V.S.NAIPAUL'S *THE MYSTIC MASSEUR*: DEFINING FAILURE AND SUCCESS FOR THE COLONIAL SUBJECT

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Abstract: The Mystic Masseur is the story of Ganesh Ramsummair's journey from the margin to the centre, from colonial Trinidad to the imperial metropolis of London. The particulars of Ganesh's local and later metropolitan success are inscribed into the larger picture of a colonial society and its maladies. Ganesh's rise to prominence is premised on the bastardization of Hindu and western cultural capital. Yet what at a superficial level appears as achievement is revealed as a deeper failure. Instead of fighting for equal access to education or championing the rights of the subaltern, Ganesh proves a supporter of the status quo. He uses opportunities only to further his own interest, and never takes a wider view on issues of social injustice. Through Ganesh's character and the story of his meteoric rise to power the novel satirizes the limited social and political understanding of colonial society, directing a powerful critique at the effects of economic imperialism. Due to the lack of authentic cultural traditions and real values, Trinidadian society appears as artificial, half-made, and is thus incapable of fostering and promoting excellence.

Keywords: social and political satire, colonialism, decolonization

'Is my only vice,' Ganesh said.' Only vice. I don't smoke. I don't drink. But I must have my books.' (5)

Ganesh Ramsummair's story is the story of the colonial subject's successful failure. It is, like Naipaul's, the story of a journey from the margin to the centre, from colonial Trinidad to the imperial metropolis of London. The particulars of Ganesh's local and later metropolitan success are inscribed into the larger picture of a colonial society and its ills. Combining a love of books with a mercantile outlook and an astute sense of opportunism, Ganesh manages to rise from local pundit to M.L.C (Member of Legislative Council) and finally M.B.E [1](Member of the Order of the British Empire).

If we were to deconstruct the idea of divine providence put forward by Ganesh in his autobiography[2], it would appear to consist in the convergence of several factors responsible for what Ganesh terms[3] his success. In a similar fashion to his divine namesake and protector[4]

[1] This was the highest distinction awarded to people from the colonies.

[2] In his autobiography, *The Years of Guilt*,[…] Ganesh attributes his success (he asks to be pardoned for using the word) to God. 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.[…] 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.[…]

He was served even by his enemies. Without Narayan's attacks Ganesh would never have taken up politics and he might have remained a mystic. With unfortunate results. Ganesh found himself a mystic when Trinidad was crying out for one. That time is now past. […] Providence indeed seems to have guided Ganesh. Just as it told him when to take up mysticism, so it told him when to give it up. (193-4)

[3] *The Mystic Masseur* is built on the tension between the protagonist's understanding of his life journey as a success and the subversion of that definition by the events of the plot- which reveal Ganesh's failures.

[4] The elephant god Ganesh is the Lord of success in Hindu mythology. He is also the god of education and knowledge, prudence and wisdom.

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he seems to be born at an auspicious hour- on the cusp of important historical shifts. Colonialism is on its last legs-towards the end of the Second World War an exhausted Great Britain went through a deep power crisis, with liberating effects for the colonies. As imperial authority became shakier every moment, the colonies were given a freer hand in political and administrative matters. For educated colonials like Ganesh this proved a golden opportunity. *The Mystic Masseur* discloses Naipaul's concern that a long history of colonial exploitation and the segregation inherent to manufactured societies like the one in Trinidad would be an impediment to the progress and new freedom made possible by the historical circumstances. What these circumstances allow is the rise to power of ambitious mediocrities like Ganesh. His success would have been impossible in the conditions before the war, when colonial administration was still powerful, or ten years later, when the confusion engendered by this historical catastrophe was over, democracy and capitalism firmly established, and the need for mystics a thing of the past. The most important historical event of the period is the first election featuring universal adult suffrage[5], held on July the 1st 1946. It is no coincidence therefore that "nineteen forty-six was the turning point of Ganesh's career" (8) Yet Ganesh's upward social mobility cannot be explained exclusively by recourse to the turbulent war period and the shifts it brought about in the world distribution of power. It is made possible by these circumstances, the lack of which would have foreclosed Ganesh's every chance of success, but at the same time it is the result of personal choice and competent strategies.

