

Imagining Hindu Identity

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English Literature

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

August 2005

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Your file *Votre référence*

ISBN: 0-494-10164-4

Our file *Notre référence*

ISBN: 0-494-10164-4

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ABSTRACT

Imagining Hindu Identity

Amy Menon

In a postcolonial world, literature is integral to the formation of identity and it is with this in mind that the thesis seeks to address the formation of Hindu identity through the reading of two novels, The Romantics, by Pankaj Mishra, and The Mystic Masseur, by V.S. Naipaul. The thesis examines how Mishra and Naipaul's novels engage with the history of British colonizers fashioning Hindu identity and how this hegemonic power continues to inflect societal concerns. The interrelated dynamics of power and politics are also explored, with a special emphasis on how religion is co-opted into the secular world and how this poses a problem for the Hindus in the above two novels.

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Introduction

Certain assumptions about Hinduism and Hindu identity gave rise to this thesis. Prior to undertaking the requisite research, I had accepted that Hindu identity was shaped by the customs, rituals and lore of Hindu families and of the community at large. I assumed that these timeworn customs were unchanged and static and that Hinduism was largely an ahistorical entity. In part, I arrived at these assumptions because literary works dealing with Hindus rarely include much historical detail. The formation of Hindu identity as it is represented in South Asian literature is a complex and nuanced issue and it is often embedded in ahistorical, Orientalist perceptions. Most fiction books fail to look at Hindu identity in terms of history, culture and colonialism. To accept Hindu identity as static would be erroneous and supports Orientalist attitudes about the East that emerge from uninformed notions of other cultures under colonialism. More importantly, the history of colonialism plays a critical role in how Hindu identity is defined in the Indian subject, whether in India or abroad. Without adequate historical grounding, it is not uncommon to arrive at assumptions that continue to categorize the Hindu as backward and traditional. Indeed, a whole host of images of Hindus were constituted under these sorts of views of the East. The most damning of these images are that Hindus are alien, exotic, traditional, prone to violence, backward, immoral and irrational in their religious fervor (Ludden 9). These images were created to rationalize early European imperialist projects. The whole European colonial project could be explained away if, in fact, it was done to modernize the backward Indian and to contain the heathen Hindu who practiced inhumane customs such as sati or widow burning. These “orientalist” images were described by Edward Said, who concluded that orientalism was the mechanism by

which the West managed its relations with the “East”. Orientalism was the Western “corporate institution for dealing with the Orient -- dealing with it by making statements about it, authoring views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short . . . a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Orientalism 3).

Upon first reading about Hindu identity, I discovered that there are so many different manifestations of Hinduism that to constitute Hindu identity as unified or as one thing is totally impossible. In fact, one may wonder if any such stable and unchanging identity can actually be distilled from reading literary works about Hindus. Furthermore, unlike Catholicism, for instance, Hinduism has no governing body that inscribes Hindu practice or belief. Given this fact, a new practice can take root and be classified as Hindu at any time, ostensibly without any opposition at all. It could then be tacitly assumed to be part of Hindu identity. The question I posed at this point was “Is there such a thing as a common Hindu identity in literary texts and if so, what is it?” The briefest answer to these questions would be “no,” but then the immediate question that arose was, if so, how did I come to the assumption that there was such a thing? The answer here is more unsettling. Ultimately, Hindu identity, if there is such a unified thing, is now a nationalist construct, and it has been adopted through productions that were influenced more by the British colonial machine than by any other historical group. How this came to be is the subject of this introductory chapter.

Although I have stated that there is no such thing as an essentialist Hindu identity, for the purpose of this paper, the term “Hindu identity” will be used to convey both an affiliation with Hindu culture and identification with any of the Hindu nationalist groups

that make up the political sphere in India today. At present, Hindu identity would also include the sense of consciousness that nationalist groups have tried to instill in the majority of Indians who claim to practice Hinduism as a religion. The history behind these nationalist groups is introduced in Chapter one of this thesis, but here it suffices to state that these nationalists claim that India should be the exclusive province of the Hindus, and as such, others such as Muslims and Christians do not have a place there. They marginalize Muslims, Christians and other minorities in order to maintain power for themselves, and they have gone to extreme lengths of violence in order to fulfill their vision of 'Hindutva.' 'Hindutva' translates into "hinduness" and is a term coined by V.D. Savarkar (3), founder of the Rastriya Svayam Sevak Sangh or RSS, a powerful cultural organization that has been able to infiltrate many political parties (Flood 250-273). The RSS is part of the Sangh Parivar, the family of 'Hindutva' influenced organisations. 'Hindutva' is also a militant nationalist movement advocating the promotion of Hinduism and the preservation of India for Hindus only. The ideological vision practiced by these Hindu nationalist groups can be traced back to the British colonial rulers who made alliances with specific Hindu Brahmin groups to facilitate their rule in India. While the British were in India, they promoted certain groups who were high in the caste system in order to govern and keep in check those of lower castes. The result was that cultural nationalism emerged. Today, Hindu identity, militancy and cultural nationalism are intricately linked.

Several key elements contributed to the rise of the Hindu nationalism that now shapes Hindu identity. Amongst these is a tendency to look to the past and to furnish facts about certain attributes of Indian culture in order to support and bolster

characteristics that Hindus want to identify with to counter negative colonial stereotypes of the Hindu man as weak and effeminate. Thus, Hindu nationalists often highlight the Kshatriya figure, a strong and masculine warrior figure. This was a continuation of what Hindu reform movements did during the colonial period. Then, Indian subjects who felt that their culture was being denigrated could look to the glorious past to restore their sense of self-esteem. In fact, the process of writing history during the colonial era at a popular level led to the rise of militant cultural nationalism. This trend of looking at the past is the result of the colonial project of writing Indian history with an Orientalist lens. In order to further understand how the British came to shape Hinduism, it is necessary to look at the historical alliances during the colonial period. Before doing so, a brief history of how the British came to rule India is also presented as it relates to this dynamic.

History of the British presence in India

The British interest in India was based firstly on commercial interests. In fact, the genesis of the British presence in India was the East India Company. After the Mughal Empire ended in 1707, the land that we now know as India became a trade stop for British merchants of the East Indian Company. In 1740, the East India Company was purely a commercial business that imported and exported goods from Bombay, Madras and Calcutta. The Company “had no interest whatsoever in challenging traditional Indian culture. On the contrary, they believed that any such challenge would destabilize Anglo-Indian relations; and that would be bad for business” (Ferguson 137). However, French traders under the auspices of the Compagnie des Indes also traded in India and in 1750, the British East India Company sponsored a local nawab (governor), Muhammad Ali Khan, as they challenged the French Compagnie des Indes for control of the Carnatic

region. The British wanted territory because land meant control of goods produced in the region; it also provided instant consumers for British-made goods. Thus, the battle for territory was largely driven by opportunism and desire for material enrichment. In 1753, the company asked for reinforcements from the British government to battle the French for the Carnatic region. It was given the 39th Regiment and four warships. The British government's decision to intervene had enormous consequences. It moved the British presence in India from a commercial to a clearly imperialist project (James 127). The political might of the British East India Company reached its apogee in 1815, by which time it had acquired the most powerful army in India. Through the strength of this army, it controlled Bengal, a large chunk of the upper Ganges basin and extensive areas of east and south India (James 130).

By 1848, the East India Company had the de facto 'doctrine of lapse' policy that allowed it to add territory to the British Empire if the local prince or ruler died without an heir. Independent Indian princes now made alliances with the East India Company in order to have the benefit of its protection. They made unequal treaties with the Company and ceded both revenue and authority in order to have a permanent garrison in their local regions. As the influence of the East India Company grew, it was seen that the revenue from land occupation was greater than from trade (James 123). This gave the Company, now the major military power in India, the impetus to go on more wars of conquest, some of which it did not initiate but claimed were only defensive wars. Individuals such as Robert Clive, an officer who distinguished himself in the initial battles for expansion, also benefited. Between 1757 and 1766, the Mir Jaffir, whom Clive had installed in Calcutta, following a battle with Siraj-al-Daula, gave Clive 234,000 pounds. Other

officials received sums between five thousand and 117,000 pounds. The Company agents thus became power brokers (James 125). Wars also generated revenue from plunder and individual soldiers could potentially reap enormous profits from small skirmishes. As the Company annexed land, the demand grew for administrators, tax collectors, surveyors and other officials. Thus began a dynamic of expansion (James 131).

Early nineteenth century India thus had a Company with land. It had its own bizarre machinery of government that was part collusion between Company official and local nawab. More tellingly, they governed well-organized societies with their own deeply rooted customs and religions. Because of these collusions, the Company did not make changes to local customs and rituals unless they were practical necessities or were required to maintain public order. “East Indian Company chaplains were explicitly banned from preaching to the Indians themselves. And [...] the company used its power to restrict the entry of missionaries into India” (Ferguson 137). While commerce flourished, the British stuck to the policy of non-proselitization.

By the early twentieth century, England had become dependent on India financially (James 219). “India had become an unequalled market for British manufactured goods, particularly cottonware, and by 1913 60 percent of all Indian imports came from Britain and it had absorbed 380 million pounds in British capital, one tenth of all the country’s overseas investments” (James 219).

Officials representing the Company were not averse to enriching themselves. Liberal thinkers in Britain spoke out against them. In 1783, Edmund Burke claimed that a “corrupt private interest...in direct opposition to the necessity of the state” was in

existence in India. In 1784, the second India act imposed parliamentary control over the Company's board of directors and it was chaired by a Secretary of State for India, thus bringing the private interests of the Company under parliamentary control (James 122-136). In 1813, when the company's charter came up for renewal, Evangelicals seized the opportunity to oppose the company's policy of excluding missionary activity. When the new East India Act was passed, it allowed missionaries to evangelize to Indians and it provided for the appointment of a bishop and three archdeacons for India (Ferguson 138-9). The Christian evangelical movement had many implications for India, the most pernicious being the destabilization of religious identity amongst Indians.

Nationalism and the Perception of the Past

There is no question that the nationalist Hindus of today look to the past in constructing their identity and in disseminating an idea of this identity to the groups they wish to influence. Particular elements of this past have to be reconstituted in order to construct the image that positions Hindus as being the original and only dwellers of India, possessing an overarching and glorious culture that attracted the neighboring Mughals to invade and stay on in India. This tendency to look to the past occurs not just today but in the period leading up to independence and partition. According to Uma Chakravarti,

The perception of the past was influenced by European, more specifically British, perceptions in two separate and contradictory ways. One strand was represented by the Orientalists whose reconstruction of the glory of Indian civilization in the ancient past was taken over lock, stock and barrel by nineteenth century Indian writers. [...] The other strand was the Utilitarian and Evangelical attack on contemporary Indian society. (31)

The Orientalists relied heavily on Brahmin pundits in the writing of their various histories, and in doing so, they and the aforementioned pundits highlighted aspects that legitimated the imperialist project. Furthermore, in the search for an authentic Hindu identity, Orientalists often looked more to texts like the Vedas than to actual custom. Two key Orientalists who contributed to creating a Hindu elite who looked back to the glorious Hindu past were William Jones and H.T. Colebrook (Chakravarti 30-34). This elite did not passively receive the works of the Orientalists, they were “active agents in constructing the past and were consciously engaged in choosing particular elements from the embryonic body of knowledge flowing from their own current social and political concerns” (Chakravarti 33). In their efforts to affect social change that would have a direct benefit for themselves, they picked elements of the past that highlighted their own privileged status.

Writings about Hindu culture after 1860 were even more nationalistic in tone (Chakravarti 39). It was especially facilitated by the Orientalist Max Muller, who focused on the Aryan in the ancient Vedic texts. As Chakravarti argues, “Max Muller vastly popularized a racist Aryan version of the Orientalist Hindu golden age and it was this newly formulated golden age that became so influential in later Indian thought” (Chakravarti 42). Other Orientalists expanded on the Aryan myth and Aryan became closely associated with vigor, with race and with conquest. Muller was also responsible for another particular strand of thought, that of conflating Hindus, Brahmins, Aryans and Indians. Other Orientalists felt that it was the miscegenation of Aryan with other races that ended up with a race that was less rigorous. The Hindu golden age was thus transformed into an Aryan golden age and again, it was used to garner a sense of self-

esteem by the colonized Indians. It was also “a means by which all Indians of the upper strata could, in opposition to their colonial rulers, gain a sense of ‘national’ identity” (Chakravarti 46).

The assertion of a new Hindu identity also caused the nationalists to adopt the British notion of martial races. The British had identified men from particular regions and groups such as Marathas, Rajputs and Sikhs as martial so that they could be recruited into the army. This idea of marshalhood and marshal races was adopted by Hindu nationalists to counter the British stereotype that Hindu men were effeminate and unfit to rule themselves (Chakravarti 35). The nationalists furthered this idea to focus specifically on the fact that they were endowed with the “heroic character of resistance to foreign rule (primarily Muslim)” (Chakravarti 47). The search for authentic Indianness led nationalists to look to the Kshatriyas. The Kshatriya warrior was also linked to the Aryans. There was a widespread belief that Hindu identity could now only be regenerated through identification with Kshatriyahood, “which combined in itself martial, Hindu and Aryan elements of the past” (Chakravarti 48). This was especially relevant since it was believed that the ‘priesthood’ had contributed to the moral degeneration of the Hindus because of the various collusions they had made with the Mughal conquerors. Furthermore, as Chakravarti suggests, it was doubly advantageous to identify with Kshatriyas, since this caste allowed and even encouraged the use of force to further political ends.

The new identity of aggressive cultural nationalism valorized select features of a Hindu past; everything related to Aryan and Kshatriya values embodying vigor and militancy were central to this new identity; so was

genuine spiritualism of the world-affirming kind such as that associated with the Vedas. (Chakravarti 49-50)

Because the new national identity was dependent on Aryanism, it excluded all foreigners and Hindus of lower castes. Later, when India became a democracy and popular vote was instituted, the caste prejudice changed. In fact, the Mandal commissions that were adopted by the Congress government in the 1980s recommended providing reservations in all institutions of public education and employment for lower castes, thus reversing the original tendency to privilege the upper castes (Basu 58). Later, to further maintain popularity, the nationalist government that came to power after Congress, the BJP, supported the Mandal recommendations nationally while undermining them at the provincial level because there, they depended on support from the upper castes (Basu 58). The BJP is an example of a strongly nationalist party, and it won votes by exploiting negative sentiments about the preceding Congress government. Such sentiments included dissatisfaction with the role the Congress government had played in economic, political and religious life. Like Hindu reformers before them, the BJP has leveled charges that Muslims are outsiders and that Congress appeases Muslims (Basu 63). In reality, the BJP has been noted to encourage hostilities that emerge from class, caste and religious contexts. By endorsing 'Hindutva,' the BJP is an example of a party that exploits the centuries old hostility between Muslims and Hindus that can be read in Orientalist accounts of Indian history.

Orientalism and the Writing of History

The Orientalists were not primarily evangelical but they shared the belief with the Evangelicals that the right to rule other peoples was a birthright (James 137). The

acquisition of British India had never followed a predetermined plan but the home government consisting of Orientalists and Evangelicals acknowledged that India was a national asset and therefore, it had to be protected.

A need arose to justify the British presence in India on moral grounds. The local aristocracy deemed India their moral project. Lord Curzon stated,

I do not see how Englishmen, contrasting India as it is with what it was [...] can fail to see that we came here in obedience to what I call a decree of Providence, for the lasting benefit of millions of the human race. (Edwardes 723)

The British, now firmly entrenched in India and in the writing of its history, saw themselves as the saviors of the Indians, lifting them from ignorance and backwardness toward enlightenment and material progress.

Orientalism allowed the British to justify the Indian Empire. Orientalism, as defined by Edward Said, was the production of the 'Orient' by historical and specific bodies of scholarship; as widely disseminated colonial knowledge, it permitted the British to suggest that they were restoring India to a former glory. According to Said, Orientalism

is rather a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philological texts; it is an elaboration not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, the Orient and Occident) but also of a whole series of 'interests' which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and

sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains; *it is* rather than expresses, a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world. (12)

Thus, knowledge and power were produced and represented in ways that both supported and produced colonialism. New historical representations presented the British as humanitarians determined to intervene on the behalf of a glorious Hindu nation that was lost due to Muslim conquest. This Orientalist perspective failed to account for the fact that the people who inhabited India before the Muslim conquest in the eleventh century were diverse in religious practices, customs and traditions. They were not part of a Hindu community or a nation. According to Pankaj Mishra,

These novel British ideas were received well by upper-caste Hindus, who had previously worked with Muslim rulers and began to see opportunities in the new imperial order. British discoveries of India's classical sculpture, painting and literature had given them a fresh, invigorating sense of the pre-Islamic past; they found flattering and useful British Orientalist notions of India that identified Brahmanical scriptures and principles of tolerance as the core of Hinduism. In this view, practices such as widow-burning became proof of the degradation Hinduism had suffered under Muslim rule, and the cruelties of caste became an unfortunate consequence of their tyranny. (Lies 3)

The Hindu elite thus began a history of collusion with the British. The idea that the British would modernize India offset the exploitation that the Hindu elite may have felt at

the hands of the British. Whatever the conditions, the Hindu elite participated in a collusive colonial construct. The Hindu elite also envisaged the idea of an Indian nation where India could be reclaimed as primarily Hindu and where Muslims and groups of other religions would be deemed as outsiders. This was undermined when the British decided to partition Bengal in 1905, and to establish separate electorates for Muslims and Hindus. However, this move again reinforced the idea of religion-based identity to all Indians, whether upper caste Hindus or Muslims. These unsteady and unstable historical representations and legislations led to growing uncertainty for most Indians and goes a long way in explaining the crisis in identity experienced by some Hindus today.

