

The Mystic Masseur Short Guide

The Mystic Masseur by V. S. Naipaul

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Characters

Characters in *The Mystic Masseur* are either Ganesh's helpers or else adversaries over whom he can triumph.

Beharry, a shopkeeper in Fuente Grove, is a helper, one of the few people in town who can read and a person who believes Ganesh is of a higher caste and therefore worthy of cultivation.

Leela, Ganesh's wife, is his helper (unless she is irritated with his laziness), as is the Great Belcher, an aunt who gives Ganesh old Hindu books which he uses in his cures.

Ramlogan, Leela's father and a wily shopkeeper, who never fails to pursue his self-interest under the hypocritical guises of friend and father-in-law, is one of Ganesh's chief adversaries. Although Ramlogan makes arrangements for the funeral of Ganesh's father, it is with the goal of capturing Ganesh, a person of higher caste, as a son-in-law.

Under the guise of friend, Ramlogan, who pretends to be "modern" like Ganesh, seeks to dispense with a dowry. Ganesh, while something of a fool throughout the novel, nonetheless sees through Ramlogan's plan and forces money out of him through the manipulation of Eastern and Western traditions. During a ceremony in which the bridegroom is ceremonially bribed to eat kedgerree, Ganesh forces Ramlogan's generosity. Later, Ganesh writes a newspaper article about Ramlogan's great gift in establishing a cultural center in the nearly treeless Fuente Grove which again squeezes Ramlogan's purse.

Indarsingh, a Trinidadian educated at Oxford, and Narayan, a critic of Ganesh's later success, are Ganesh's adversaries in the political arena. Indarsingh loses an election to Ganesh because his acquired British identity causes him to totally misread Trinidad's Indian population. To defeat his former Queens College friend, Ganesh exploits his Indian heritage. Narayan, who hoped to manage a large grant from an Indian industrialist, loses his political hold when Ganesh fills Narayan's organization with his own cronies.

The narrator, who appears in the story significantly at the beginning and the end, is neither a helper nor an adversary. At the beginning, he is a young black boy whose mother brings him to Ganesh for medical help. Although Ganesh's treatment is unsuccessful, the boy is impressed by Ganesh's books and finds him amusing. At the end of the novel, as a student at an English university in 1954, the narrator is to be host to one of his countrymen, G. R. Muir, Esq., M.B.E. The narrator's guest turns out to be a haughty Ganesh. The narrator, subject to the same vices of vanity and hypocrisy one sees in the other characters, has a double reaction to Ganesh — he likes him, even as an adult student in England, but he knows Ganesh's weaknesses, the lies in Ganesh's autobiography, *The Years of Guilt*, and his many foolish whims and petty vanities.



Ganesh is a delightful comic character. Lazy and dull, he nevertheless manages to forge a respectable and successful career. At times, when he is working as a strike negotiator or healer, he almost seems admirable. The enjoyment of seeing Ganesh get the better of his adversaries is that of seeing one confidence man outwit another.

The cure of a black boy pursued by the hostile black cloud shows Ganesh at his best. This cloud is a projection of the boy's guilt over the death of his brother. The guilt resulted from the boy's sending his brother on an errand in which he was run over by a truck.

Ganesh tries to rid his "patient" of guilt and pretends to see the boy's cloud. Ganesh, after establishing the mood with religious paraphernalia and Hindu chants, creates a visible black cloud that quickly dissipates. Although Ganesh fools the boy and his family, he does cure the child. Greedy but caring, a trickster who also privately prays for the success of his trick, Ganesh advises the family, "If you want to send me anything, send it. But don't go around telling all sorts of people about me."

Ganesh knows that the family will tell everyone about him and send him more money than they can afford in gratitude. But Naipaul does not linger on Ganesh's successes; he rushes through Ganesh's political career, collapsing ten years of Ganesh's life in fifty pages, so that readers see more of Ganesh's struggle than his success.

Social Concerns

one could wash away the comic Ifsatire from Naipaul's first novel, it would be seen as a story of the rise of Ganesh Ramsumair from humble beginnings to Member of the British Empire. Such a story, as long as the hero and the society are viewed as admirable, serves as a model for readers to emulate (much like the American Dream). However, in *The Mystic Masseur* neither the hero, Ganesh, nor the culture, Indian settlements in Trinidad around the time of World War II, are admirable.

The years depicted in the novel were critical for Ganesh and for Trinidad.

They mark a transition from a traditional, almost feudal, colonial culture of large sugar plantations to a more capitalist, Western oriented culture.

Ganesh is a product of both the Indian Hindu tradition in which he was raised and the Western values he learns at Queens Royal College. When Ganesh finally begins to act as a healer, a mystic masseur, he learns to cynically use the values of both cultures in pursuit of success. Over and over Ganesh markets his Eastern culture in the service of commercial and political success.

While there are disturbing faults in Ganesh, such as vanity and laziness, the culture is lacking as well. The chief cultural void is the absence of standards. Success is applauded, and even plausible failure is rewarded. Trinidad seems a hopelessly mixed cultural stew of British, Muslim, Hindu, and African elements from which no rational standards can arise. To use one of Naipaul's favorite words, all is "absurd" in this comic novel.



Techniques/Literary Precedents

The *Mystic Masseur* is a straightforward comic novel. Except for the handling of narrative point of view, there is nothing technically innovative in the book. Using traditional novelistic techniques, Naipaul has created a character, Ganesh, that is a target of comedy and the recipient of affection.

The narration is chronological, except for the narrator's introduction of himself and Ganesh at the novel's beginning, and shows a skillful use of the participant narrator. This young black man feels Ganesh to be a person much like himself, and yet, since the narrator is more clever than Ganesh, he can see his shams, lies, weaknesses, and petty vanities. The narrator's judgments, however, never drain sympathy from Ganesh, but allow the comic foibles of this pundit and politician to be delightfully exposed. Ganesh's own writing, such as his autobiography, *The Years of Guilt*, which the narrator quotes, cunningly points to a seemingly great man while also exposing the pretension of such a vanity publication.

Some have criticized Naipaul's handling of narrative pacing and the magnitude of successive episodes in *The Mystic Masseur*. They feel that the ending is rushed and that Ganesh's later political success is not as detailed as the early years of failure. Other critics claim that there is too much summary, at too great a distance from Ganesh, softening the comic potential of the book and blurring the satirical focus.

Related Titles

Three of Naipaul's stories written before *The Mystic Masseur* feature Ganesh Pundit to varying degrees. He appears in "Man-Man" of *Miguel Street* (1959) as a person who has a relation to God that the title character imitates, but it is merely a passing reference of less than a paragraph. In "How I Left Miguel Street," the last story in the collection, the narrator's mother bribes Ganesh, now a popular politician, to give her son a scholarship to study in London. The story depicts Ganesh in a comic crying contest between the narrator's mother and Ganesh over the size of the bribe. "My Aunt's Gold Teeth," published in *A Flag on the Island* (1967), shows an ineffective younger Ganesh who hastens the death of one of his patients, but who also consoles the patient's widow, who feels guilty for offering Christian prayers.

Interestingly, each of these views of Ganesh comes from a different period of his life: before his success as healer, in the middle of that success, and after he moves on to a political career.

The narrative perspective of *Miguel Street* is a more significant bridge to *The Mystic Masseur*. Both books have character-narrators, but the narrator in *Miguel Street* is too close to Ganesh to provide an objective view of him. *The Mystic Masseur* employs a retrospective participating narrator who can reconstruct events and motivations from a mature perspective. This participating narrator exhibits a greater control of tone than the narrator in *Miguel Street*.



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