In a study of V.S.Naipaul Fawzia Mustafa notes that *The Mystic Masseur* is "the chronicle of Ganesh's success as a flawed and misguided achievement within a political and social milieu that cannot as yet read itself as the tangled amalgam of badly translated texts." (46) This observation, rooted in the analysis of colonial Trinidad, would seem to imply that Ganesh's political achievement is no more than an accident attributable to fortune and circumstance. The novel's comic form reinforces this kind of reading, with its emphasis on the humorous effects of mistaken interpretations, mistranslations[6], linguistic and cultural qui pro quo. While it may be true that Ganesh's success is to a great extent the consequence of the general cultural incompetence of colonial society (this cultural and political incompetence is the very target of Naipaul's satire) it becomes soon obvious that Ganesh is able to turn this cultural incompetence to his own advantage and exploit the ignorance, superstition and gullibility of others. Mustafa seems to make a similar point when she notices that Ganesh reads different situations with "considerable sophistication" (47).

Ganesh's principal strategy is to capitalize on his cultural and religious capital. He is able to do that as he is among the first generation of Trinidadian Indians to receive formal education at a college in Port of Spain. However, the profitable exploitation of cultural capital becomes a viable strategy under the double circumstance of a general lack of formal education among Indians and their desire and respect for it. Had Ganesh been born among the former black slaves (who were less inclined to appreciate formal education, associating it with the rule of the white elite) the situation would have been different. Recently returned to his village after his father's death, Ganesh shares his life projects with his aunt, The Great Belcher. Hearing that he is about to take up massaging people, she is the first to suggest him a different path: "It sound good. But a man like you should be doing something else. Bookwork, man." (47) She voices the collective insecurity in her justification of books as necessary for a sense of identity lacking in colonial Trinidad:

[5] This was a momentuous change in the history of Trinidad. Voting on a limited scale had been introduced only a couple of decades before (in 1925) and the universal adult suffrage expanded the electorate from a couple of thousands to almost three hundred thousands, including the previously disenfranchised nonwhites and women.

[6] As Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi note in the Introduction to *Post-colonial Translation: Theory & Practice*, there is a close relationship between colonization and translation : colonies are regarded as translated copies of originals "located elsewhere on the map" (5)

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> 'People go want to buy that sort of book?'
> 'Is exactly what Trinidad want, boy. Take all the Indians in the towns. They ain't have any pundit or anything near them, you know. How they go know what to do and what not to do, when and not when? They just have to guess.' (47)

Writing books in Trinidad means not only providing guidance for lost sheep-as a business that responds to a specific market demand (of spiritual guidance), it is also a lucrative activity: "It have money in books, you know. I suppose the man who write the *Macdonald Farmer's Almanac* just peeling money. Why don't you try your hand at something like the *Napoleon Book of Fate*[7]? I just *feel* you could do that sort of thing good." (47)

Popular opinion in Trinidad relegates books, knowledge and writing to the domain of the magic and the occult. Ganesh's use of writing to impress and earn the respect of others often intermingles with his shrewd appraisal of the power that superstition exerts on the uneducated average Hindu. Thus, when Ramlogan goes to his house after the wedding to insult him and proffer threatening remarks, Ganesh asks Leela to bring him the copy-book from the bedroom and then writes down Ramlogan's words in it. This makes Leela suspicious; her suspicion changes into firm certitude when Ganesh takes Ramlogan's picture: she is sure that her father is going to be the victim of obeah[8]. As a dutiful daughter she informs Ramlogan of Ganesh's intention, and the aggressor instantly turns into a terrified victim: 'Oh, God! What I do to your husband to make him prosecute me in this way? What he going to do with the picture?'(51)

Alternatively, Ganesh speculates on the cultural and religious capital he possesses and exploits the superstition and gullibility of others that are less educated. The widespread appeal of superstition and black magic in Trinidad are explained by the fact that they offer people immediate gratification and provide a rough means of dealing with the complexity of their world in the absence of real knowledge. The roots of Ganesh's failure lie in his refusal to acknowledge the injustice at the root of this situation. Instead of fighting for equal access to education or championing the rights of the subaltern, he is often a stark supporter of the status quo. He uses opportunities only to further his own interest, and never takes a wider view on issues of social injustice. This is all too evident in his treatment of Leela. Though a modern educated man, his family life begins with the beating of his wife, a common practice among Trinidadian Indians. Bridget Brereton argues that due to the scarcity of women among indentured labourers, domestic violence increased among Trinidad Indians:

> in a situation where women were scarce, the possession of a wife was an important symbol of status and masculinity[…] a crucial element in the husband's self-esteem, which he could ill afford to lose. Traditionally, the Indian husband was expected to keep his wife in subjection; […] the shame of failure was wiped out by 'the cleansing violence of self-righteousness'. (182-3)

Wife beating is such a common practice that it is ironically described as a rite of passage to adulthood and Ganesh's initiation into 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. (49)

[7] *Napoleon's Book of Fate* (anonymous writer) was allegedly found by Napoleon and translated by a German scholar. It is an oraculum that describes various methods of divining the future and was very popular among superstitious Hindus which replaced the customary visit to the astrologer with a consultation of the book.
[8] Sorcery of West African origin, similar to voodoo practice and popular throughout the Caribbean.