In the nineteenth century, India also became the testing ground for libertarian and utilitarian theorists who saw Hindus as degraded and demoralised. One prominent libertarian who spoke and wrote about India was John Stuart Mill. In 1823, while a Company bureaucrat based in London, he stated,

By a system of priestcraft, built upon the enormous and tormenting superstition ever harnessed and degraded any portion of mankind, their [the Indians'] minds were enchained more intolerably than their bodies; in short; despotism and priestcraft taken together, the Hindus, in mind and body, were the most enslaved portion of the human race. (Stokes 54)

Such widespread theorizing dealing with hundreds of millions of people from individual Englishmen were commonplace. Writers such as Mill and Kipling did not venerate a lost Hindu civilization. Instead, they lamented the moral degeneration and the inhumane customs practiced by nineteenth century Hindus. In this way, they contradicted the

Orientalists who wrote that Indian history included the Aryan and his primacy in the glorious Hindu civilization that had existed since 3000 BCE. Diverse accounts went from lauding an ancient scientifically advanced and culturally superior civilization to lamenting a degenerated and debased Hindu culture that practiced impenetrable customs such as sati. The only common element shared by these historical interpretative works was that they were published and therefore, they derived some credibility. Unfortunately, some of these works became textbooks and were influential in the developing of Hindu identity. These contradictory accounts must have confused, and if not that, misled the contemporary Hindu who was looking to the past for guidance. The contradiction in representing the Hindu as an individual with a glorious culture to a debased and demoralized character came from the need to evangelize and convert the Hindu to Christianity. By shifting the perception of the Hindu to a debased character, the evangelicals could argue their right to exert power over, influence and ultimately convert the Hindu.

The effect of the colonial regime in India cannot be underestimated. According to Nicholas Dirks,

colonialism lives on in the massive disparities of wealth and control over capital between north and south, in the contradictory institutional legacies that inhabit political, juridical, educational and economic systems and in the differential manifestations of cultural entitlement and social capacity that characterize a world of ethnic dispute and national dislocation. (303)

National dislocation is intimately tied with identity and in the absence of being able to claim that the land one resides in is home, a crisis in identity arises. Hence, the loss of

Hindu self-esteem since the colonial period. In India today, extremists and fundamentalists who propose that India should now solely belong to the Hindus have exploited this sentiment. This may not have been the intention of the first proponents of independence, but it was perhaps an unfortunate effect of colonial rule in India. If colonialism could be described as “British rule through Indian collaboration” (Seal 12), then Indian nationalism can be attributed to structures and affiliations that were made in the interest of the self. Nationalism gained a stronger foothold when local elites, the same groups that had been the collaborators in British rule, turned nationalist. They did so when they realized that more power could be consolidated through autonomous political institutions than through colonial ones.

Education and Evangelism

The British strengthened their position in India by creating an Indian elite through education that ultimately supported them. Thomas Macaulay, chair of the committee formed in 1833 for educational policy in India, spearheaded this initiative. He stated,

It is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect. (Ferguson 189)

Thus began the creation of a people that had no attachment to the land in which they had been born, who yearned to become Englishmen and yet would never be accepted as English even if they were to set foot on English soil. These were Indians who were confused about their identity and who saw their Hindu origins as debased and detestable.

Macaulay initiated this class of people by insisting that all teaching be in English and based only on English texts (Stokes 46). British-style schools run by missionaries became the key to creating an elite and by 1938, there were forty English-based seminaries under the control of the General Committee of Public Instruction (Ferguson 189). The emergence of a pro-British Indian elite would not have happened without this British style education and the proponents of “evangelizing India seized on the idea of giving Indians access to Western education” (Ferguson 189). This evangelism did not take into account India’s existing cultures and religions. It also ignored the possibilities of backlashes from interference in local religious rituals and customs. Sure enough, these followed. An early example would be the conspiracy to massacre Europeans discovered in Bangalore in 1832. This conspiracy was based on fears that the British were preparing to convert Muslims to Christianity (James 224). Other strides such as roads, railways and telegraph symbolized inevitable and not necessarily welcome change to the Indians from industrialization. The British advanced these changes because it helped trade.

Many of the traders opposed the first English missionaries. When George Gogerly arrived in India in 1818, he wrote that the European inhabitants were

of the most questionable character, and the presence of the missionary was a check on their conduct which they did not choose to tolerate; whilst the officers of the Government looked upon them with suspicion. Both parties did all in their power to make them appear contemptible in the eyes of the natives, describing them as low-caste people in their country and quite unfit to hold conversation with the learned Brahmin. (Ferguson 140)

The will to evangelize India was not uniform. It took place between the secular forces of Liberal enlightenment and the religious forces of Christianity. While the Liberals desired to convert India to capitalism, the evangelicals wanted to convert Indians to Christianity. The Christians made no attempt to understand Hinduism or Hindu identity. Wilberforce declared, “theirs is a cruel religion [and] all practices of this religion have to be removed” (Ferguson 140). This extreme position engendered a vitriolic reaction from the Hindus who saw Christianity not just as a threat to religious belief but also as a threat to culture and selfhood. This was not surprising since “almost as important as the Evangelical project was the idea that Indian’s whole culture needed to be Anglicized” (Ferguson 140). In this respect, the missionaries were supported by liberal secular thinkers such as Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill. Mill, in Considerations of Representative Government, argued that the colonies should have “improvement of the public intelligence; the decay of usages or superstitions which interfere with the effective implementation of industry” (Ferguson 141). Mill’s desire to eradicate Indian beliefs, described as “usages or superstitions” was purely in the utilitarian interest of advancing commerce and trade. The cultural and religious transformation of India was deemed necessary for the economic advancement of Britain.

The British made some very threatening changes to Indian culture by eradicating three Indian customs. The first was female infanticide, common in parts of North India and practiced because of the high cost of the dowry that was imposed when marrying off a female daughter; the second was thagi, the cult of assassin-priests, who were rumored to strangle and rob travelers on the road; and the third was sati, the act of self immolation when a Hindu widow was burned alive on her husband’s funeral pyre. (Ferguson 141).

The campaign to eradicate these three customs was undertaken with a zeal that conveyed the British Anglicist's attitude toward traditional Indian culture. These British Anglicists considered Hindu culture as debased, brute and degenerate. Amongst these men was Victorian Governor General, William Bentinck, who in arguing against sati, stated,

The whole and sole justification is state necessity – that is, the security of the British empire, and even that justification, would be, if at all, still very incomplete, if upon the continuance of the British rule did not entirely depend the future happiness and improvement of the numerous population of the eastern world. (Ferguson 145)

Assisted by Hindu reformers, Bentinck was instrumental in the banning of sati in 1829.

This move was not so much concerned with the welfare of women as it was a configuration of cultural superiority. These British interferences with Indian culture led to dissatisfaction with British rule. The Indians began to see the British as a threat to their religion. Negative sentiments gathered and one of the direct repercussions to evangelism was the Mutiny.

A careful study of the statistics of those killed in the Mutiny reveal that more Indians were killed than were British within the Army itself. This is another example of how the British prevailed by turning the Indians against each other. The Mutiny became the catalyst in the dissolution of the East India Company in 1858. After this, a secretary of state and the British parliament became responsible for governing India. Local law making was now in the hands of the viceroy and provincial governor general and they were assisted by councils of bureaucrats and a handful of Indian princes. These

bureaucrats came from the Indian Civil Service, which recruited members through a rigorous exam that was open to educated Indians.

Indian Civil Service

Between 1858 and 1947, there were approximately 1000 members of the Indian Civil Service. These men were selected from exacting exams that were later opened up to Indians (Ferguson 185-6). The first of these exams took place in 1827 but only in 1853 was patronage replaced completely by merit in these exams. The institution of the Civil Service meant that an impartial academic elite would rule India. The men who made up the Indian Civil Service tended to be “those whose prospects at home were modest: bright young sons of provincial professionals who were willing to cram for the sake of a prestigious job overseas” (Ferguson 186). As District Officers, these individuals had to see to the well being of up to three million Indians spread over 17,000 square miles. According to Ferguson, “under Indian conditions, administrators sent out from London saw no alternative but to co-opt an elite of natives” (190). Thus, they relied on another group of bureaucrats below them. This was a civil service made up of Indians. They were responsible for the day-to-day administration of the District (Ferguson 188). For this important class of Indians, British rule was actually a way in which they could improve their prospects. They were public employees who clamored for the opportunity for self-advancement. They were also the ones who colluded most with the British to ensure that life for the majority of Indians carried on as it had under Indian rulers and princes.

With the education initiatives outlined above, a pro-British Indian elite emerged. This elite entered the Indian Civil Service when in 1863, Satyendernath Tagore became

the first Indian to pass the exam. In 1871, another three Indians were admitted to the Indian Civil Service (Ferguson 190). The British grew dependent on this group of civil servants as well as a local elite made up of Indian lawyers and young professionals because even at its height, the British population in India amounted to a mere 0.05 percent of the total. The men the British came to rely upon as administrators were generally Hindus who were also from the highest castes. Hence, the collusion with the local elite again contributed to the separation of “Muslim” and “Hindu.” By favoring one class and religious group over another, the British accentuated the differences between communities of people. By implementing systems that highlighted the differences within the Indian population, the British contributed to the rise of Hindu nationalist sentiments.

Indian National Congress

In 1885, the Indian National Congress (INC) was formed as an association of educated Indians from different professions who met annually to discuss Indian issues. They were predominantly Hindus of high caste and class. Membership in the INC grew and it soon became a contending voice for Indian public opinion (James 231). The British were still very much in power, though they recognized that the Indian empire was heterogeneous. In 1919, India was made up of provinces, directly governed by British officials, and princely states numbering over 500 where the local elite shared power with the British. Religious conflicts were already prevalent. In 1920, Jawaharlal Nehru, a prominent member of the Indian National Congress or Congress said he saw religion as India’s greatest bane and he believed it fostered dogmatism and narrow-mindedness (Sixty years 118). Nehru stated,

Hinduism, as a faith, is vague, amorphous, many-sided, all things to all men. It is hardly possible to define it, or indeed to say definitely whether it is a religion or not, in the usual sense of the word. In its present form, and even in the past, it embraces many beliefs and practices, from the highest to the lowest, often opposed to or contradicting each other. (Discovery 75)

Nehru, like other members of Congress, belonged to the Indian elite, a product of the nineteenth century idealists who believed education would emancipate India. These men were all products of a systematic indoctrination in the ideals of the British ruling classes (James 413). According to Nicholas Dirks, “India was governed in the same way it was conquered, through the complicity, and lack of any unified resistance of the governed” (305). The educated elite was a tiny section of India but they viewed themselves as the intellectual equals of the British. They also believed themselves the representatives of a superior culture. All the same, Congress members suggested that religious differences were exacerbated by the British who they accused of using the policy of ‘divide and rule.’ They spearheaded the move toward independence, inciting nationalist sentiments. During the First World War, many Indians fought on behalf of the British Empire. As recompense, Congress asked for more autonomy in governing India. In August 1917, the British government committed itself publicly to set India on a course to ‘responsible government.’ (Tinker 89). This was vague enough to mean either dominion status, or self rule. However, it was enough for Indian nationalists to believe that they were headed for self rule.

Congress now pushed for self-government and in March 1919, Mahatma Gandhi explained to his followers that it could be achieved through “satyagraha.” This term,

means “soul force” or “love force” and is essentially a spiritual state achieved by a man or woman which gives them physical and psychic fortitude. Gandhi explained that it was the state needed to resist the British in a campaign of passive resistance (Gandhi 15, 130-47). Following this, Gandhi proposed nationwide campaigns of passive resistance to show the British that they were no longer wanted in India. Most of these protests descended into violent bloodbaths, either by rioting Indians against British police or by the British Indian army against unarmed Indians. These riots proved conclusively that British rule in India rested ultimately upon force (James 416-8). Although Congress was now the voice pushing for self-rule, it was not without its problems. Winston Churchill told the Commons in September 1942 that Congress was “a political organization built round a party machine and sustained by manufacturing and financial interests [which was] opposed by all Muslims and the millions of Indians who were subjects of princes” (James 420). However, in England, it was clear that the Labour party had formed strong alliances with members of the Congress Party (James 420). Gandhi had managed to convince Congress to adopt the non-violent strategy even though he himself admitted to a journalist in April 1942 that the majority of Indians seemed unable to appreciate what satyagraha required (Gandhi 3). Gandhi and Congress’ aim by this time was swaraj or self rule, and a number of civil disobedience campaigns were reignited. More often than most, these ended in bloodshed and violence (James 421).

Gandhi never endorsed a specific religion, although he was governed by a Hindu sensibility. For example, Gandhi was a strict vegetarian and when asked why he advocated this, he stated,

I not only practice vegetarianism, but also a strict control of one's palate. A man who wants to control his animal passions easily does so if he controls his palate. Unless we are prepared to rid ourselves of stimulating, heating, and exciting condiments, we shall certainly, not be able to control the over-abundant, unnecessary, and exciting stimulation of the animal passions. If we do not do that, we are likely to abuse the sacred trust of our bodies that has been given to us.

I have philosophical reasons to advocate vegetarianism. I believe that the animals have spirits and souls also. ("Ask Gandhi")

This belief that animals have spirits and souls is a Hindu concept. Hindu practices governed Gandhi's self representation and life and tended also to place Congress as a party governed by Hinduism. However, in order to endorse other religions, Gandhi also stated that,

The Hindu system of philosophy regards all religions as containing the elements of truth in them and enjoins an attitude of respect and reverence towards them all. This of course presupposes regard of one's own religion. Study and appreciation of other religions need not cause a weakening of that regard, it should mean extension of that regard to other religions. (All Men, 55)

Those campaigning for Indian self-government had assumed that the nation that would emerge would encompass all of India that was under British rule. In the 1920s, this seemed likely because an accord existed between Muslim organizations and Congress. The surge in Muslim sentiment against the British that caused the allegiance

with Congress occurred when Muslims perceived that the British had dealt a blow to Islam by forcing the Turkish sultan to renounce the spiritual title of Khalifah. However, by 1924, Muslims were no longer irate about this event and they began to worry about the position of Islam in an Indian state that was predominantly Hindu in population. According to Sumit Sarkar, “Indian nationalism had to seek a fundamentally territorial focus, attempting to unite everyone living in the territory of British-dominated India, irrespective of religious or other differences” (273). Sarkar further states,

Transformed from inspiration for mass awakening into the official ideology of an increasingly bureaucratized and centralized nation-state, Indian nationalism has become more and more of an icon, with predominantly, though not invariably, Hindu lineaments. The dividing line between national and communal assumptions and values became increasingly porous, to the great advantage of Hindutva political forces. (276)

Muslim resistance threatened Congress, which claimed to be the voice of all Indians. The refusal of Muslims to join a civil disobedience campaign led by Congress in February 1930 led to a riot in which between four and five hundred people died (James 422).

Another element that incited Muslims against Hindus was their memory of the Mughal period when Islam had been the religion of the rulers. This gave the Muslims added antipathy toward the Hindus that were grasping for power. The Hindus also viewed this period in history as a period of Hindu degeneracy and this fuelled their claims for power. By 1938, the Muslim League had become the party for Muslims. “The British, following that well-established imperial rule of doing business with those who

appeared to possess power, accepted the League's credentials" (James 423). Muslims also sided with the Muslim League because some Congress land reforms would have hurt Muslim landowners. From the British perspective, the Muslim League was a welcome opposition to Congress, and the Muslim League took advantage of this. They urged the partition and establishment of a Muslim state, Pakistan, in August 1940 (James 423).

In July 1942, Gandhi mobilized his followers in a 'Quit India' campaign (James 425). In August, rail and telegraph services were disrupted. Mobs and rioters, egged on by Congress, attacked and killed British servicemen. Gandhi and hundreds of Congress leaders were arrested and jailed. Six weeks later, order was restored but it was becoming obvious to the British rulers that the will of the people was for independence and because of this, they supported Congress.

The British orchestrated a withdrawal from India by working together with the new elite and with local politicians. They

adopted the old empire-builders' rule, which was to find someone with legal authority, such as a chief or rajah, and do business with him. [...]

The leaders of various parties and national movements were assumed to speak for the majority of the people. (James 544)

Organized political activity in India was now centered around one party, the Indian National Congress, and one goal, independence. Thus, a handful of British and Indian statesmen, politicians, lawyers and administrators set about constructing a government that could preside over the whole of India. Nehru and Congress "spoke and acted as if it was the mirror of the whole Indian nation, which, according to Gandhi, was indivisible"

(James 548). Dr Jinnah represented the Muslims, who thought the Indian territory was divisible.

India's road to independence was marked by violence on an unprecedented scale. During a Muslim civil disobedience campaign in August 16, 1946, violence erupted around religious issues and 4000 were killed and 10,000 injured. A massacre in Bombay followed where 1,000 died and over 13,000 were wounded. In Bihar, Hindus proceeded to murder 150 Muslim refugees in November (James 550). After the current Viceroy, Wavell, visited Calcutta, he determined the immediate evacuation of British civilians and servicemen. It was to the British credit that this sudden exit did not take place, for it could have precipitated a civil war. Instead, a new Viceroy, Mountbatten, was appointed to oversee the handing over of India to Congress. June 1948 was the agreed-upon date but because of civil disorder, the date was advanced to 15 August 1947 (James 552). In May of the same year, a plan was drawn up for separating the Indian territory into India and Pakistan. However, the hastily drawn line created boundaries where whole communities found themselves on the 'wrong' side of the line, leaving them religiously isolated and outnumbered. The Punjab region, inhabited mainly by people of Sikh religion, was divided between India and Pakistan. It was inevitable that religious riots would follow the partition and independence of India, given that religious communities everywhere had not been given a voice in the bid for independence and partition. "The massive bloodletting which occurred across northern India after partition is well known. Perhaps half a million died, although no one has ever calculated the exact numbers killed" (James 553-4). Through the efforts of Congress, India achieved independence. The price of independence was a great loss of life and the eruption of violent conflict

between religious groups. The continued uncertainty of minority religious groups in a predominantly Hindu nation is also a legacy of colonial rule. The role of colonialism affected India's power distribution after independence in that the new Indian business class was Hindu (Barlas 57).

