's spiritual heart. For the second-generation of Indo-Trinidadian community, it can be remembered through rituals and stories. It comes in memory and imagination not in real experience. When Ramlogan says “That is in India... This is Trinidad”, Banaras becomes a symbol of geographically and culturally alienated. To displaced community, it is confined to name which is heard by them in stories or in holy books.

“Cut out this nonsense, man... That is in India, you know, and this is Trinidad” **(Naipaul 11)**.

It reveals the demerits of the imaginary world created by displaced community in Trinidad. As the time passes, ritual practises are not authentic beliefs. V.S. Naipaul highlights the satire and irony of displaced community through the fictional characters. Success of a displaced community depends on accepting western ideas and deception. Ganesh mixes tradition and modernity, faith and politics whenever he alights on benefits. In his wedding ceremony, he demands dowry which shows his deceptive nature. At Fuente Grove, he establishes his reputation as masseur for his business activities. Naipaul displays a society where survival needs manipulation. As masseur, he is completely imposter who does not have understanding of mysticism. Even then, he becomes a successful mystic masseur by blending indigenous religious practises with western psychology. Ganesh appears to be benevolent, and soft-hearted, but he is cunning which highlights that aplomb in

behaviour hides the weakness and emptiness. *The Mystic Masseur* displays the life of displaced West Indian society, its crisis and challenges in structured way.

“Naipaul’s main aim in the *The Mystic Masseur* seems to be to exploit the comic absurdity in the lives of the transplanted Indians in the West Indies” (Naik 1-2).

Epistemic Violence

This term was coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. Epistemic violence refers to the devaluation of colonized people’s tradition, philosophy and knowledge. It shows how colonizers conquered land and imposed religion culture and philosophy by eroding indigenous epistemology. Ganesh wields shattered Indo-Trinidadian colonial beliefs. He is susceptible to Western education. The need of Western education takes him to creole society of Port of Spain. On the first day of his *Queen’s Royal College*, he faces humiliation for wearing indigenous dress and manners. He realizes his subalternity as an Indo-Trinidadian. He tries to hide his Indian identity. He gets western success in lieu of abdicating cultural roots of ancestors. It shows how colonial education destroys indigenous epistemology. Colonialism results in the epistemic violence by showing indigenous epistemology as superstitious and puny, replaced by English books and ideologies. Ganesh’s refusal of indigenous culture giving importance to imperialism for his self-importance reflects internal colonialism. Ganesh uses little knowledge of Indian culture to deceive people and make money. Deep down, he himself thinks that Indian culture is ineffective. He becomes a successful masseur by reading traditional books, but leaves them after reading English books like “The Healing Hand”. Naipaul tries to show that even colonized people think that their culture is inferior and ineffective.

The Healing Hand, Magic and Mysticism, and The Mysteries of the East... The Healing Hand opened his eyes" (Naipaul 32-33)

Ganesh gets self-education by reading western texts which obfuscate original indigenous epistemology. Western hegemony forms colonized community’s subalternity which renders indigenous epistemology ineffective. Commonsense also plays an important role in his success. Despite being subaltern in front of authorities, he handles adverse circumstances very well. N. Ramadevi writes:

“He proves to be smarter than others, and his smartness is not condemned by the people of his society in which smartness and intelligence have come to be viewed as synonyms and with awe” (23).

Male Gaze

The term “Male Gaze” was coined by Laura Mulvey in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”. It describes and interprets that women are seen through the eyes of men as passive objects of desire. Here, Ganesh does not behave good with his wife Leela. Marriage hinges on mutual respect from both sides. Being a colonial subject and woman, Leela is doubly oppressed. Leela is made to sit beside Ganesh only to be looked. Ganesh is respectable while Leela is reduced to object of display. Ganesh is listened while Leela is looked at. Leela is paragon of subalternity who faces double oppression from colonialism and patriarchy as a third world woman. She is submissive, demure and subservient to her husband. Muzzling of women’s voices like Leela, Indira and The Great Bulcher is quintessential of male gaze in this novel. Ganesh’s sister Indira fades into obscurity due to patriarchy, colonial oppression and Ganesh’s success. The Great Bulcher is unnamed throughout the novel. She is given name due to her chronic hiccups. This novel views women as subordinate of the subordinates. Ganesh’s treatment of women is societal expectation. He does this only to show others which helps him get respect as powerful man. He uses Leela to show authority. In this novel, the male gaze is performative act through which he shapes his own image in public of authority and social success. Many critics have highlighted Naipaul’s depiction of women, particularly his tendency to show women characters through male expectations. Hemenway writes that

“It seems that Naipaul can’t depict elegant and charming female images, for these females are likely to bring a certain of hope to male protagonists who are politically incumbent and suffered many failings in his works. Naipaul has been trying to inform his readers that contemporary young people are in the presence of self-destruction, and it’s difficult for them to get comfort from the love, even the marriage” (200)

Abrogation and Appropriation

Abrogation refers to abjuring of rules and cultural norms imposed by colonialism, while appropriation refers to adapting and reshaping colonial legacy for own purpose. In *The Mystic Masseur*, abrogation comes in Naipaul’s satirical representation of colonial authority. By mimicking British officials, Western systems and values, the novel deteriorates the notion that colonial authority is superior and respectable.

Appropriation is observed with the protagonist Ganesh Ramsumair who enjoys colonial tools like English education, political system to establish his own status in the society. Ganesh takes the help of English language to ameliorate his social status. Though his expertise of English language is spurious, he shows himself as an intellectual. It shows English is a weapon for getting authority.

Conclusion

The study examines interconnection of language, power and epistemic authority in colonial and postcolonial context. The way Ganesh Ramsumair rises, V.S. Naipaul exposes the legitimacy of society. Ganesh's rise from a schoolteacher to spiritual and political authority shows the fragility of truth of a colonial and postcolonial society. The novel divulges how colonial authority starts epistemic violence by neglecting indigenous knowledge systems. Ganesh's appropriation of mysticism interprets how traditional practises are misrepresented to support colonial expectation. In this way, knowledge becomes a way to dominate subaltern not to enlighten. Naipaul's narrative describes psychological consequence of colonialism on subaltern by internalizing colonial values by postcolonial subjects.

Ganesh's success transforms Leela into a polished woman as his success brings change in her speech, dress and manners. Leela's transformation takes place only after Ganesh's fame. It highlights male gaze where women are seen only after male's achievement.

"Everyday Leela became more refined. She often went to San-Fer-Nando to visit Soomintra, and to shop. She came with expensive saris and much heavy jewellery."(Naipaul 155)

Ultimately, Naipaul gives a "powerful remarks on the politics of knowledge of postcolonial subjects. Naipaul allows readers to question for acceptance of authority as correct, valid and cogent. It changes raw powers into authority. This novel is a text which attempts to explore how discourse creates hierarchies and epistemic inequality in postcolonial context.

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