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And yet, in addition to his cultural and religious capital, it is to Leela that Ganesh owes a large part of his success. The miserable interlude of The Trials (the 5th chapter that recounts Ganesh's struggles in Fuente Grove) ends when Leela decides to leave Ganesh in an attempt to persuade him to write his first book. Although The Great Belcher had kept her promise and given Ganesh all the Sanskrit books his uncle possessed, he kept postponing the actual writing of the book, concentrating on making notes and ordering them in differently colored notebooks. Ganesh's first book is a compilation entitled *101 Questions and Answers on the Hindu Religion* written with the express purpose of getting Leela back and impressing Beharry, his neighbour and friend from Fuente Grove. Going to Ramlogan with the book, Ganesh earns from his father in law both the title of author and that of "Ganesh the Radical". Ramlogan's attitude changes dramatically at hearing that he has 'an author' in the family: "Come inside, man, sahib. Why you pretending that you is a stranger and standing up outside? Come in, sahib, come in, sit down in your old place in the hammock. Oh, sahib, is a real honour. I too too proud of you." (88). Ramlogan's deferential attitude is symbolic of the mechanism of public reaction in Trinidad, where social and political life is mainly organized around the related concepts of pride, honour and self-esteem. Furthermore, due to the close connection between books and magic, being an author is regarded by Ramlogan and others as possessing a kind of mystical aura that reflects positively on everybody around. Magic symbols, as Frazer claimed, work according to two major principles: the principle of similarity and the principle of contagion[9]. By contagion books are not perceived as the independent production of a single individual- instead, due to their function as carriers of occult knowledge they spread their auratic rays over the whole community. That is why what earns Ganesh the respect of relatives and neighbours also contributes to the poor sales of his book. The salesman tells him the book sold badly because "is the sort of book you go have hell even giving away because people go think you want to work some sign of magic on them." (100)

Ganesh's success as a mystic owes much both to his knowledge of Hinduism and local magic practices (obeah) and to the encouragement of The Great Belcher. His aunt and Leela join forces to convince Ganesh that he has "the Power". Beharry writes an advertisement for "pundit Ganesh", but Ganesh himself, dissatisfied with the pundit title, nails "a signboard on the mango tree: Ganesh, Mystic."(110) Ganesh's preference for "mystic" (a word that alludes to initiation into religious mysteries, occult forces, etc) instead of "pundit" (an Indian scholar, an expert of Hindu law and philosophy) shows his awareness of the power of superstition and his eagerness to capitalize on that. Appearances are not neglected either: Ganesh gives up wearing trousers and shirt and dons the traditional dhoti[10] and white turban.

His fame as a mystic begins after he manages "to cure" a boy who thought he was followed by a black cloud. Ganesh finds out from his parents that the boy started having hallucinations after his brother's death. The parents had gone to the Christian priests as well, and they were told that the boy had to pay for his sins. The reader is thus given to understand that the boy's hallucination was part of a guilt complex-knowledge that is not available to the average uneducated Trinidadian. Ganesh puts up an impressive performance in front of the boy, pretending to see the black could, fight it and dispel it-an exorcism inspired from the practice of obeah. The success of his performance is augmented by what Naipaul ironically dubs the Niggergram-the rumours spread by the ignorant and superstitious black population:

[9] The law of similarity means that an effect will resemble its cause, and the law of contagion extends negative or positive attributes of things in space and time through physical contact. The kissing (or touching) of saints' relics in Christian Orthodox religion is an example of contagion: the sacredness of the saint's body extends to the one who touches (kisses) his holy relics. Similarity functions when an icon (an image/representation) stands for God/saints in receiving believers' prayers.

[10] A rectangular piece of cloth, wrapped around the legs and knotted at the waist.