The negative sentiments that partition aroused in India are still prevalent today. Religious groups in India do not live harmoniously with one another. Groups with identities based on religion have given rise to the term "communalism."¹ According to Sandra Freitag, "the ambiguity of the state's relationship to the individual citizen, and its increasingly institutionalized relationship to imagined communities, contributes to the conundrum now being faced in postcolonial India" (233). This religion-based identity has exacerbated the centuries old conflict between Hindus and Muslims to an unprecedented scale. It continues to pose a problem for individual Hindus who want to practise their religion without aligning themselves with Hindu nationalists or other political groups.

There are very obvious links between the history of the formation of Hindu identity discussed above, and the priorities of literary texts that use religion, culture and history to deduce a sense of identity. In Making India Hindu, critics have turned to literature in order to understand the formation of Hindu identity. This and other scholarship reveals how literature is inflected with the concern of the history of the formation of Hindu identity, but do not adequately explore this issue. Indeed, because the history of Hindu identity is reflected in the study of literature in English, it becomes

¹ According to Gyanendra Pandey, "Communalism acquires its remarkable prominence in a certain kind of historical writing, beginning with the work of conservative colonialist writers at the turn of the century, because it is seen as being a subcontinental version of nationalism – the nearest thing to the genuine article that the South Asian region could produce" (1)

very relevant, especially in the postcolonial context. Nationalism centers on the link between culture and power and inevitably literature as part of culture is used to access power. Also, literature tends to eclipse historical accounts because it is more widely read. The novelist uses a literary framework as a backdrop to explore social, political and economic issues and brings such issues as independence and identity to the forefront of society. The continued problems associated with colonialism and its very discursive nature make history and historiography inadequate and opens the field to fiction.

Examining identity from a literary perspective offers a forum in which to understand personal experience as it intersects with national history. The novel allows for examining the sentiments of individuals because it is not bound to a construed sense of historical objectivity. Doubts, trauma and contradictions are brought to the forefront in narrative accounts of the postcolonial. Even though the narrator and the text are not free from bias, they still provide a bigger picture of the personal implications and the emotional turmoil that can result from searching for a distinct identity.

Examination of the literature reveals the way people situate themselves in a new world. One of the issues central to Indian authors who dealt with the theme of Hindu identity involved Hindu-Muslim hostility before and after partition. Gopal Ganesh Agarkar (1856-95), Gopal Hari Deshmukh (1823-92) and Vishnushastri Chitambar (1850-82) are just three of the numerous literary writers who thought that Muslims oppressed Hindus and that violence was the essence of their civilization (Hasan 200). Other noted Hindu writers like Bharatendu Harishchandra (1850-85), Pratap Narain Misra (1856-94), Radha Charan Goswami (1859-1923) and Kisorilal Goswami (1866-1932) portrayed Muslim rule as a series of rapes and abductions of Hindu women, the slaughter of sacred

cows, and the defilement of Hindu temples (Hasan 200). Perhaps the most influential writer during this period was Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-94). His work is deemed a component of Hindu revivalism and it provided vital resources for late twentieth century Hindutva and RSS leadership (Sarkar 164). In his fiction, Bankim questioned the specific forms of caste, class and gender oppression in precolonial Indian traditions. He gave less priority to British rule than internal stratification and oppression in Indian society. Later, Bankim mocked the reformist dependence on colonial legislation since it perpetuated Indian dependence on foreign rulers. Bankim, like other Hindu revivalists, used their anti-Western rhetoric to close off all interrogation and transformation of power relations within the Hindu community as false knowledge contaminated by alien forms of power knowledge. Revivalism thus assumed a markedly fundamentalist kind of defensiveness (Sarkar 168). In the eighties, Bankim's work centered around what constituted authentic Hinduism, what possibilities existed within the Hinduism of the past and in the reauthenticated Hinduism of the future for nation building, and what was the culpability of the Muslim in Indian history, and how and why had Hindu power capitulated to it (Sarkar 169). In his final work, Sitaram, Bankim furnishes a violent Hindu agenda and immediately proceeds to deconstruct it. He suggests that militancy is a resolution to the problem of colonization. He is equally uncertain about its untenable future (Sarkar 184). It is this violent Hindu militancy that the RSS has today adopted, hence lending credence to the proposition here that literature affects nationalistic agendas, especially those that seek to confer a sense of identity to its followers.

There are a number of writers who did not focus on Hindu-Muslim hostilities. Bhudev Mukhopadhyay (1827-94) was a novelist who suggested that these hostilities were an exaggeration of British historians. He claimed that the sultans of Delhi aided the process of unification and contributed to the emergence of a sense of community among Indians. He emphasized the commonalities between the Muslims and rest of the population (Hasan 201). Romesh Chandra Dutt (1848-1909) was another author who avoided portraying the Muslim as wicked and aggressive. He also wrote a major denunciation of British economic policies and was the inspiration behind the rise of “economic nationalism” (Hasan 201). In spite of these authors, the prevailing sentiment that infused Indian fiction portrayed Muslims as outsiders. Muslims were viewed as constituting their own society with a distinctive culture that could not be absorbed into a unified nation. Nirad Chaudhari, another prominent Bengali writer stated, “no historical argument was too false or too foolish to be trotted out by the Hindus to contest the demand of Indian Muslims to have their own way of life” (Sarkar 202). It is not surprising that the literature that contained the seeds of Hindu-Muslim hostility would later aid the thrust toward partition. Ultimately, these representations undermined the agenda of welding different communities into a unified nation. Even today, these representations continue to challenge the ability of Indians to create a composite nationality based on liberal and secular values. Instead, various narratives have been co-opted by Hindu nationalists who lay claim to the idea that India should be the exclusive province of Hindus, leaving the minority exiled in their own land.

This thesis will now turn to a contemporary text that is thematically concerned with Hindu identity and a diasporic text that also concerns itself with Hindu identity. The

first text looked at is The Romantics where hegemonic notions of Hindu identity are examined and dismantled. In this novel, a systematic Hinduism emerges, predisposed to interpretation by a nationalist movement that seeks to bring together various regional religious contradictions so as to effect a greater participation in the quest for power in Indian soil. The protagonist in this novel, Samar, questions such monolithic interpretations of identity. Ultimately, he comes to see that Hindu identity is a heuristic entity and that for him, it is more a traditional and personal practice. In the second novel, The Mystic Masseur, the elasticity of Hindu identity in the diaspora is looked at. The protagonist in this novel, Ganesh, uses Hinduism to establish himself as a politician of power, and ultimately, Hinduism serves as a vehicle to construct an identity that is relevant to the diasporic community. The community is revitalized because of the unique brand of Hinduism practiced. The two novels studied above portray different characters whose relationship to Hinduism are nuanced at the level of intention, action and consequence. At the level of the narrative, selfhood is also fraught with issues that both complicate and redeem the individual protagonists represented. The protagonists are also affected by the historical and geographical contexts in which they live. By looking at the Hindu identity in each of these chapters individually, it becomes clear that Hindu identity is a discursive, multi-faceted entity with many different modes of representation.

The Romantics: Religion and the Formation
of the
Hybrid Individual

Introduction

Pankaj Mishra's novel, The Romantics, is based on his personal essay entitled "Edmund Wilson in Benares," first published in "The New York Review of Books" in 1998. The essay and ensuing novel convey Mishra's concern with the crisis in Hindu identity. A close examination of both works suggests that Mishra's personal outlook merges with the views of the protagonist in the novel, especially on the question of Hinduism and how it informs subjectivity. In The Romantics, the protagonist, Samar, questions his religion and caste, engages with Western books and associates with foreigners. He does not fit into the mould of the traditional Brahmin, nor does he embrace modernity and the West in its entirety. It soon becomes evident that he occupies an identity that is distinct because he recognizes clearly that Hinduism has been shaped by colonialism and that he needs a thorough knowledge of the history of colonial power to understand his selfhood.

This is Mishra's first novel, although he is a seasoned writer, having written articles for Indian magazines, for the *New York Review of Books* and for the *Times Literary Supplement*. According to one reviewer, Amitava Kumar, "If much of cosmopolitan Indian writing has valorized the immigrant in the foreign land, then The Romantics is a celebration of the home and its forgotten world" ("The Nation"). As such, The Romantics is told from the point of view of a young Brahmin student who proffers vivid descriptions of the landscape of India, while outlining the Hindu-Muslim conflict and the predicament of Brahmin privilege embedded in this confrontation. The Romantics also addresses the theme of unrequited love between Samar and Catherine, a French woman who is temporarily living in Benares. Inscribed into this relationship is Samar's difficulty in accepting Western notions of love and sexual gratification. Samar's concerns centre on his Brahmin heritage and he struggles to integrate this historical element with Western contemporary notions,

specifically the idea that love is integral to marriage. He laments the fact that capitalism has invaded Benares and he questions the assault of globalization on Indian culture.

Samar is from a Brahmin family but he rejects outright the Indian nationalist's attempt to shore up Hindu identity and preserve economic privilege by stressing casteism. Furthermore, the traditions and attendant religious rituals that Samar has inherited from his family complicate his understanding of life in postcolonial India. In particular, the two conflicting models of Hinduism – a traditional model that forbids violence and a nationalistic model that sanctions violence – cause problems for Samar. Since the novel only offers vague outlines of these two models through the events of the story, it is essential that they be placed in context in order to understand how the history of colonialism has come to shape Hindu identity. The novel suggests the traditional way of Hindus was one of internal tolerance. S.L. Sharma offers a historical perspective that states,

the Hindu religion, in its traditional form, was a non-proselytizing system against the various proselytizing religions of the world, namely Islam and Christianity. Therefore, it created federal Hindu cultural organizations and was democratic, tolerant and plural. (49)

Gandhi, known best for his stance on non-violence, furthered this by stating, “Non-violence is the supreme law” (Gandhi 25) of life. This view is not endorsed by the violent Hindu nationalist movements of India today. Mishra, in asking Brahmins to recognise that their status is being exploited by these groups, has commented on this

Perhaps India's largest-circulation news magazine, ‘India Today,’ describes an isolated mood in a recent cover story on the “return of the militant Hindu.” But that mood does exist. Fed by a patriotic media and film industry and reflected in bellicose posturing against Pakistan,

it nearly dominates public life now; its urban middle-class constituency hopes that nationalism may provide a measure of security against the economic and political crises that, in the early 90's, had looked so threatening. And nationalist leaders continue to strengthen their hold over the heavily centralized Indian state as their constituents continue to gain from a globalized economy. [...] What was once quickly identified as unreasonable and aberrant - Hindu majoritarianism — enjoys a growing influence and legitimacy as the ruling ideology of the Indian government. (“Hinduism’s Violent Resurgence”)

The idea of militant Hindus taking to the streets in droves to reclaim India for Hindus is a stance that Mishra will not endorse. He wonders how these nationalist movements have garnered support from so many Indians.

In the novel, Samar also questions how violent nationalist movements have gained prominence. Samar realises that his own concept of Hinduism, one that is non-violent and endorses all people having a place in India that is not fixed because of caste privilege – has been tainted by the views of hard-line Hindu nationalist Brahmins who feel that their options in life have been firmly curtailed by discriminatory government policies. Brahmins who have reacted to the government policies that limit their numbers in the civil service want to preserve privilege by suggesting that all individuals have an unalterable place in society that is fixed according to caste. In Mishra’s novel, Samar does not endorse this and he resists collaborating with hard-line Hindu nationalists. His resistance, however, takes on a distinctly passive form and he remains anxious and ambivalent. The reader questions whether his ambivalence stems from his empathy for Brahmins who cannot get jobs because they will not stoop to working for lower caste businessmen.

Samar's position evokes the notion of hybridity which states that identity can be deeply ambivalent and not constrained by a single monolithic agenda (Bhabha Signs 144-65). Hybridity refers to "the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization (Ashcroft et al 118). However, these contact zones and their attendant transcultural forms are not always harmonious. On the contrary, Mishra's novel presents groups with competing claims that are so antagonistic that violent conflict erupts. Where conflict is not heightened to a violent degree, the Hindus in the novel face such diminishing prospects that they exist in a kind of malaise. Samar cannot identify with the claims of the violent group of Hindus, nor does he endorse an essentialist and ahistorical idea of what Hindu identity should be. As the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that the only way Samar can achieve a relevant Hindu identity is to reconstruct himself along Bhabha's lines, that is, "in the emergence of the interstices," and in "the overlap and displacement of difference" (Culture 2). This different or "liminal" space is a "hybrid" site. Samar's identity is not decentred or fragmentary but is related to historically produced social forms and political structures.

Other elements influence Samar's conception of self, most notably, the group of Western foreigners who pose questions about India to him. He is introduced to these foreigners by his neighbour, Miss West, and they provide a matrix for his understanding of the West. Eager to do the same for them, he, however, realizes that he does not fit their idea of a typical Indian. This leads him to question himself. When his love affair with the French woman, Catherine, who is an Orientalist, is thwarted, he is so devastated that he sets out to travel around India. Here, he sees more acts of random violence that increase his sorrow over his unrequited love. In order to ease his pain, he tries to understand and practice Hindu detachment. Thus, one of the major ways Samar reconstructs his religion and personal philosophy is in

terms of Hindu detachment. He becomes a “satyagrahi.” His response to the world is “satyagraha” or perfect weakness. Samar’s quest for “satyagraha” allows him to take into account the history of colonialism in order to understand his hybrid self.¹ This chapter will explore how Mishra’s novel The Romantics dismantles ahistorical conceptions of Hindu identity through the story of Samar’s reexamination of his bourgeois aspirations. I will foreground the argument with a brief history of Hindu nationalism which is essential to understanding how different groups in the novel compete for power in a world where capitalist interest are intensifying. This will be followed by a plot summary. I will then look at Samar’s crisis of Hindu identity and his immersion in a hybrid culture. It becomes clear that Samar’s crisis in Hindu identity can be understood in terms suggested by Homi Bhabha. His quest for selfhood is an example of a “complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge” (Culture 2). Lastly, the commentary on religion in the larger framework of the narrative will be looked at.

Historical Context of Violent Hindu Nationalist Movements

The crisis of Hindu identity portrayed in The Romantics was no doubt exacerbated by the rise of Hindu nationalist movements. Prior to Gandhi’s death and in the course of the formation of Indian nationalism, a number of right-wing Hindu organizations became popular. They sought to promote India as Hindu rather than secular. Their ‘modus vivendi’ was and is still that India had been subject to foreign invasion throughout history and that in recent years, Western and other foreign ideas have infiltrated it. Hoping to construct an indigenous Hindu identity that opposes the foreign ‘other,’ particularly Indian Muslims and Christians, these movements sanction

¹Gandhi was instrumental in popularizing this stance. Dr. Y. P. Anand, Director of the National Gandhi Museum states that *Satyagraha* literally means insistence on truth. This insistence arms the votary with matchless power. *Satyagraha*, to be genuine, may be offered against parents, against one’s wife or one’s children, against rulers, against fellow-citizens, even against the whole world. A complete discussion of the term can be found on <http://www.meadev.nic.in/Gandhi/satyagrahya.htm>.

violence in their quest for a Hindu nation by promoting 'Hindutva' or 'Hinduness.' Some examples of these groups are the Rastriya Svayam Sevak Sangh or RSS, a powerful cultural organization that has been able to infiltrate many political parties; the BJP or the Bharatiya Janata Party which seeks to establish a Hindu value system in India; and the Shiv Shena, responsible for communal rioting against Muslims in Bombay following the demolition of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodha in 1992 (Flood 250-273). The antagonistic, violent nature of these organizations has led to much bloodshed, but they continue to attract many supporters, amongst them students who feel they have been unfairly treated because of the reservation system. This reservation system is similar to affirmative action in the United States: it admits only a certain quota of individual groups according to caste into the Indian Civil Service. Mishra comments on this system. He states,

The quotas, first created by Nehru's government in the early 1950s and meant as a temporary measure, were expanded and used by successive governments as an electoral ploy to attract lower caste votes. The upper-caste students found themselves making the difficult adjustments to urban life only to confront the prospect of being sent back to the oblivion they had emerged from; and their sense of blocked futures, which they acquired early in their time at the university, was to reach a tragic culmination in 1990 in the spate of self-immolations following the central government's decision to provide even larger quotas in federal jobs from applicants in lower castes. ("Wilson" 26)

In the novel, Samar finds himself in this milieu of students. Feeling discriminated against by the government, he proceeds to question the role of caste and Hinduism in his life.

Plot Summary

The plot recollects the time Samar spends in Benares. Samar narrates how this period is significant because it changes the course of his life. As a Brahmin, he would never intermingle with foreigners to the extent that he does in Benares. Furthermore, he falls in love with Catherine, a French woman, and when she rejects him, he becomes a primary school teacher in Dharamshala, thus failing to fulfil his father's expectations that he enter the Indian Civil Service. Samar comes to Benares with the intention to read, but is soon forced to confront the violence in the University which is the result of caste conflict and of general dissatisfaction with government policies. Samar befriends Rajesh, a former student, a Brahmin like himself, who has become embroiled in violent campus politics. Samar feels that the life of crime that Rajesh decides to embark on is somewhat inevitable because Rajesh has no viable job opportunities in modern-day India. In addition, Rajesh's own casteist views prevent him from working for lower-caste businessmen. He is thus thrust into a nefarious life of crime where the only certainty is his death at the hands of unscrupulous men. In Benares, Samar also befriends a group of foreigners, amongst them Miss West, his neighbour. Through the foreigners and his reading of Western books, he is exposed to Western values. Initially, he equates the West with the modern. Hence, he feels that his Brahmin Hindu heritage with its deep links to the past has not equipped him to deal with contemporary life. Samar's life thus departs from the normal trajectory of a Hindu Brahmin. He falls in love with a French woman named Catherine who cannot be with him because she is already committed to an Indian boyfriend, Anand. Samar continues to hope that she will leave Anand for him. Toward the end of the novel, Samar has to travel to Pondicherry to visit his ailing father, who is in an ashram. Here he waits for a letter from Catherine, who has returned to Paris with Anand. Instead of good news, she writes a cruel note and breaks up abruptly with him. This has an extremely destabilizing impact on his life. He decides to travel before taking up a

post as an English teacher in a primary school in Dharamshala. While travelling, he is exposed to more violence, this time a result of the religious conflicts between Hindus, Muslims, and to a lesser extent, Christians. Disheartened by what he sees, he retreats to Dharamshala to teach English in a primary school. He intends to stay there for a year, but stays for seven years. Eventually, the urge to find out about his former friends drives him back to Benares. The novel ends on an uncertain note. The Westerners appear to have returned to their respective homelands without gaining any special enlightenment from India. Samar's Indian friend, Rajesh, has become a contract killer, and Anand has become a second-rate musician in a Delhi orchestra. Anand still pines for Catherine. The final scene shows us Samar in Benares, but it does not reveal where he plans to go from there.

Samar's Crisis of Hindu Identity and His Immersion in a Hybrid Culture

Samar is an intellectual who examines the minutiae of his life in an attempt to grasp some meaningful conclusions about existence. As a Brahmin, he especially tries to analyze how his past contributes to his current crisis in Hindu identity. Samar's predicament arises from the government's challenge to the caste system which has left him with no specific role in Indian society. Furthermore, his unspectacular undergraduate education in Allahabad University has equipped him with no professional skills for life. Samar reflects on his family's experiences and describes their affluence in the past. They were high caste Hindus who lost their privileged status and were

thrown into the new ruthless go-getting world of independent India with none of their old certainties intact. Successive land reform legislation undermined the family's assets to the point where ancestral jewelry had to be sold off to pay for the education of my father and his brothers. (68)

He says his father grew up “knowing both a kind of feudal grandeur and shameful penury. From a life of secluded leisure, he was catapulted into the ranks of desperate millions seeking jobs under the new regime” (69). Samar’s father ultimately finds work in the Public Works Department and although they are of the highest caste, the family is now firmly middle class.

The social transformations in India have obvious ramifications for Samar. He cannot depend on his Brahmin heritage to provide either class or caste privilege anymore. He states explicitly that “I was very much on my own [...] the past that had given shape and coherence to my parents’ lives was no longer available to me” (72). Samar is unable to tap into his religious identity in two ways. Firstly, the practical aspects of being a Brahmin no longer exist for him and secondly, the exclusive spiritual consciousness defined by being a Brahmin is no longer valid in his contemporary life.

The practical aspect of his Brahmin status and its attendant material impoverishment is what he first expresses concern about. He states

For centuries after Akbar, my ancestors had remained wealthy landowners in the flatlands enclosed by the foothills of the western Himalayas. During all that time, the turbulent history of medieval India touched them little. (68)

Samar is resentful of his transition to penury. In fact, he implies that his legacy is doubly arduous because of the quotas that have been imposed on jobs in the Civil Service. He cannot access privilege through this route nor can he share in the life of privilege enjoyed by his father’s family. He states

the serenity of the old Brahmin world in which his (father’s) family had lived for centuries was even more remote for me [...] I had a great

reverence and awe for these ancient practices. But at the same time I could feel my own life had drifted apart from them. (69)

Samar realizes that his life must take a different route from that of a traditional Brahmin, not just materially but spiritually as well. Indeed, the novel questions whether this spiritual consciousness ever had any relevance for Samar. He states that his mother's copy of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and her small idols of Krishna and Rama

had accompanied her all her life; they had made up her world; but it was not until I came across the heavily annotated Hindu calendar she kept hung in her room all her life that I realized how inviolably whole that world had been to her. It had been a realm of existence over and above her sorrows and disappointments on the material plane, a world with its own rhythms and seasons, virtues and habits. (71)

Samar's mother's calendar is annotated because she observes Hindu religious festivals. Samar, however, has never observed these festivals. He believes that the answers to how to live in contemporary India lie in the West. Aware that he must empower himself with knowledge, he turns to reading Flaubert and Edmund Wilson.

Samar wants to expose himself to Western thinking which he equates with modernity so that he can deal with the contemporary moment. He reads Western books and then uses them to describe situations specific to India. When he first visits Catherine, she tells him that having too many things can be construed as being too bourgeois. He responds by quoting "Flaubert, from some probably inaccurate translation, about how one should live like a bourgeois but think like a bohemian" (45). Samar flaunts his Western book-learning to show the foreigners that many Indians, like himself, are educated. However, by using Western books to represent this learning, he undermines his Indian roots. On a positive note, though, he

demonstrates the hybridity of his culture. Bhabha's claim applies to Samar, that "colonial specularity, doubly inscribed, does not produce a mirror where the self apprehends itself; it is always the split screen of the self and its doubling, the hybrid" (Culture 114). The primacy of Western books on Samar's reading list indicates the extensive influence that the colonial education system has in India. When Samar arrives in the room he is to occupy for the duration in Benares, he replaces shelves where "the vermilion spattered clay idols of Krishna and Vishnu had stood" (6) with books. By dispensing with the religious icons, Samar further demonstrates his alienation with respect to Hinduism. He is besotted with Western Empiricism and views reason as more valid than religion. The access to these books also reveals the hybrid culture that Samar is immersed in. He states,

The University (Benares Hindu) built in the early years of the twentieth century, was the work of the pre-Gandhi generation of Indian nationalists, such leading figures as Madan Mohan Malviya [...and] the larger aim these nationalists had, apart from independence, was the regeneration of India through direct and vigorous contact with the best of what was being thought and said in the Western world. (78)

Like the nationalists mentioned above, Samar tries to enlarge his worldview by accessing Western thought and reason. He believes he can rejuvenate his life and increase his narrowed options by reading Flaubert and Wilson. These books are meant to expand his horizons and provide relief from his crisis of Hindu identity.

Ultimately, Samar uses his reading to counter the Orientalist views of the foreigners whom he meets. He wants to correct the foreigner's misperceptions of India and tries to do so on their terms. However, he fails to enlighten them because, unlike him, they are not receptive to the hybrid culture that is so much a part of Benares. While Samar ventures out to associate with them, the foreigners stick

together. They form their own community and socialize among themselves. The only exception to this is Catherine, and her motives are questionable. Catherine lives with Anand, an Indian sitar player whom she supports financially and wants to bring to the West. She is the quintessential Orientalist who wants to save the poor Indian. In doing so, she has exoticized him. This is true of how many of the foreigners in the novel view India. Samar says,

Most of them couldn't think of India as anything other than an exotic hotbed of illiteracy, poverty and religion; [they go on] speaking excitedly of sadhus who had been standing on one leg for ten years.
(92)

Samar uses the books he has read to refute the foreigner's bigoted and prejudiced views about Indians but unfortunately,

in trying to correct their notions of India, I became false to myself and others [...] I became eager to flaunt my book-learning, and I dropped names right and left: Nietzsche, Mann, Proust, James, Keirkegaard, Pascal. (92)

Samar feels that he has become false to himself because he uses Western book-learning rather than Indian knowledge to respond to the Orientalist views of the foreigners. But he is ill-equipped to respond with Indian books or with Hindu ideas. Samar states "the mediocre Christian-run schools in which [he] had spent [his] childhood" (69) would not have equipped him with the study of Hindu writings such as the Vedas. Thus, he cannot help but respond to the foreigners with Western books.

The most damaging indictment to contemporary Hindu identity in the novel is revealed through Samar's friend, Rajesh. Rajesh is a graduate of Benares Hindu University who still resides on campus. He is a contractor, a Brahmin who offers protection to other Brahmin students at the University in the intercaste conflicts.

Samar regrets his first visit to Rajesh at Benares Hindu University because he sees evidence of Rajesh's involvement in campus violence. He had been told that Rajesh was not in politics, but when he sees a bag of pistols in Rajesh's room, he says, "I was less certain about what he actually did at the university. The pistols now made me wonder; they also made me nervous" (28). Samar has no political affiliations and does not want to get involved with the Hindutva movement. Cognizant of the fact that violent nationalism is, to a certain extent, a result of historical pacts made between the British and different groups, he also knows that such long-standing divisions cannot be easily solved. At the University, though, he is dependent on Rajesh to get him a health certificate from the University infirmary, and he requires Rajesh's protection. Samar demonstrates an example of the rifts between groups in University society when he repeats what Rajesh says.

'Studious' Brahmins like myself, he would say, pronouncing the English words with relish, needed 'backers' if they were to go on studying without fear of disturbance from low-caste 'lumpens' and 'anti-social elements.' (23)

Rajesh pronounces English words with relish because he is very much a part of the colonial construct. Later, Samar also realizes that Rajesh's lack of opportunity and mobility in life has parallels with his own life. Samar accompanies Rajesh on a visit home and finds out that Rajesh comes from abject poverty. As a child, he was employed as a laborer. Although Rajesh has educated himself by going to night school and has obtained an undergraduate degree, his initial intention of sitting for the Mains has been thwarted by the reservation system that allows only a certain quota of Brahmins to enter the Civil Service.

Rajesh is based on a real character in Mishra's life and Mishra refers to the dearth of opportunity for students like Rajesh in the 1998 *New York Review of Books* article. He comments,

Students from the lately impoverished upper castes suffered most in this respect; if poverty wasn't enough, they were further disadvantaged by the large quotas for lower caste candidates in government jobs. ("Wilson" 26)

In the novel, Rajesh's mother tells Samar that, in her opinion, Brahmins like Rajesh have even fewer work opportunities than those of other castes. She says

All the government jobs these days were going to low caste people, and not only did Rajesh have the wrong caste, he had no connections anywhere. He also had too much self-respect to work for low-caste shopkeepers and businessmen. (170)

The dearth of jobs for a Brahmin like Rajesh is related to his own casteist thinking, which does not simply arise out of nowhere. It can be attributed to the collusion made between the British and the Brahmins, an unhealthy alliance that has led to Rajesh's opinion that he is superior to Hindus of other caste. Samar, on the other hand, feels that Rajesh should put aside his caste prejudice and accept work from lower caste merchants. However, he is also aware that globalization has affected them in that they now have fewer job opportunities.

In another scathing critique of how casteist thinking has affected Hindus, the text highlights an incident where Samar's Brahmin status hinders him from speaking to a low caste man who rows a boat on the Ganges for a living. In the novel, Samar will not deign to speak to this man, Ramchand. He justifies it by stating

although I spoke the same language as Ramchand and lived in the same country, the scope for conversation between us was limited.

Countless inhibitions of caste and class stood in our way; the only common vocabulary between us was the service he offered. (38)

Samar feels the lingering effects of his high caste identity. While he has rejected the Indian nationalist's desire to protect privilege through stressing caste, Samar still cannot bring himself to speak to the boatman.

G. Aloysius, in a seminal article on caste, has pointed out that any explanation of caste must grapple with its long history. Caste, an empirical fact, is separate from varna, which is ideological (152-71). Varna is the "actual divisions of society based on birth with discriminating rights and liabilities" (155). Aloysius states

caste-varna, both as an existential reality and a cognitive ideal is another name for Brahminical social order or Brahminism, in short, which as the socio-political ideology of modern Indian is inextricably entangled with the nation (India) and the religion (Hinduism). In a very real sense, this trimurti is a colonial-collusive-construct. That is why any attempt to deconstruct or destruct caste has vital implications for nation and religion; and similarly any attempt to valorize either the nation or religion has the unfortunate effect of sending the wrong signals to the masses who are victims of the caste-varna system and spirit, albeit at different levels. (170-1)

These ostensibly "wrong signals" include the idea that those in lowly jobs should not seek to improve their stations in life. Samar does not endorse the caste system, but paradoxically, he does not speak to Ramchand. When Miss West, who is on the boat with him, speaks to Ramchand, Samar says it has an "un-Indian naturalness" (38).

Samar's religious traditions have alienated him from his countryman. Furthermore, his comment indicates that the inability to transcend these caste barriers is a historical by-product of Empire that has become an innate feature of Indian society.

The deadening lack of opportunity for Hindu Brahmins permeates the novel. This is exemplified when Rajesh chooses a life of crime. He becomes a contract killer. His political passion and his fury are directed at the government and by extension, the quota policies that have discriminated against him. By the end of the novel, he is unable to meet with Samar because it is too dangerous. Nonetheless, Samar feels tied to Rajesh because they are both Brahmins. Also, Samar had recommended Flaubert's Sentimental Education to Rajesh to read. Upon finishing it, Rajesh says, "It is the story of my world. I know these people well" (175). Samar echoes this feeling and says the book

held out a philosophical vision (I) couldn't fail to recognize. Something of Hindu fatalism seemed to come off its pages, a sense of life as drift and futility and illusion, and to see it dramatized so compellingly through a wide range of human experience was to have, even at twenty, with so little experience of anything, a chilling intimation of life ahead. (155)

The book they read, Sentimental Education, involves European characters doomed to act out trajectories that are strongly suggestive of Hindu fatalism. Although Samar manages to escape the fate of Rajesh, his path also deviates from the expected Brahmin route.

The violence at the University is extensive and Samar states, "For some months, the campus had been the setting for pitched battles between the police and students" (24). Samar stays clear of the agitators and it becomes increasingly evident that his response to the extensive violence is "satyagraha." However, Samar's "satyagraha" stance is a hybrid one because he does not have a coherent political or personal agenda. He has no desire to further any social or political cause. Gandhi has said that to be a "satyagrahi," one has to have an agenda. As Gandhi states, "Without

a direct active expression of it, non-violence, to my mind, is meaningless” (36).

Samar comments about student politics, but his reticence to become actively involved suggest that he wants to remain detached. By professing that he will not get involved, Samar keeps away from imposed forms of nationalism that support and endorse specific agendas through their narrow religious affiliations. Samar states

I had no sympathy for sectarian, caste-or religion-based politics; I wanted to keep as far away as possible from the constant skullduggery and intrigue that went on among different political factions, and frequently resulted in violence. (23)

Samar uses the term ‘skullduggery’ to imply that these nationalist movements have shadowy affiliations and that they are to be regarded with suspicion because they are deceptive, because their agendas are unclear and because they are endorsed by people of questionable values. In the postcolonial Indian context, the political factions in Benares have drawn religion into the arena of politics. They demand hegemony and link religion with territory and nation. These groups also tend to fundamentalist articulations of India as “Hindustan,” thus marginalizing other religious groups (Flood 250-73). Samar clearly states that he wants nothing to do with these organizations. This conveys his sense of alienation toward other Brahmins and their agenda of Brahminism.

As a Hindu Brahmin, Samar is traditionally forbidden to mingle with foreigners, much less fall in love with one. However, the hybrid culture he is immersed in allows him to do the unthinkable. He states “I felt easier in Miss West’s company; the world she represented held me more than the university” (33). He is besotted with the West. For him, Catherine is representative of the West. He first describes her as “looking in her calm self-possession, as she would always do, from another world, richer and more fulfilled than the one she lived in now” (19). This

view of Catherine proves to be wrong. Catherine is actually a conflicted individual who is desperate to be loved. She travels to the Himalayas with Samar. Here, he tells her that she must become detached, while himself becoming tied to her through their brief sexual liaison. He clings to the hope that they can be together, forgoing all thought that as a Hindu, he should not rely on her because she is both female and Western. Furthermore, love in the Brahmin social order is viewed as being of no special significance. He states

in the world I had known, romantic love was looked down upon as a kind of sensual derangement that briefly affected insufficiently acculturated or Brahminized youth and then left them broken and disillusioned soon afterwards...Love was supposed to follow marriage, not the other way round; and it mattered little if it didn't. (132)

However, Samar says the affair “had awakened a part of me I had never known” (136). This part of himself that he has “never known” is the complete antithesis of his Brahmin self, thus provoking a crisis in his Hindu identity. His Brahmin self does not subscribe to the primacy of romantic love, and to succumb to love is a weakness. It troubles him that he has fallen in love.

Hindu detachment is a philosophy Samar wants to follow and he does not question his commitment to detachment until he is with Catherine. As he travels to Kalpi with Catherine, she asks him about detachment. He tries to tell her about it but says “I could only remember my father’s homilies about the importance of detachment, homilies drawn from classical Hindu scriptures” (114). This suggests his lack of experience in a circumstance where he has to be detached. Catherine brings out his affective side and after their first sexual encounter, Samar cannot stay detached at all. He says he had a “new intense emotion [...] the emotion which was also a suddenly acute awareness of the great yearning that had lain suppressed within

for a long time” (136). He momentarily foregoes all thoughts of Hindu detachment and lives in the euphoria of love.

Love has serious implications for Samar. For Catherine, it is cursory; it is an event that momentarily alleviates her great anxiety regarding her future. She initiates the affair in a very offhand manner, and she makes open and premature declarations of love for Samar. Later, she seems flippant about it. Samar says

Catherine made scarcely any reference to what had happened between us; the terrible thought often came to me that the time in Kalpi, unforgettable for me, had already been forgotten by her. I wondered then if it had become for her yet another one of the inconsequential experiences she had disclosed to me, a minor distraction that would soon be swallowed up by other memories from her long, eventful past.