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> There was no report of this incident in the newspapers, yet within two weeks all Trinidad knew about Ganesh and his Powers. The news went about on the local grapevine, the Niggergram, an efficient, almost clairvoyant, news service. As the Niggergram noised the news abroad, the number of Ganesh's successes were magnified, and his Powers became Olympian. (125)

Ganesh's mystic career, although rooted firmly in popular belief and superstition is propelled by his "intelligence and sympathy" (128) and his love of learning. Intelligence and sympathy refer to his ability to "read" people and circumstances and exploit them in his favour. The books which surround him kindle respect and reinforce his authority: "You never felt that he was a fake and you couldn't deny his literacy or learning- not with all those books." (128) His mysticism also reflects the cultural hybridity of the island in embracing all religious traditions:

> He was no bigot. He took as much interest in Christianity and Islam as in Hinduism. In the shrine, the old bedroom, he had pictures of Mary and Jesus next to Krishna and Vishnu; a crescent and star represented iconoclastic Islam. 'All the same God' he said. Christians liked him, Muslims liked him, and Hindus, willing as ever to risk prayers to new gods, didn't object. (128)

This universalism is not, however, an effect of the pluralism and tolerance of Hindu religion, but the consequence of an emerging capitalist frame of mind, for which nothing should be discarded as long as it brings profit. Ganesh's financial flair is again at work-he realizes that in a poor society like the one in Trinidad it is generosity rather than strict fees that can earn him a practice: "But more than his powers, learning, or tolerance, people liked his charity. He had no fixed fee and accepted whatever was given him." (128) He finds alternative ways of making money: by reprinting his book, "the first best-seller in the history of Trinidad publishing."(140). He also acts with considerable shrewdness when he discovers that Ramlogan had been making money off his back by establishing a taxi-service to drive Trinidadians to the mystic's residence. Ganesh blackmails Ramlogan into selling him the taxis-and this prompts Ramlogan to look for revenge and inform Narayan about the whole affair. The war with Narayan, as I have shown previously, is again a stepping stone for Ganesh, launching his career as a politician.

Another incident that testifies to Ganesh's use of cultural symbols to further his own interests is his self-promotion with the aid of the written word in the war with Narayan. Ganesh's second book is called *The Guide to Trinidad*, and in the guise of an innocent booklet introducing foreign visitors to the multi-racial Trinidad[11], it contains hidden publicity for Ganesh's mystic practice:

> The book spoke about the romance of Trinidad's many races. In a chapter called The East in the West the readers were told that they would be shocked to find […] in a village called Fuente Grove, a genuine Hindu temple which looked as if it had been bodily transported from India. The Fuente Grove Hindu temple was considered well worth a visit, for spiritual and artistic reasons. (147)

The Guide to Trinidad is also a cunning attempt to destroy the credibility of his rival. Pretending to take an objective look at Trinidad's mass media, Ganesh's book does its best to cast a shadow on Narayan's paper: "The anonymous author of the Guide was enthusiastic about the island's modernity. […] But he deplored the absence of any influential weekly or monthly paper, and he warned foreign advertisers to be wary of the mushroom monthlies which claimed to be organs of certain sections of the community "(147)

[11] Here Ganesh proves his ability to master the Western double code of dressing up business interests as multicultural rhetoric.

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If being an author served his interests in the Hindu community when writing his first book, Ganesh is conversely aware of the benefits of anonymity when launching an "objective" book to an international audience. He learns about the practice of foreign publishing houses of sending away free catalogues from Beharry. Yet, though acquainted with the practice, Beharry is completely unaware of its meaning and intention, and watches in bewilderment how Ganesh "sent free copies of *The Guide* to all the American Army camps in Trinidad. […] He also sent copies to export agencies and advertising agencies in America and Canada which dealt with Trinidad."(147) Education gives Ganesh an understanding of practices and meanings unavailable to the average ignorant Hindu. His knowledge of Western ways and awareness of local cultural practices enable him to make the best of both worlds and carve a personal space for success and recognition.

Fawzia Mustafa argues that Ganesh's ascension is "emblematic of the rise of the first generation of colonial entrepreneurs who unethically capitalized on the political opportunities the era offered." (45) What she implies by "unethically capitalized" is that Ganesh, although to a large extent able to "read" people and circumstances correctly and act on that knowledge, is nevertheless limited in his agency by personal interest[12]. He acts only when his interests are at stake. As a politician he fails to represent adequately the interests of the black people who had elected him. Yet circumstances act again in his favour, and he is awarded an M.B.E by the British authorities who were too far away to be in touch with the political realities in Trinidad. There is also a deeper criticism embedded in the irony-the implication that in colonial countries like Trinidad political elites will fail to represent people's interests because politicians are mere imperial stooges (a criticism that foreshadows *The Mimic Men*). Thus what at a superficial level appears as achievement is revealed as a deeper failure. Ganesh's successful strategies are premised on the bastardization of Hindu and western cultural capital. This bastardization and the mistranslation of values become possible against the backdrop of colonial manufactured societies, which lack a powerful tradition. The cultural fields in colonial societies are incapable of preserving their autonomy and establishing a firm basis for political debate. The cultural and religious hybridity that characterize Trinidad Indians are perceived as negative effects of the lack of Hindu cultural autonomy. The displaced Hindu spirituality loses its capacity to act as an integrative cultural system ordering people's lives and is consequently invaded by the modern capitalist spirit. The result is a formal Hindu culture whose meanings are supplied by capitalist practices. As colonial societies are incapable of nurturing strong and authentic[13] values, they pave the road forward for opportunists like Ganesh, conversant both with formal Hindu custom and capitalist practice. They are emblematic of the period right before independence-and they constitute, more or less, that class of locally born colonials that Macaulay's infamous 1835 Minute to Parliament advocated the creation of: "a class of interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern- a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, opinions, in morals and in intellect." (qtd. in Ashcroft 140) The result of such mimicry, however, is not the