(151-2)

Samar’s instinct that the affair means more to him than it does to Catherine is affirmed by her unease with seeing him once they return to Benares. Upon their return, Catherine goes back to Anand. Presumably, Catherine chooses Anand over Samar because she wants to “save” her Indian boyfriend by exposing his talent to the West.

In Benares, Catherine will not resurrect the intimacy she shared with Samar. They get together in coffee houses and she no longer wants to meet with him in private. Furthermore, she starts making plans to leave for France with Anand. She does so with “new energy.” Knowing that she is leaving for Paris with Anand, Samar goes to the ashram in Pondicherry where his father is residing. His father is ill, thus adding greater urgency to Samar’s trip. As he leaves, Catherine gives him a card that states,

I just wanted to say how much you mean to me. Such friendship is a benediction, one of the things for which you feel worthy of living. And to think of the part I have played in your once secure life – what a mystery love is! (190).

This letter is misleading. Because of it, Samar believes that Catherine has deep feelings for him. He states,

there was no doubt that something of great significance had occurred in my life, and I was filled with a sense of wonder again at how the vague longings and expectations of childhood and adolescence had crystallized into a clear, sharp feeling for someone who was a stranger to me in so many ways, a foreigner I wouldn't ever have known had I not gone to Benares. (193)

Samar says that something of 'great significance' has occurred, for behind the mere meeting of lovers, there is also the proposition that the East and the West have found common ground. Catherine's declaration that she has played a part in his once "secure life" is ironic and suggestive: a throwback to the colonial encounter between the Empire and its effects on India.

In the text, Samar, who represents the East, now desires what Catherine and the West represent: freedom from traditional obligations, material and intellectual wealth, and global mobility. Thus, in Pondicherry, he waits anxiously for a letter from Catherine. Further evidence of how his Hindu identity has failed him is shown by his extreme anxiety while at the ashram in Pondicherry. His father's stated intention of retreat from the world also comes into question. Pondicherry is introduced as the place where Samar's father has come because "freedom from all bonds was what he had desired" (194). Samar's father has taken a resolve to retreat from the world, yet in Pondicherry, he is constantly with Deepa, a female companion.

Samar states “the intimacy with Deepa now made me wonder about the life he had shared with my mother” (194). He also states that Deepa’s proprietary claim on his father “made him uncomfortable” (194). However, he does not dwell long upon these matters because he is overwhelmed with unrelenting thoughts of Catherine. He waits hourly for a letter from her. Finally, she writes “*Please don’t write or try to get in touch with me in any other manner. Please accept this break with dignity and grace if it is possible for you*” (210). Samar reacts with a depth of loss and devastation which is unheard of for a Hindu Brahmin. He becomes emotionally numb and proceeds to block out the memory of Benares altogether.

Samar’s sense of self is completely violated by Catherine’s rejection. The contents of the letter deal a final blow to his youthful illusionment. The letter further states,

What was the meaning of this affair in the total economy of our lives, apart from giving me a sense of mischievous adventure and providing instant gratification to both of us? It was a perversion of human emotions, of our humanity. I now see that perversion within myself and feel ashamed. I feel ashamed of your role also. (210)

Catherine’s use of the phrase ‘instant gratification’ suggests that she has imposed her very Western view of sexuality on Samar. He, on the other hand, had viewed the events of their night together as a culmination of love. The break is so significant that years later, he calls the period a “time of pain” (217). He travels immediately after receiving the letter and this “diminished, however briefly, the feeling [...] that I had been contaminated in some profound way” (218). His use of the term ‘contaminated’ again implies that he feels that his Easternness has been tainted by Catherine’s Western ways.

The break-up with Catherine drives him to wander around India in a bid to reclaim a sense of self. He does not succeed and says, “in some sense, I went everywhere and nowhere” (216). Furthermore, his travels expose him to “the clumsy brutality, the rage, the dereliction, the damage I had so far read about in the papers (217). This wreckage is the result of violence between Muslims and Hindus. Samar is reduced to “wordless fear” (217). The only way he manages to evade what he sees as “the large and ominous void of the future” is by heading to Dharamshala to take up a job that has been arranged for him.

Samar’s decision to stay in Dharamshala is a direct expressive action of detachment. His choice of place – Dharamshala – is significant, for geographically, he cannot be further removed from the rest of the world. Ironically, Samar’s hybrid identity is also fully realized in Dharamshala because it is a hybrid place comprised of Hindus, Buddhists and people of various belief systems. Samar states,

Dharamshala was then, and has remained to a great extent, an unambitious little town. Its small population consisted mainly of Tibetans who had arrived in the 1960s as refugees from their homeland, and something of the private and incommunicable melancholy of permanent exile hung over its huddled houses and pinched streets. This effect impressed me deeply when I arrived one early monsoon evening. (218)

Samar empathizes with the Tibetans in Dharamshala. Specifically, their sense of “permanent exile” touches a chord within him, for he has himself been banished from Catherine’s world. In Dharamshala, Samar sets up a spartan home. He says “I moved into the house and spread my few possessions around. I let the house retain its bareness” (222). In living with minimal material possessions, he demonstrates another aspect of being a “satyagrahi” - the need to live a simple life.

The impetus that drives Samar toward this detachment shares qualities with how Indians have had to protect themselves from Western influence in postcolonial contexts. Ashis Nandy states,

The average Indian has always lived with the awareness and possibility of long-term suffering, always seen himself as protecting his deepest faith with the passive, 'feminine' cunning of the weak and the victimized, and surviving outer pressures by refusing to overplay his sense of autonomy and self respect. At his heroic best, he is a satyagrahi, one who forges a partly coercive weapon called satyagraha out of what Lannoy calls 'perfect weakness.' In his non-heroic ordinariness, he is the archetypal survivor. Seemingly he makes all round compromises, but he refuses to be psychologically swamped, co-opted or penetrated. Defeat, his response seems to say, is a disaster and so are the imposed ways of the victor. But worse is the loss of one's soul. (111)

Like Nandy's average Indian, Samar demonstrates "perfect weakness" by refusing to act. He resorts to passivity to reclaim his sense of self. Ultimately, Samar has to become detached because he cannot bear the pain of Catherine's rejection. Nonetheless, by becoming detached, he is reverting to a Hindu framework.

Samar stays in Dharamshala because it offers him peace of mind. This time is obviously meant to invoke a spiritual ethos because it is a self-imposed exile from the world. The seven years constitute his retreat from the world. He acquires a new life through discarding his past. In some ways, he is rejuvenated. He states "I would be suffused with a sense of well-being I had never known before. This was to me the new and exhilarating discovery of that time" (227). He does well as a teacher and is

promoted to assistant principle. He achieves an equanimity that he wants to protect.

Samar realizes he was unrealistic to have attached himself to Catherine. He says

I still sensed something raw and incoherent within my personality; and I remained vulnerable to those large vague longings [...] these moments went by quickly [...] I was more conscious than ever of how absurdly romantic and incongruous these longings were for me. (230)

The “absurdly romantic” longings that Samar laments were his notions of idealized love with a foreigner. In his naïve high regard of all that Catherine represented, he had believed that her love could fulfil him. Only by living the simple life in Dharamshala does he come to see that these longings were incompatible with his life. However, at the end of the novel, Samar once again returns to Benares, thus resurrecting his need for more than a mere simple life in Dharamshala. The novel ends with him in Benares, and we are not told where he will go from there, but the assumption is that he will now pursue a more complex way of being again.

Samar’s hybrid identity develops fully in Dharamshala. This is not a coincidence since Dharamshala is also a hybrid place. When he approaches the landlady of the house he wants to rent, he discovers that her Eastern name, Uma Devi, does not coincide with the “slightly, talkative, tonsured woman in her late thirties, from Bavaria, Germany [who] had adopted the name after converting to Buddhism” (220). The fact that Dharamshala is filled with exiles puts Samar literally at the periphery. The hybrid feature of the time is furthered by the fact that he teaches English to students who feel that this is “their passport to the larger world” (223). The provincial nature of Dharamshala does not affect him at all. Rather, he is content here. He states,

I didn’t miss the old intensity of contradictory hopes and fears, the hopeful blind striving I knew in the days I came to live in Benares,

which I felt was leading me nowhere [...] I could even think that this detached, eventless life wasn't far from matching the old Brahmin idea of retreat, from fulfilling those ancestral obligations my father still wrote me about. (238-9)

Samar believes that his life in Dharamshala has similarities to the Brahmin idea of retreat because his time in Dharamshala is solitary. His internal life is no longer characterized by self-doubt and anxiety. Rather, he finds equanimity. But it is not to last.

The transient nature of Samar's Western contacts from Benares is revealed when Samar runs into one of his old acquaintances, Mark. By sheer coincidence, Samar sees Mark in Dharamshala. Mark launches into a discussion about spirituality. He also says that his new relationship has provided the necessary answers to his existential dilemma. He says, "it was so simple. Like everyone else I also want to love and be loved. Just that" (237). Mark also states,

"you realize after some time what a load of bullshit [...] all these great religions and philosophies are, this thing about solitude and loneliness being good for your spiritual and philosophical growth. So you end up starving yourself in every way, waiting and hoping for this truly awesome spiritual jackpot that never comes, and then one day you are down there all alone in Manikarnika Ghat turning to ashes with not a single soul on the fucking planet who feels sorry for you." (237)

Clearly, Mark's monologue suggests that the foreigners are on a quest, and in the event they fail to find something spiritually tangible, they dismiss Eastern spirituality and call it "a load of bullshit." Mishra uses the context of Samar's reflection to suggest that such existential questions are too complex to find adequate answers in either Eastern or Western value systems. Although Samar was initially skeptical of

practicing any aspect of Hinduism, he comes to respect certain redemptive elements for it is the Hindu idea of retreat that has restored his peace of mind.

Samar does not want to be drawn into ambivalence again. He experiences an extreme reaction to Mark's comments and says "the balance I had arrived at in Dharamshala, was so fragile. I did not want it to be threatened – particularly by something that was an echo from my time in Benares" (238). The past threatens to draw him back into spiritual and emotional turmoil and he resolves to stay away from Mark. He states,

For years now, I had lived neutrally, on the surface. I had learned to live without the feeling I'd had for all of my childhood and early adulthood, the quiet certainty that had existed over and above the fear and pain of those years, that something good and precious was growing within me. (238)

This indicates that Samar has subsumed his emotions by living neutrally. He has put aside the bourgeois dreams that he had in Benares. By subsuming those emotions, he has also buried the sense that "something good and precious was growing" within him. In Dharamshala, he has found a configuration of solitude and contentment that works, but it is a fragile peace, for he is afraid that Mark can threaten it. Thus, he resolves not to see Mark again.

Samar's life is complex and multi-dimensional and no essentialist reductions can properly be used to define it. Samar's retreat in Dharamshala is clearly imperfect for eventually he feels compelled to return to Benares to address the sense that "he has left something incomplete and unresolved" (240). His decision to return is spurred on by an invitation from Miss West which is forwarded along with a parcel that Rajesh had left for Samar years ago. The package contains a copy of Sentimental Education and an essay on Flaubert, items that Samar had loaned to Rajesh. Samar

puts these aside but picks them up again after he has unexpectedly run into Pratap, one of Rajesh's old "hangers-on." Pratap reveals that Rajesh is now a notorious contract killer. Shortly thereafter, Samar receives a letter from Rajesh explaining that they cannot meet because it would be too dangerous. This news appalls Samar and later when he rereads Sentimental Education, he states,

I couldn't see it then, but in Benares I had been among people who, like Frederic and his friends, had either disowned or, in many cases, moved away from their provincial origins to realize their dreams of success in the bourgeois world. Rajesh was one of them. So was Pratap, and so, in a different way, was I, with all the confused longings I had for a true awakening to the world, for everything I felt lay out of my reach. (250)

While in Benares, Samar had imagined himself in a middle-class, bourgeois world. Furthermore, the things he had been striving for while in Benares had nothing to do with the distinction between East and West. Rather, his dreams of entering the Civil Service had to do with becoming upwardly mobile. Catherine's rejection of his love is what causes him to retreat from the world and by going to Dharamshala, he gives up his bourgeois pursuits. However, they seem always to be in the back of his mind and hence, he avoids Mark. Only through retreat does he find equanimity. Eventually, however, his curiosity about Rajesh and Miss West convince him to return to Benares.

His return to Benares forces him to confront his past and to acknowledge that his early longings were both vague and naive. When he goes back, he finds that Miss West has aged, and far from feeling as if she was once his friend, Samar finds that he never really knew her. She reminisces about the past and about a courtesan recently dead and pronounces it "such a fucking waste" (269). Years earlier, when Miss West

and Samar had thrown a party, her words the next morning were “it’s all a waste, isn’t it? Such a fucking waste” (34). Samar’s reaction to her then was “I had a sudden oppressive sense of the density of memories, wounds, ambitions, regrets seething inside the body leaning against mine” (34). Back then, Miss West had been living between meetings with her English lover. Now, she has stopped waiting for him and accepted that they will never be together. Ironically, Miss West’s fate is similar to Samar’s in that they both have unrequited love affairs. Samar finds out that Miss West intends to return to England. As their talk continues, Miss West brings up Catherine and Anand. Catherine has settled with a broker and lives a middle-class life. As for Anand, he had not received a single job offer in Paris. He returned to India in a state of dejection and works at a studio orchestra in Delhi. He lives in a slum. But his physical penury is nothing compared to his misery at being dumped by Catherine. He still longs for her and for the grandiose life he had imagined for himself. Miss West concludes by stating,

Anand, people like him, they can’t afford such ideas, they don’t know who they are; they don’t know what they want; they are simply trying hard not to sink into the misery and wretchedness they are born into. That’s what he’s doing now. (273)

This absolute indictment of the Easterner who tries to seek fulfillment through the West and its attendant ideas also applies to Samar. Samar reveals this by stating, “How could I confess that the larger world that I had once longed to enter had become a fearful place for me?” (274). Samar knows he has been spared a life as meaningless as Anand’s and Rajesh’s only because he had escaped the bourgeois aspirations that he harbored. He has acknowledged his hybridity and stopped aspiring to a stereotype of Western identity. His equanimity is purchased at no small cost and it is contrasted starkly with the unhappiness of the other character’s lives.

How the Setting Inscribes Religion into the Novel

Mishra has located the novel in Benares in the attempt to reveal the conflicts faced by Hindus of Brahmin descent, for Benares is of great significance to Hindus. By locating the protagonist in Benares, Mishra deals with the religious implications for Brahmin youth in a city that was considered holy even during the British occupation of India. Mishra uses this venue to study Samar's response to Hinduism. He also shows Samar's lack of job opportunities before going on to tackle the larger and infinitely more complex nature of religious pluralism in India. Samar states,

The new middle-class prosperity of India has at last come to Benares. This holiest of pilgrimage sites that Hindus for millennia have visited in order to attain liberation from the cycle of rebirths has grown into a noisy little commercial town.

This is as it should be; one can't feel too sad about such changes. Benares, destroyed and rebuilt so many times during centuries of Muslim and British rule – is, the Hindus say, the abode of Shiva, the god of perpetual creation and destruction. The world constantly renews itself, and when you look at it that way, regret and nostalgia seem equally futile. (3)

Samar mentions Muslim and British rule despite the overwhelming Hindu association of Benares. He also implies that the Muslims and British are responsible for the Benares of today and that the "noisy little commercial town" owes much of its character to the hybrid culture that existed in Benares.

The "perpetual creation and destruction" which is "as it should be" is specific to Hinduism. Samar is endorsing the Hindu idea that there is no end to the universe or to life. Samar's mother's body was brought to Benares to be disposed of. In this context, the words of D. Shulman apply:

The Hindu universe is a closed circuit; nothing new can be produced except by destroying or transforming something else. To attain more life – [...] the ‘rebirth of the sacrificial victim himself – the life of the victim must be extinguished. Life and death are two facets of a single never-ending cycle. (90)

Thus, Hindus flock to the river in Benares to cremate their relatives’ physical bodies once they have died. The “waters are believed by Hindus to wash away sin and release the soul for its journey toward heaven” (Nirmala A4). Coterminous with this principle of transformation is how Benares is instrumental to a major change in Samar’s life. When Samar arrives in Benares, he is keenly aware of the “immemorial Hindu belief that to die in Benares [is] to be released from the cycle of rebirths; it couldn’t be argued with” (70). Samar knows that people flock to Benares to die, and if not that, then their relatives bear their corpses to Benares for cremation. Cremation is viewed as a sacrifice because the physical body is destroyed (Parry 152). Samar describes some of these destructive facts with disdain in the context of his mother’s burial: “the bridal gaudiness inflicted on the helpless female corpse, the breaking of the skull with a bamboo pole” (70). However, he also writes,

Before I could arrive in Benares, she died and had to be cremated quickly. I was secretly relieved to be spared of my duties in this regard, I couldn’t have coped with the physical facts of a Hindu cremation.” (70)

According to Parry, “the performance of such rites is the most solemn of filial duties, and one of the three inescapable debts which a man must discharge in the course of his life” (151). However, Samar did not perform all the requisite obligations. Samar’s sense of being alienated from his religion can be attributed to this lapse in performing his Hindu duties. He states that the Hindu holy and fasting days are

“alien” to him (72). His religion is “cognitive” as opposed to “affective” (King 71) implying that although he is aware that he is a Brahmin, he does not perpetuate or practice ritual or tradition in order to distinguish his Brahminical status. Thus, he does not attend his mother’s cremation. His lapse in fulfilling his Hindu duties also distances him from his family. He cannot identify with his father’s attitudes and beliefs.