[12] In the terms of the Kantian and continental philosophical tradition, Ganesh does not act freely, because he doesn't act morally. For Kant freedom is a consequence of the ethical act, which presupposes a universal law: one should act only in such a way which would constitute a universally accepted law. Acting out of personal interest is not a moral, and thus not a free act. Another important distinction is made by David Detmer in his analysis of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, between practical(limited) and ontological(absolute) freedom.(60-1) Insofar as Ganesh is not able to dictate the terms of his success, he doesn't have ontological freedom (the freedom of choosing for oneself how one should act). Ganesh has only practical freedom, which is the capability to achieve what you desire.

[13] It is important to note that while Naipaul seems to decry the lack of authentic traditions in colonial societies, he takes an ironic stand towards the recuperation of authentic pre-colonial traditions. His argument is that the pre-colonial past has been erased with the genocide of the indigenous population and the languages spoken in the Caribbean were borrowed from the imperial masters (*The Middle Passage*).

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subversion of the colonial order as Ashcroft claims (141), but the creation of a class of opportunist 'picaroons'[14] like Ganesh. For a Romanian reader in particular characters like Ganesh appear strangely familiar, and there is feeling of "family resemblance" between the early post-colonial Trinidad and the panorama of Romanian society sketched by I.L.Caragiale in his plays and short stories: the same opportunism, double-standard morality and hybrid practices, the result of the meeting of two worlds, one dying and the other not-yet born: the traditional, Balkan-Ottoman practices grafted onto a an incipient capitalism. Like Caragiale, a conservative who repeatedly offended the liberals by revealing the discourse of modernization to be just empty mimicry of the West, Naipaul proved a very unwelcome voice in postcolonial literature, with his implication that colonials conversant both with their culture and the colonizer's culture will develop a double-standard morality that will serve only their own interests. He later had to face this accusation himself from critics like Selwyn Cudjoe, Rob Nixon and even Edward Said. For early postcolonial literature, therefore, the ambivalence of hybridity and mimicry is not necessarily positive. For a start, cultural hybridity indicates the degree to which traditional Hindu customs become corrupted by the emergent American capitalist culture. Furthermore, while it empowers educated individuals like Ganesh to accede to high positions, it also serves as an instrument for the oppression of the illiterate masses.

Ganesh's from rags-to-riches Cinderella story is illustrative of both the shortcomings and mediocrity of Trinidadian colonial society and the opportunities for change offered by the turbulent war period. Through Ganesh's character and the story of his meteoric rise to power the novel satirizes the limited social and political understanding of colonial society, launching a powerful critique at the effects of economic imperialism. Due to the lack of authentic cultural traditions and real values, Trinidadian society appears as manufactured and artificial, half-made, and is thus incapable of encouraging, fostering and promoting excellence. A society lacking in adequate standards becomes the competing field for mock-personalities like Ganesh and his political rival Narayan. Their success is primarily the conjoined effect of the flawed social structure of Trinidad and the volatile circumstances of the Second World War. At the same time, the novel becomes, in reverse, the mirror of Naipaul's own journey of literary discovery from the colony to the heart of empire and then back home again. Together with *Miguel Street*, *The Mystic Masseur* testifies to the emergence of the writer's own voice after overcoming the intellectual colonialism that had kept him tied to the cultural heritage of the Empire.

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[14] In *The Middle Passage*, Naipaul compares the opportunist politicians of the 1946 elections to "the sixteenth century picaroon of the Spanish literature, [who] survives and triumphs by his wits in a place where it is felt that all eminence is arrived at by crookedness." (72)

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