Samar is drawn to Benares because it was once a centre of education.

According to Jonathan Parry,

With its reputation for orthodox Brahmanical Hinduism and its ancient tradition of Sanskritic learning, it is the Brahmans who set the dominant religious tone of the city. Despite its relatively small population, Benares now [1990] supports three universities, each of which prides itself on a strength in Sanskrit studies and/or Hindu philosophy, as well as a host of *pathshalas* (traditional schools) devoted to transmitting under the tutelage of a Brahman guru a knowledge of the sacred scriptures and an ability to recite Vedic mantras. (34)

It is significant, however, that Benares Hindu University had been built out of an impetus to reconcile ancient Hindu beliefs with Western empiricism and modernity.

This hybrid focus is another reason that scholars, both foreign and Indian, go to Benares. Mishra writes that the university had

come out of an old, and now vanished impulse, the desire among Hindu reformists in the freedom movement to create indigenous centers of education and culture. The fundamental idea was to train young Hindu men for the modern world; and like many other idealisms of the freedom movement, it hadn’t survived long in the

chaos of independent India, where even the right to education came to be fiercely fought over under the banner of specific castes, religions, regions and communities. (“Wilson” 25)

Mishra believes that the University no longer trains Hindus for the modern world, and that the University has lost its original focus. However, Samar’s trajectory in the novel indicates that the problem is more complex than that. In the novel, Samar makes it clear that the campus is a place of extensive violence. He calls it an arena for “pitched battles.” (24). The violence that terrorizes the University is religious as well as secular. Despite his desire to maintain his distance from student activism, Samar is acutely aware of the religious tensions because they are inspired by casteism and pertain to him.

The general dissatisfaction of Brahmin students in the campus is linked closely to the government’s adoption of the reservation system. Though not explicit in the novel, it is clear that students like Samar have come to Benares expecting to write their Civil Service exams. However, they have little hope of being selected because the quota of Brahmins is already exceeded. For other students, the rigorous nature of the exams poses a problem. Samar states,

Though very exacting, they still offered the quickest route to affluence and power in North India. More importantly, they offered a way out of the hopelessness and desperation many of the students from nearby villages and towns knew awaited them at home. These students spent the best part of their twenties in their badly lit rooms, grappling with various exam ‘guides,’ memorizing whole essays on Gandhi and Nehru, cramming their heads with arcane statistics about the Indian economy. But only a handful of them ever qualified. To the rest, the results came every year as a fresh blow. They were the ones you saw

age fast, with gray hair, crow's-feet, and faltering eyesight; and every year, there were at least four or five suicides. (29-30)

Some of the students who are not accepted into the Civil Service become malcontents and perpetuate the violence on campus. Samar himself never succumbs to violence since he states he is at the University only to read.

Another hybrid feature of the University is the vast availability of Western books. Mishra states that in spite of the tensions in the university "Miraculously, the library at Benares had remained well-stocked. [...] the books, as though through some secluded channel untouched by the surrounding disorder, had kept flowing in" ("Wilson" 25). The language Samar uses here provides an interesting analogy with the Ganges river, since that is where water flows from. More importantly, Samar's reading of English books in a Hindu University is another example of hybridity. He applies Western books to Indian contexts and comments that the disillusionment between the French intellectuals in Flaubert's Sentimental Education has parallels with the disaffection of Rajesh and the other students at Benares Hindu University.

The hybrid identity featured in the text is further highlighted in scenes where tradition intersects with modernity. This is evident when the pilgrims flock to Benares. Samar states,

Millions of pilgrims visit the city that day [Shivratri] to bathe in the river [...] All around me, and in the far distance, swarmed a crowd of pilgrims, with not a patch of uncovered ground to be seen anywhere, pilgrims surging into the main road from all directions. (160)

The sense of the old intersecting with the new is exacerbated when Samar looks around him and states,

I began mechanically noting things: the hastily erected telephone booth, freshly painted, but without its constitutive instrument; the

misspellings and malapropisms on the bright little posters for Keo Karpin hair oil on lampposts and the vaguely fluttering banners between them. (162)

Samar observes the phenomenon of modern elements in the middle of a traditional Hindu festival. He questions whether hybridity is now a part of the social fabric of Benares.

Mishra's choice of Benares as the backdrop to Samar's life means that he can use the many Hindu images in Benares to articulate Samar's Hindu origins even while pointing to the hybrid nature of these origins. Mishra has chosen to construct Samar as a Brahmin so that he can incorporate a discussion of Brahminization into the novel.

Brahminization is

the process whereby the Sanskritic 'high' culture of the Brahmins absorbed non-brahminical (sometimes called 'popular' or even 'tribal') religious forms. [It] was an effective means of assimilating diverse cultural strands within one's locality, and of maintaining social and political authority. (Srinivas 20)

Competing notions of Hinduism have always co-existed in India. One of the effects of the colonization of India was Brahminization² and it was a means for the British authorities to apply a uniform strategy to govern groups that were very different in nature. After independence, Hindu nationalist organizations maintained this strategy, this time to obtain widespread support.

² To adapt to the beliefs or practices of a high Hindu caste was also called Sanskritization and "a lower caste was able to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by Sanskritizing its ritual and pantheon. In short, it took over, as far as possible, the customs, rites, and beliefs of the Brahmins" (O.E.D., second edition 467). This process has been called 'Sanskritization' in Srinivas' book, in preference to 'Brahminization.' The difference between Brahminization and Sanskritization are that certain Vedic rites are confined to Brahmins and the two other 'twice-born' castes.

Another reason Mishra maintains the Brahmin focus is to reveal the political ramifications of being a Brahmin. The events of the novel indicate that in the contemporary moment, casteism works against the Brahmins. Samar's job prospects are bleak because of his status as a Brahmin, a caste that has been discriminated against by the government's reservation system. Mishra makes clear that the violence that ensues at Benares Hindu University is tied to casteism. In the commentary in his essay, Mishra states

Such violence, extreme though it seemed, wasn't new to the university, which had long been witness to bloodier battles between student wing of Communist and Hindu nationalist organizations. These two groups tended to be allied with different ends of the caste system: the lower castes tended to be Communist: the upper castes tended to be Hindu nationalist. ("Wilson" 26)

The novel, however, complicates this perspective by suggesting that Brahmins are not merely discriminated against by the reservation system. In fact, their own sense of elitism prevents them from existing peacefully with lower caste Hindus. This elitist mentality can be traced back to the encounter between the colonizers and the Brahmins. The British created alliances with Brahmins and preserved their historical privilege, a strategy that has backfired for Brahmins in contemporary India. The Brahmins' desire to maintain this privilege has created resentment from other groups and has led to violent political struggle.

The images of Benares described by Samar, also suggest a vital link to Inden's strand of discourse that is also termed 'Romantic.' Inden postulates that Indian Romanticism is generally motivated by an idealization of Eastern culture and thus, it reifies and ascribes certain values to it. When Samar returns to Benares after visiting Rajesh's mother, he states, "a golden glow on the horizon announced Benares" (176).

The second time Samar returns to Benares, he comments, "I had the sensation of reentering a dream" (259). Mishra's title as well as Samar's poignant and evocative descriptions of India is suggestive of Inden's discussion of Indian Romanticism. It is an area that is indebted to European Romanticism and is an example of further hybridity in Samar's outlook. This style informs the novel as a whole, and a further example of it can be seen when Samar and Catherine visit the Himalayas.

The Romantics: A Commentary on Religion in the Indian Nation

Mishra explores the crisis of Hinduism that has informed nationalism by addressing it through Samar's predicament. The extreme violence provoked by Hindu nationalism is highlighted. The violence revealed here has been commented on by Mishra in many articles. In one particular article in the "New York Times Magazine," he states:

The consistent demonizing of Muslims and Christians by Hindu nationalists may seem gratuitous -- Christians in India are a tiny and scattered minority, and the Muslims are too poor, disorganized and fearful to pose any kind of threat to Hindus -- but it is indispensable to the project of a Hindu nation. The attempt to unite low and upper-caste Hindus in a united front against Muslims and Christians has certainly worked in the state of Gujarat. Ashok Singhal, the president of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council, V.H.P.), yet another R.S.S. affiliate, seemed to accept proudly the charge of inciting anti-Muslim hatred when he described last year's pogrom in Gujarat as a 'victory for Hindu society.' Whole villages, he said, had been 'emptied of Islam.' 'We were successful,' he said, 'in our experiment of raising Hindu consciousness, which will be repeated all over the country now.' ("Fanaticism")

While Samar is at Benares Hindu University, he describes lower and upper caste Hindus as living in opposition. However, one of the effects of Brahminization is the desire to consolidate Hindus of various castes. Some Hindu nationalist movements view united Hindus as a powerful majority able to successfully skew the balance of power in favour of Hindus, while other religions become the minority. When Samar travels across the countryside, the violence he sees differs from the violence in the University in that it is between different religious groups: the Hindus and the Muslims. The above paragraph suggests that Hindus are united in at least one area, that is in their violent opposition to Muslims. Clearly, Mishra worries that Hinduism, with all its attendant traditions is being expropriated as a political tool in order for nationalists to further their agenda.

Furthermore, violent nationalist groups perpetuate the notion, as I have suggested in the introduction, that Hinduism is one single religion and that all Hindus endorse “Hindutva.” This representation of Hinduism as homogenous has been commented on by Dalmia and Steitencrom:

Scholars who study the history of the Hindu religion more closely discover such a plurality of religious doctrine and practices with Hinduism, that the current practice of subsuming them under one religion appears inadequate. (50)

The process of homogenizing Hinduism is a ploy by nationalist groups to obtain more support. However, not all Hindus endorse Hindutva and Mishra uses Samar to convey the vision that religious diversity and foreign influence must be tolerated for peace to prevail. The violence that Samar sees in his travels after leaving Pondicherry is far more pernicious, destructive and wanton than the violence in Benares Hindu University. However, Samar can no longer view the conflict objectively because his emotional life is in shambles. The escalating violence leaves him with a distinct sense

of futility, a numbness that he brings with him to his new life in Dharamshala. After Samar leaves Pondicherry, he travels. He says

And as it turned out, the unfamiliar world I longed for proved to be disturbing in an unsuspected way. It was nowhere more so than in the towns I passed through that had experienced Hindu-Muslim rioting over the then-still-standing Babri Masjid. In these places, I couldn't walk a few yards away from my refuge for the night without encountering some conspicuous trace of recent violence: burned or scorched buildings, charred cars, buses and scooters, upturned carts with missing rubber tires...

I saw all this – the clumsy brutality, the rage, the dereliction, the damage I had so far read in the papers – I saw all this and the great grief I felt was reduced gradually to wordless fear. I kept telling myself as consolation: this isn't my world, I'll soon be out of it. (217)

Samar does not suspect that the unfamiliar world he longs for will be quite as distressingly violent. He is exposed to a new degree of hatred, this time between Muslims and Hindus, over the site of the Babri Masjid. Built in 1528 in honour of the emperor who founded the Mughal dynasty in India, the Babri Masjid became a contentious place in 1788 when Jesuit priest Joseph Tieffenthaler suggested that Rama, hero-king of the *Ramayana*, was born in the vicinity of the Masjid. Mishra highlights the Babri Masjid specifically because the animosity surrounding the mosque has reached an apex around the time he is writing, that is, in the early nineties. On Dec. 6, 1992, three Hindu nationalist groups, the BJP, the VHP, and the RSS together with 300,000 holy men and volunteers gathered and proceeded to destroy the Babri Masjid brick by brick. The largely Hindu police force did not intervene in the destruction of the mosque. Mishra brings up the mosque because it is

a glaring example of Hindu extremist fanaticism which has widespread support from influential political groups (“muslims on line”). The core of the controversy affects Samar so much that he tells himself this is not his world. However, the reality is that it is very much his world, for as a Hindu living in India, he cannot avoid the religious conflicts that erupt and the implications this has for his own identity.

Samar’s attempt to protect himself by declaring that what he sees is not “his world” has roots in his early family life. Within the tightly structured Brahmin family, he is encouraged to remain aloof and to repress all emotion. This patriarchal aspect of Hinduism is critiqued by Mishra. In the novel, Samar recalls his love for his mother and remembers how this was curtailed by his father. As a child, when he returned to school after the holidays, he states that his mother and he both restrained “tears under the disapproving gaze of my father” (70). His father promotes the idea of Hindu detachment, and as a devout Brahmin, marriage and children are duties in which emotion has little part. While discerning that this is a harsh way in which to live, as an adult, Samar has adopted his father’s particular gendered Hindu outlook. He states,

I went by myself to the room in the ashram where my mother had spent her last years, slowly subsiding into a mist of religious piety and illness. It was where I had once seen her tiny figure huddled on the bed, quietly crying to herself. That was also the time when she first told me – out of what depths of desolation, I now wonder- that she did not wish to live any longer; and I, though taken aback, had taken after her husband, who thought her incapable of independent thought, and had not really believed she knew what she was saying. (70)

Samar knows that his father’s patriarchal views have undoubtedly contributed to his mother’s despair. Nonetheless, as a Hindu Brahmin, he blindly adopts his father’s

patriarchy. Samar believes this gender prejudice is uniquely Hindu and is surprised when he finds out later that it also exists in England, albeit in a different form. In Benares, Miss West says her father “belonged to a generation where people didn’t bother educating their daughters” (9). This surprises Samar who states “prejudices against female education were a feature of poor societies; I didn’t associate them with England” (9). As a result of her professional inadequacies, Miss West clings to the archaic notion that only love and marriage can complete her life. Thus, she has been waiting for her lover, who is a married British man, for twenty years. She conducts her affair with him in India and lives “from meeting to meeting” (117). Miss West is cognizant of how fruitless her aspirations are for the morning after a party, she says, “It’s all a waste, isn’t it? Such a fucking waste” (34). Samar is taken aback by her pronouncement but from it, he recognizes how important the past is in determining the lives of individuals. He knows that, consciously or unconsciously, the past is an influence that cannot be discounted.

The religious and ideological conflicts depicted in The Romantics are broadened to encompass both East and West when Samar receives Rajesh’s package in Dharamshala and finds an underlined passage in Wilson’s article that can be used to contextualise current issues. The passage states

Flaubert’s novel plants deep in our minds an idea which we never quite get rid of; the suspicion that our middle-class society of manufacturers, businessmen, and bankers, of people who live on or deal in investments, so far from being redeemed by its culture, has ended up cheapening and invalidating all the departments of culture, political, scientific, artistic and religious, as well as corrupting and weakening the ordinary human relations: love, friendship and loyalty to cause – till the whole civilization seems to dwindle. (249)

This underlined passage suggests that Rajesh has become disillusioned with Hindutva, a philosophy associated with this kind of upward mobility. Both he and Samar now believe humanity cannot be redeemed because it has succumbed to narrow, mercantile pursuits. As for the impoverished classes like Rajesh, Samar points out that they are merely trying to survive, and they have to make all kinds of moral compromises in order to do so. Samar goes on to add, “the small, unnoticed tragedies of thwarted hopes and ideals Flaubert wrote about in Sentimental Education were all around us (249). With unerring sureness, Mishra underscores the profound ennui that lack of opportunity has caused in all people in a materialistic world. The effects of capitalism, however, are more pernicious in India because the elite preserves existing privileges through extreme measures and makes it impossible for the poor to get ahead.

The countless examples of violence viewed by Samar results in a message that exhorts the Hindu to live in a world somewhere between reality and illusion. In spite of all the violence and hatred around him, Mishra imbues Samar with a defining vision. This is given to us in the beginning of part three, where he states “The world is maya, illusion: it was one of the very first things my father told me” (215). Prior to leaving Benares, he hears Rajesh tell a fellow student

‘That [...] is sunyata, the void. And this’ – he pointed at the teeming conglomeration of temples and houses toward the north of the city – ‘is maya, illusion. Do you know what our task is? [...] Our task is to live somewhere in between.’ (180)

The proposition that one has to live ‘in between’ is an appeal to ardent Hindu nationalists to forego their dogmatic pursuit of a Hindu state. The novel suggests that it is the only solution to the religious and caste conflicts. It is also the only solution to the extreme violence generated in the name of religion. This exhortation to live ‘in

between' is further reminiscent of hybridity. Thus, hybridity not only applies to the undefined space between cultural groups but it also pertains to the space between ideology and material issues in the everyday lives of Indians.

With The Romantics, Mishra engages in some of the more important questions concerning the role of religion and cultural hybridity in India. The success of the novel ultimately lies in its ability to engage the reader in these epistemological conundrums and to offer an educated Brahmin's view of the religious conflicts in India. By articulating the predicament of Samar, a predicament no doubt shared by many young Brahmins who experience social conflict in India, Mishra has revealed "a symbiotic relationship between life and literature" ("Wilson" 32). By this, Mishra means that he is attempting to explore themes in his writing that are "most likely to yield a true impression of life" (Sabin 2). This symbiotic relationship between life and literature is one Mishra first searched for himself by reading the great nineteenth century realists when he arrived as a young man in Benares. Not having found anything that particularized the postcolonial Brahmin predicament, he produced The Romantics. The result is a thoughtful and grave reflection of contemporary Indian life that raises many questions about Hindu identity and Indian nationalism, questions that may not find answers anytime soon.

The Mystic Masseur: Religion as an Alternative to Mimicry
in the
Construction of Selfhood

Introduction

Without doubt, the concept of Hindu identity has changed as Hindus have moved from India to other parts of the world. In the late nineteenth century, Hinduism as a cultural concept and as a religious notion changed because of immigration that was attributable to indentured labour. According to Vijay Mishra, this first set of emigrants whom he calls “the old diaspora of exclusivism” are clearly distinguishable from the immigrants of today, whom he calls “the diaspora of the border” (189). Critics charge that the historical context of the old diaspora is rarely unearthed, both by authors and readers and that the diaspora of exclusivism is relegated to the sidelines in favour of the newer, more dynamic diaspora whose issues of ethnicity, belonging and globalization are more exciting. Of the fiction writers whose subject matter has dealt with the old diaspora, Naipaul stands out because his work often explores the cultural conundrums that the descendants of indentured labourers faced when trying to re-establish the cultural links that were lost once they were disconnected from India. This chapter is concerned with The Mystic Masseur, one of Naipaul’s earlier novels. It details how the Indians in a small Trinidad village react when one of their own, Ganesh Ransumair, launches a discursive practice of Hinduism through his profession as a mystic. In this novel, the Hindus have lost their sense of religious identity because the history of indentured labour and the exigencies of their existence have cut them off from the authentic pursuit of their religion. None of the villagers seem concerned by this break until Ganesh resurrects the issue because of his own need to find a sense of belonging. In this novel, the questions that complicate Ganesh’s identity are issues such as colonial mimicry and transculturation. Even after Ganesh establishes himself as a renowned mystic in Trinidad, he cannot discard the Orientalist lens with which he views the world. Thus, indentured labour

carries its consequences into the present generation, leaving Hindus born in Trinidad with a sense of dislocation that, unlike their forefathers, cannot be traced back to an actual departure from their homeland.

Indentured labour was introduced in the British Empire soon after the abolition of slavery in 1838. To help sustain the labour supply required in sugar and other types of plantation agriculture, Indians were brought over systematically from rural populations in Madras in the south and Bengal and Uttar Pradesh in the north (Clarke 8). Between the 1830s and the 1910s, approximately 1,120,000 Indians were transported to the different parts of the globe as indentured labourers (Lal 3). Once in the colony of destination, emigrants no longer practiced the religion of their forefathers with the same degree of rigorous attention. Naipaul himself states, “Immigrants are people on their own. They cannot be judged by the standards of their older culture. Culture is like language, ever developing. There is no right and wrong, no purity from which there is decline. Usage sanctions everything” (Literary 40). Having crossed the ocean and having experienced a distinct separation between self and community, the Indians who arrived in Trinidad practiced Hindu ritual in ways that had no connection to the original beliefs. The practices were not grounded in their belief in god, rather they were a cultural connection to the past and to India.

The Indians in The Mystic Masseur use myth in reconstructing a Hinduism that is relevant to them. The novel is infused with what Jonathan Culler calls “second order memory (myth)” or “second-order signification” (32). Myth operates this way for Trinidadian Indians. A manifestation of this is how Naipaul’s main character, Ganesh Ramsumair, adopts Hindu rituals which do not have any connection to a particular Hindu belief in his mystic practice. Ganesh Ramsumair is portrayed as a man who practices a highly subjective type of Hinduism. He helps to forge a unique

Hindu identity by uniting old Hindu customs with his own novel ideas, some of which are influenced by his colonial heritage. As the narrative proceeds, Ganesh revitalizes religious belief in the community. He fashions a religion that is relevant to the community in which he lives.

Naipaul suggests that stable notions of Hindu identity do not exist. What exists is transculturation, defined by Mary Louise Pratt as “the process by which a conquered people choose and select what aspects of the dominant culture they will assume” (Pratt 589). Transculturation plays a role in the shaping of Hindu identity in this novel in the following ways. Ganesh first decides to become a Hindu holy man because of the suggestion of the Orientalist, Mr. Stewart, whom he meets when he returns to his village. Stewart is a British man who claims to be a Kashmiri Hindu (28). Although he is not particularly well versed in Hinduism, he exhorts Ganesh to continue meditating. Stewart upholds the Orientalist view that Ganesh’s exotic qualities will help him succeed and this spurs Ganesh on to a life as a mystic. Stewart exhorts Ganesh to find a spiritual rhythm before he starts doing anything and tells him that he should help other people by writing down his thoughts. Ganesh first recognises the power of mobilizing the Orientalist view of Hinduism from Stewart. Hence, he perpetuates some notions of Hinduism such as the tendency toward ascetism and to meditation. The second instance of transculturation appears when Ganesh reads Western books. These books lend an air of authenticity to his holy works, suggest that he is educated, and indicate that his practice is not merely based on superstition. Ganesh’s avid reading lead the villagers around him to believe that his mystic practice is influenced by outside opinion, and that it is somewhat scientific. When he starts his mystic practice, he combines elements of Western religions in his shrine. In his shrine, he has a “picture of Lakshmi on her lotus” (122). There is also

“a stabbed and bleeding heart, a putative likeness of Christ, two or three crosses, and other designs of dubious significance” (122). In fact, Ganesh has blended Eastern and Western belief in the construction of his shrine, thus suggesting that his blend of Hindu belief is a product of transculturation.

This chapter will start with a plot summary followed by an analysis of how religion is represented in the community. The main focus of this chapter will look at how a particular appropriation of Hinduism shapes the identity of the protagonist, Ganesh Ramsumair, and how it revitalizes the society around him. Here, I will undertake a discussion of how Ganesh’s Hinduism is an effective and critical alternative to mimicry. After that, I will show how he influences the society and alters the landscape through his religion.

Plot Summary

The novel traces the life of Ganesh Ramsumair, a village boy of Hindu ancestry, as he moves from his village to the city to get an education. In Port of Spain, he tries to mimic an English boy but his thick local accent dooms him to being a country boy (11). Furthermore, he cannot convince his schoolmates to call him Gareth. He remains unpopular and has practically no friends. In his ample spare time, he develops a love for books. Books represent quantifiable knowledge and they are a way in which Ganesh can gain insight into the colonial world, which he is fascinated with. Ganesh becomes a school teacher but quits when he has an argument with another teacher. He returns to his village, Fourways, when his father dies and marries the daughter of a local shop keeper, Ramlogan. Before the marriage, he exacts a hefty dowry from his father-in-law, which includes a house in Fuente Grove and a sum of money. He moves to Fuente Grove with his wife and lives off his dowry money, all the time promising that he will set up as a village masseur. In Trinidad, a

masseur is a healer of ailments. However, as the villagers are relatively healthy, Ganesh has no clients, and his business never gets off the ground.

Ganesh keeps stating that he will write a book. Finally, he sits down to write when his wife leaves him and returns to her father. The book he writes is a pamphlet entitled, 'A Hundred and One Questions and Answers on the Hindu Religion.' He cites his authorship as Ganesh Ramsumair, B.A., even though he does not possess an actual B.A. This book does not sell, but it gives Ganesh a certain added credibility as a masseur. A woman from town brings her son, Hector, to see him. Hector believes that a black cloud is following him. Through a sophisticated trick whereby he creates and then dispels the cloud, Ganesh manages to convince Hector that he has banished the cloud permanently. We know he has used a trick to dispel the cloud from above the boy's head for when Leela says "don't tell me you use a trick on them," he does not answer (125). He vindicates himself because he is not after money. He says, "it is my duty" (124). His ritual healing is done in Hindi but the act itself is a hybrid creation. It blends Eastern and Western mystic beliefs. After this incident, Ganesh becomes a prosperous masseur. Ganesh himself is awed by his own prowess and the narrative states,

What surprised him even more was the extent of his own powers. No one could lay evil spirits better, even in Trinidad, where there were so many that people had acquired especial skill in dealing with them. No one could tie a house better, bind it, that is, in spiritual bonds proof against the most resolute spirit. If he ran up against a particularly tough spirit, there were always the books his aunt had given him. So, balls-of-fire, *soncouyants*, *loups-garoux*, all became as nothing. (127)

Even with his superlative success, Ganesh continues to acquire books, especially those about India and Hinduism. His success transforms the village where he lives and Ganesh becomes the new president of the Hindu Association in Trinidad. The first general elections in Trinidad are called and Ganesh decides to run. Again he uses religious rhetoric to get ahead. The narrator states,

his posters were the simplest things: GANESH WILL DO WHAT HE CAN, A VOTE FOR GANESH IS A VOTE FOR GOD; sometimes even plainer statements, “GANESH WILL WIN and GANESH IS A MAN OF GOOD AND GOD. (187)

As a member of the Legislative Council, he first works for the people. However, after he is involved in a scandal where he finds out that the leader of a strike had been bribed to incite his fellow workers in what was actually a lock-out during the slack season, he loses faith in working for the people. His allegiance switches to the British Government in Trinidad, and he is sent to Lake Success, where he defends British Colonial rule. When it becomes evident that he will lose the next Trinidad general elections, he is appointed a member of the Executive Council. He changes his name to G. Ramsay Muir, also the name of a renowned British historian and the novel concludes with his cold denial of his former identity of Pundit Ganesh Ramsumair.

Ganesh's Relationship to Colonial Culture

As a young boy, Ganesh becomes aware that life in the city is dramatically different from life in the village. The city is governed by a strict colonial legacy that destabilises what he knows. His initiation into the difference between the village and the city is dramatic and is first exemplified by his dress. For example, dressed in a khaki suit, “they knew they looked important when they got into a train at Princes Town” (10) but once in Port of Spain, “their dress and manner were no longer

drawing looks of respect. People were smiling, and when they got off at the railway terminus in Port of Spain, a woman laughed” (10). The village when compared to the city is something to be ashamed of. Thus, in Port of Spain, Ganesh has to eradicate all signs of his village background and recreate himself. The transformative potential of mimicry is never realised in The Mystic Masseur. Naipaul suggests that “being alienated from the colonizer’s history and culture, the colonized cannot internalize the world with any phenomenological certainty” (Mishra 53). Ganesh does not know exactly what to imitate, he only knows that he must wipe out his Indian background, but he is unsuccessful at this.

In the novel, books represent quantitative knowledge, and Ganesh associates them with colonial power and authority. Therefore, Ganesh slavishly accumulates books throughout the novel. When the narrator first meets him, he is overwhelmed by Ganesh’s collection of books. The narrator states,

there were books, books, here, there, and everywhere; books piled crazily on the tables, books rising in mounds in the corners, books covering the floor. I had never seen so many books in one place. (5)

When the narrator asks how many there are, Leela, Ganesh’s wife answers

‘Four hundred Everyman, two hundred Penguins – six hundred. Six hundred and one hundred Reader’s Library, makes seven hundred. I think with all the other book it have about fifteen hundred good book here.’ (5)

Later, Ganesh wants to buy a publisher’s list of seven hundred books. His wife’s objection results in his buying only three hundred books. The narrator states, “It was one of the biggest things that had happened to Fuente Grove, and even Leela was impressed, though reluctantly” (69). From the start of the novel, we see that books

carry an undeniable authority. In *Fourways*, Ganesh had the “glamour of a college education. [The villagers] called him ‘sahib,’ and some parents encouraged their children to call him ‘Teacher Ganesh’ (21-2). When he moves to Fuente Grove, he orders three hundred books and this is a major event in the little village. The narrator states that

Ganesh’s reputation, lowered by his incompetence as a masseur, rose in the village; and presently peasants, crumpling their grimy felt hats in their hands, came to ask him to write letters for them to the Governor, or to read letters which the Government, curiously, had sent them. (69)

His learning and his reading of books give him credibility amongst the Trinidadians, and it is instrumental to his success as a mystic. In his autobiography, Ganesh attributes his learning to all the spare time he had when he first moved to Fuente Grove. Books are tools that Ganesh uses to refashion himself and they are significant in so far as they lend him authority in the village. When Ganesh refers to the books, he refers to them in terms of their size in inches (Naipaul 5), not in terms of their content. This emphasis on form over content parallels the villagers’ ways of practicing religious rituals without any direct relevance to Hinduism in the beginning of the narrative.

Ganesh wants to get ahead and become popular. Thus, at the college, the narrator says, “He was so ashamed of his Indian name that for a while, he spread a story that he was actually called Gareth. This did him little good” (10-1). His denial of his Indianness and his adoption of the new name is a postcolonial subject’s attempt to establish that he is as good as the colonial master. According to Vijay Mishra, in Naipaul’s work, the unequal power relations drive the colonized subject to “the structural inevitability of mimicry (an identity of sorts) because for the colonized

'slave,' mimicry was one of the two available modes of self-legitimization or self-transcendence. The other was, of course, violence" (194). Accordingly, Ganesh tries to raise his status with the students from town by adopting an English name.

However, it does not catch on and the other boys at school never recognise him as Gareth. Ganesh fails at his first attempt at mimicry. Not surprisingly, this attempt at mimicry occurs in the city, when he becomes acutely aware of colonial power.

Ganesh makes another attempt at mimicry when he moves to Fuente Grove, but this time, he is driven by his desire to elevate his status with the other villagers whom he views as provincial subjects because he is far more educated than they are. Ganesh tries to change his mode of speech and adopt proper English. The narrative states, "One day he said, 'Leela, is 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'" (65). After this, he tries to speak to his wife in proper English, but because she cannot understand him nor respond with the required English, they start to argue. Although the narrator states, "like many Trinidadians Ganesh could write correct English" (65), none of the Trinidadians can speak correct English without feeling embarrassed and starting to laugh. Ganesh's project to speak proper English never succeeds and he remains mired in colloquial speech. When he doubts the value of his own culture, he cannot make himself understood. He has to put aside his snobbery for the mode of communication developed by his own community.

After his unsuccessful attempts at refashioning the self through mimicry, Ganesh now tries to embrace his own culture. He does so by writing a book about Hinduism. While the book itself is seen as symbolic of colonial power, he preserves his autonomy vis-à-vis the colonial culture by writing a book about Hinduism, thereby unconsciously undermining colonial authority and its attendant secular ideas of reason

and rationality. The impact of colonialism on Ganesh is therefore, complex, and he is not a passive victim of mimicry. However, he does succumb to the Orientalist vision that notions of East and West are static and fixed. This binary opposition between East and West is symptomatic of Naipaul's bifurcated vision of the world and we see it through another episode in the novel. When Naipaul reveals the books brought out by Beharry in Fuente Grove, the narrator states

the boy brought the books and Beharry passed them one by one to Ganesh: *Napoleon's Book of Fate*, a school edition of *Eothen*, [...] three issues of the Booker's Drug Stores *Almanac*, the *Gita* and the *Ramayana*. (59)

Naipaul mentions these specific texts to suggest that Ganesh is influenced by both sets of books, one clearly colonial and the other clearly Hindu in origin. The colonial texts are Napoleon's Book of Fate and Eothen. The Gita or Bhagavadgita is a Hindu book, significant here because it embodies much of the religious heritage of Hindus. The reading of the Gita implies that even though Trinidad is a British colony, the diaspora's connection is still to India. At this time, Ganesh also has a discussion with Beharry as to whether one can get to know everything in the world. This discussion coincides with the arrival of an Everyman folder (a publisher's list) of nine hundred and thirty books. The Everyman library is symbolic of universal knowledge and Ganesh says, "If a man reads all those book, it go have nobody at all to touch him in the line of education. Not even the Governor" (68). Ganesh mentions the governor as the epitome of learning and education, evoking the native subject's feelings about colonial authority. The governor's education also differs significantly from that of the Trinidadian Indian's in that it is grounded in perceptions of cultural universalism. By mentioning the reading of books in connection with the governor, Ganesh

foreshadows his later entry into politics. Ganesh's complicated relationship to colonial authority is further evident when he writes his book and cites his authorship as Ganesh Ramsumair, B.A. He does not actually possess a B.A. and this qualification would hardly lend specific insight into his book, entitled 'A Hundred and One Questions and Answers on the Hindu Religion.' After lying that he has a B.A., he then negates the value of a B.A. by stating

'Is a thing I ain't approve of, you know: this modern method of education. Everybody start thinking is the little piece of paper that matter. It ain't that does make a man a B.A. Is how he does learn, how much he want to learn and why he want to learn, is these things that does make a man a B.A. I can't really see how I isn't a B.A.' (90)

Ganesh invokes the colonial system of education, at the same time, he questions its relevance to himself. He is clearly ambivalent about slavishly copying the colonizer yet he recognises that to become upwardly mobile in Trinidad, he must be complicit with the colonial powers that govern Trinidad.

Ganesh writes a book about Hinduism in order to better himself in the eyes of the villagers who are mostly Hindus. Ganesh is the sole authority of Hinduism in the book and his book is an oversimplified catechism. Thus some sample questions are "Who is the greatest modern Hindu? Who is the second greatest modern Hindu? Who is the third greatest modern Hindu?" (90). In the second insight we get of the book, the questions there posed are "Question Number One. What is Hinduism? Answer: Hinduism is the religion of the Hindus. Question Number Two. Why am I a Hindu? Answer: Because my parents and grand parents were Hindus" (97). In spite of the tautological content of the book, the villagers come to revere Ganesh because of it, indicating that they themselves are disconnected from their religious culture. The

narrator too wants to improve his status through his association with Ganesh. He states, “when Ganesh published his autobiography, *The Years of Guilt*, I read it half hoping to find some reference to myself. Of course, there was none.” (107) The narrator’s comment suggests that individuals can raise their status simply by being acquainted with Ganesh, whose status as a published author implies that he is educated and credible.

As Ganesh reads more widely, he attempts to establish a colonial consciousness and to distance himself from the village. The village Ganesh comes from is called Fourways and the name is symbolic of a crossroads. Anthony Boxhill states that this place has a “significant name since the period of his life which Ganesh spends there is one of indecision” (28). Once he leaves the village and goes to Fuente Grove, however, his direction is clearly toward colonial consciousness. Ultimately, the centre for Trinidadians like Ganesh is England. We see this when Ganesh’s friend, Indarsingh, wins a scholarship to go to England. The narrator says, “at the end of Ganesh’s second year, Indarsingh won a scholarship and went to England. To Ganesh, Indarsingh had achieved a greatness beyond ambition” (12). Unable to head to England himself, Ganesh tries to attain a colonial awareness through books. Later, Ganesh moves to Port of Spain because it is closer to the centre of colonial culture than Fourways.

Ganesh’s Quest to Legitimate the Self through Hinduism

Mimicry on the part of the postcolonial subject is redeeming in one sense in that it leads the individual to explore colonial culture. Nevertheless, it relegates the postcolonial subject’s culture to the background. In *The Mystic Masseur*, it is only after his attempts at mimicry have failed that Ganesh returns to his roots. However, his exposure to colonial culture taints the way he looks at Hinduism and he can only

see it through an Orientalist lens. Ganesh sees the possibility of Hindu provenance as the source of direction in his life only after Stewart, a British man, suggests this to him. At the early stages of his life, Ganesh is not a devout Hindu. While he is unemployed and languishing at Fourways, he realizes his own lack of skills. The narrator says, “He had no means of earning a living” (21). Nor does Ganesh seem overly perturbed by this. He spends his time aimlessly and ascribes his own lack of initiative in getting ahead to fate. His belief that fate will prevail is closely linked to Hindu dharma and he ascribes all the vagaries of his life to Hindu dharma. Essentially, dharma is the orderly fulfillment of an inherent nature or destiny. More specifically, when Ganesh says,

“In conversation with Shri Ramlogan I learnt a curious fact. My father had died that Monday morning between five minutes past ten and a quarter past ten – just about the time, in short, when I had the dispute with Miller, and was deciding to give up my teaching job. I was much struck by this coincidence, and it was only then, for the first time, I felt I had something big ahead of me. For it was indeed a singular conspiracy of events that pulled me away from the emptiness of urban life back into the stimulating peace and quiet of the country.” (21)

Ganesh feels that his vocation is formed by these acts of God and the involvement of providence in the unfolding of his life is an example of svadharma. Svadharma is defined as

the personal path, pattern or obligation and it is the individualized application of dharma, dependent on personal and physical characteristics, health, intelligence, skills and aptitudes, desires and tendencies. (“Himalayan”)

Ganesh also exoticizes his Hindu background and as a masseur, he conducts his business in a colourful and outlandish way so as to draw more clients to him. In this way, he orientalizes his own culture, and seeks to make it seem more unusual and exotic than it is.

In Port of Spain, when Ganesh becomes a teacher, he is called Mr Ramsumair. However, once he returns to the village, he reverts to his first name, Ganesh, because it is strongly evocative of Hinduism. Having already called attention to this feature early on during the episode of the failed name change, Ganesh now becomes significant because the name refers to “Ganesa, the elephant headed god” who is “one of the most important divinities of the Hindu pantheon. [...] He is a very popular god, as he is invoked for success at the beginning of every undertaking” (Dhavalkar 49).

Furthermore,

Ganesa has everything that is fascinating to anyone, who is interested in religion or India or both: charm, mystery, popularity, sexual problems, moral ambivalence, political importance, the works. One can start from Ganesa and work from there in an unbroken line to almost any aspect of Indian culture. (O’Flaherty vii)

The narrative highlights the importance of Ganesh’s name when he has become a renowned mystic by alluding to the “two stone elephants, representing the Hindu elephant god Ganesh” that are erected in the mansion that Ganesh builds in Fuente Grove. Ganesh “designed the elephants himself” (144). Ganesh identifies himself with the Hindu god, Ganesa, thus he structures the idols accordingly. He comes to use Hindu signs as they can further his mystic persona and practice. The use of Hindu symbols and images is a conscious attempt to convey his spiritual prowess to the villagers. It professes his commitment to Hinduism. On his first visit to Ganesh, the

narrator sees “a beautiful four-armed god standing in an open lotus” (6). This is Vishnu. In his book, Naipaul, A Materialist Reading, Selwyn Cudjoe states

Vishnu [the symbolic representation] also suggests the asramas that each Hindu must make in the Wilderness to assume his being in this new world; the goal toward which all beings must tend, the symbolic compromise all must make to survive. Thus the icon of Vishnu structures the novel, suggesting the way of life of the East Indian within the feudal-communal world of Trinidad and Tobago. (38)

Cudjoe suggests that Vishnu’s four arms represent the scattering of the East Indian because of indentured labour, and also the new and untravelled routes that the Indian must embark to forge a new identity in a foreign land. The symbolic compromise that Ganesh makes involves practicing ritualistic forms with no real religious referents. His religious rituals cannot be substantiated by belief but because they grip the imagination of the community in which he lives, he continues to practice them. Hence, the diaspora comes to invent its own religious referents. Cudjoe also suggests that all members of the diaspora, including Ganesh, have to make their own way in Trinidad.

An irony of the text arises when Ganesh discovers his vocation specifically because of the Orientalist, Mr. Stewart. Ganesh meets him when he goes back to Fourways. Mr Stewart is an Englishman turned Hindu mendicant who first suggests to Ganesh that he can become a mystic. The narrative states that Mr. Stewart had “a decisive influence on his life” (26). Stewart is characterized as English although he claims that he is an Indian Kashmiri. He is also known to be “a millionaire, and a little mad” (27). He moves around the Trinidadian countryside and gives money away. Significantly, Stewart himself abandons Hinduism when he returns to

England. However, in the brief meeting he has with Ganesh, Mr. Stewart asks what Ganesh has been doing and Ganesh responds that he has been doing nothing at all. He says, “I guess I just doing a lot of thinking” (29). When Stewart asks whether Ganesh is meditating, Ganesh takes up the suggestion and says that he is indeed meditating (29). Stewart also first brings up the idea of writing about Hinduism. Stewart says,

‘I know the things that are worrying you, and I think one day you may find the answer. One day you may even bring it all out in a book. If I weren’t so terribly afraid of getting involved I might have written a book myself. But you must find your spiritual rhythm before you start doing anything. You must stop being worried about life.’ (30)

Stewart will not write a book himself because although he is English, he denies any collusion with the colonial establishment. In fact, he distances himself from it. However, he does not hesitate to capitalize on the extraordinary qualities of the East and in fact, he exhorts Ganesh to accentuate the differences between the Indians and the British. To a certain extent, Stewart creates Ganesh’s role for him. Once he sees how appealing the persona of mystic is to the villagers, Ganesh exaggerates all his mystic qualities. His role as mystic also allows him creative license in interpreting Hinduism to the villagers. Ganesh is also heavily influenced by his aunt. He is spurred on by her statement that “‘It have a long time now I studying you, Ganesh. You have the Power all right’” (105). The power is “‘to cure people. Cure the mind, cure the soul’” (105). Because of these suggestions, Ganesh sets up as a mystic. When war breaks out, Ganesh delves deeper into Hindu books in order to understand the growing uncertainty in the world. The narrative states,

Ganesh read again, with fuller appreciation, the dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna on the field of battle.

It gave a new direction to his reading. Forgetting the war, he became a great Indologist and bought all the books on Hindu philosophy he could get in San Fernando. He read them, marked them, and on Sunday afternoons made notes. [...] But India was his great love. It became his habit, on examining a book, to look first at the index to see whether there were any references to India or Hinduism. If the references were complimentary he bought the book. (102)

The reading of Hindu philosophy is instrumental to Ganesh's burgeoning career. He is able to establish himself as an expert in India and Hinduism. His specialization in Hinduism becomes the source of his cultural regeneration and because his study is grounded in books, his imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases are Orientalist. This reading of Indian and Hindu books culminates in the seminal event in Ganesh's career: the moment he saves the boy with the black cloud following him. The narrative does not clearly elucidate the genesis of the black cloud but it does attribute it to superstition, for Ganesh states "sometimes I glad I get a college education." (121) He then leaves to see a man who works in the Oilfields who helps him to create a cloud that the boy, his father, his mother and Leela also see. Clearly this cloud is an apparition created by Ganesh. To substantiate this, he says "whatever Suruj Mooma say about education, it have it uses sometimes" (125). When Leela responds "don't tell me you use a trick on them," (125) the reader is convinced that Ganesh has used a trick. Ganesh feels that his education is valuable because it dispels superstition. He is convinced that he is doing a greater good by curing people of the superstitions that cause their illnesses. Through his mystic practice, he is able to

negate the outdated superstitions that plague the lives of the villagers. As a healer, he constructs a discursive redefinition of Hindu mysticism. His ability to mould Hindu spirituality to meet his needs is distinctive because he blends a variety of religious beliefs into the process of healing. In fact, Ganesh constructs a new cult of Hinduism. He speaks in Hindi when he conducts his healings. His religion is novel and particularized and it succeeds in a place like Trinidad because he is not questioned as the preordained authority. The narrator states,

People came to hear him not only because of his reputation but also because of the novelty of what he said. He spoke about the good life, about happiness and how to get it. He borrowed from Buddhism and other religions and didn't hesitate to say so. (150)

Hinduism's very nature makes it amenable to a practice like Ganesh's. According to Balagangadara "Hinduism, the 'religion of the Hindus, was amorphous" (115).

Balagangadara attributes this amorphousness to the fact that

Hinduism has never prepared a body of canonical Scriptures or a Common Prayer Book; it has never held a General Council or Convocation; never defined the relation of the laity and clergy; never regulated the canonization of saints or their worship; never established a single course of training for its priests. This is not due to the fact that [...] all such action is essentially opposed to its spirit and traditions. (Balagangadara 115)

Ganesh's success in defining his mystic powers in terms of his individualized understanding of Hinduism can further be attributed to the fact that concepts like holy and mystic are used

to denote a particular type of experience, which they (the individual) would identify as characteristically, or even typically religious. The emphasis shifts from an organized entity – be it as a set of doctrines, a movement, a structure – to an experience, which an individual could have. (Balagangadara 188)

Ganesh's clients have unique spiritual experiences when Ganesh heals them, in spite of the fact that these experiences may be self-provoked. Because the actual experience cannot be validated or questioned, Ganesh is able to succeed. Once he cures Hector, his reputation as a masseur is established in Trinidad and “within a month Ganesh was getting as many clients as he could handle” (127). His prosperity as a mystic induces him to seek a closer link to Indian culture. Thus, “a temple for Ganesh in proper Hindu style is built” (143). Ultimately, Ganesh draws people to Hinduism because he does not represent religion as a static entity and he develops a practice that goes beyond the mere rehearsal of empty rituals as they were practiced before.

Another way in which Ganesh redefines Hindu identity for the diasporic community is his lack of concern with mercantile pursuits. He does not charge his clients a fee but asks only what they can give. His mystic practice thus has an ascetic aspect to it that is reminiscent of how Hindu holy men should conduct themselves. In spite of this, he becomes very wealthy. His lack of entrepreneurial drive is what leads to the initial disharmony between him and his wife. However, his father-in-law, Ramlogan, capitalises on the mystic practice and begins to run a taxi service to Fuente Grove for which he charges an exorbitant price. When Ganesh finds out about this, he accuses his wife, “You and your father is proper traders. Buy, sell, make money, money” (134). Ganesh himself feels that his mystic practice is much more

than a simple business enterprise. Indeed, he feels it is his calling and that he is doing the community a service, one that they are not able to appreciate because they are concerned with the more mundane aspects of life. Thus, Ganesh states

‘What else you expect? Money is all she and she father does think about. She don’t care about books and things. Is people like that did laugh at Mr Stewart, you know. And they call thyself good Hindus! Now if I was in India, I woulda have people coming from all over the place, some bringing me food, some bringing me clothes.’ (76-7)

Ganesh’s statements convey his belief that money is not important. He feels that in India, he would be recognised as a great mystic, and it is only because Trinidad is backward, and contains Hindus who have lapsed, that he is not properly recognised and revered.

Ganesh’s influence in the community is far reaching, and he becomes a “philosopher and arbiter” (149) in the community. He delivers lectures on mysticism to groups of Indian villagers. Because Ganesh’s religious influence is widespread and esoteric, the head of a political entity called the Hindu association, Narayan, writes that it is “surely a retrograde step for any community these days to look up to a religious visionary” (150). The villagers are outraged by Narayan’s charges and they encourage Ganesh to run against Narayan in the first general elections in Trinidad. The narrator states “He was served even by his enemies. Without Narayan’s attacks, Ganesh would never have taken up politics” (193). In his campaign, Ganesh’s uses his mystic practice and his religious base to garner support:

quite casually, in the middle of a lecture, he would say in Hindi, ‘it may interest one or two of you in this gathering tonight to hear that I am a candidate for the elections next month. I can promise nothing. In

everything I shall consult God and my conscience, even at the risk of displeasing you. But that is by the way. We were talking, you remember, about the transmigration of souls. (187)

His religious zeal is further exemplified by how “in the week before polling day, Ganesh decided to suspend mystic activity and hold a Bhagwat, a seven day prayer-meeting.” (191) Not surprisingly, Ganesh is soon elected as a Member of the Legislative Committee. The narrator then states

Here it might be well to pause awhile and consider the circumstances of Ganesh’s rise, from teacher to masseur, from masseur to mystic, from mystic to M.L.C. In his autobiography, *The Years of Guilt*, which he began writing at this time, 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. (193)

There is a definite shift in the narrative view of Hinduism here as the narrator goes on to say that “Ganesh found himself a mystic when Trinidad was crying out for one. That time is now past” (193). Once Hinduism has served to cohere the Indian community so it has majoritarian representation, it is discarded. Hindu identity in Trinidad is thus a very fluid entity and its representation as such reflects Naipaul’s pessimism. It is indispensable in unifying the Hindu villagers and in helping them attain a political position but once that is done, they no longer give it the same importance. Ganesh leaves the village to go to Port of Spain. When he leaves, Beharry says, “he do his duty here and God call him somewhere else” (198). By this time, Ganesh has stopped wearing the traditional dhoti and turban. He no longer

draws attention to his Hinduism. He presents himself as a secular individual and he has stopped being a mystic. In Port of Spain, he still visits the numerous bookshops, but the narrator tells us “he dropped Indology, religion and psychology and bought large books on political theory” (200). Once he is ensconced in the political community, he no longer talks about religion or mysticism. In fact, it no longer has any relevance in his life.

The consolidation of power and political success allow Ganesh to abandon his vocation as a mystic. Although Ganesh initially legitimates himself through Hinduism and spirituality, in an ironic appropriation of Orientalist views of his identity, by the end of the novel, he distances himself from it. Further confirmation of this occurs when the narrator addresses Ganesh in London as Pundit Ganesh and Ganesh responds that his name is G. Ramsay Muir. The narrator sees Ganesh’s denial of Hinduism as being concomitant with his move into politics. Political power for Ganesh is intricately meshed with the colonial enterprise and this is a secular undertaking. The Hindu world of the village is unstable when contrasted with the world outside the village with its competing values of capitalism, globalization and social equality. Ganesh works for the populace and the narrator states,

There was no doubt at this time Ganesh was the most popular man in Trinidad. He never went to a cocktail party at Government House. He never went to dinner there. He was always ready to present a petition to the Governor. He exposed scandal after scandal. And he was always ready to do a favour for any member of the public, rich or poor. (201)

Once Ganesh enters public life, his Hindu identity becomes secondary. The narrative suggests that politics subdues Hinduism in Ganesh’s life because now, he has to

represent all Trinidadians, whether Hindu or otherwise. As a politician, he is also a reformer and therefore, his central vision is no longer based on Hinduism. The narrative states that “In 1950 he was sent by the British Government to Lake Success and his defence of British colonial rule is memorable” (207). Ganesh’s trajectory has now come full circle. Once he validates himself and establishes his political legitimacy, he undergoes another transformation. After an incident where he is tricked into speaking at what seems to be a strike, he loses faith in the people and joins the colonial establishment fully. The narrative states that “He went to cocktail parties at Government House and drank lemonade. He wore a dinner-jacket to official dinners” (207). At the end of the novel, he again resorts to anglicizing his name and mimicking the British. Ganesh has in Edward Said’s terms produced a

conscious affiliation proceeding under the guise of filiation, that is, a mimicry of the centre proceeding from a desire not only to be accepted but to be adopted and absorbed. It caused those from the periphery to immerse themselves in the imported culture, denying their origins in an attempt to become ‘more English than the English.’ (Ashcroft et. al 4)

Although Hinduism had helped Ganesh define his sense of self and construct a successful vocation, he discards it when he no longer needs it. His religion is thus called into question and it appears that it may have been used opportunistically to further the cause of the Hindus in Trinidad. Hinduism as portrayed in the novel is thus an affiliation that is produced because of the specific historical and nationalistic elements in Trinidad. Ultimately, power and history cannot be separated from Ganesh’s religious experience.

How Hinduism Is Represented in the Community and How It Alters the Landscape

In the Indian community of The Mystic Masseur, Hinduism is an ancestral obligation and a vital link to India. Hinduism is more a communal affiliation and an important cultural signifier than it is a spiritual pursuit. It fulfils Vijay Mishra's requirement as a "root" metaphor around which the diaspora, in this case, the villagers, "construct a pristine, uncontaminated homeland to which, ideally, one ought to return" (195). The Indian community of The Mystic Masseur is associated with India and Hinduism through dress, food and most importantly, Hindu rituals. An example of the first relationship is how as a Hindu mystic, Ganesh dons *dhoti* and *koortah*. Once he becomes a politician, he dispenses with his Indian outfit altogether and wears Western clothes (199). The narrator suggests that as Ganesh is always already absorbed into the colonial enterprise, even his external appearance changes. An example of the second type of relationship, food, is seen most clearly when Ganesh, as M.L.C., is invited to dine with the Governor. The meal is described as "torture to Ganesh," not only because Ganesh does not eat with cutlery, but also because the meal contains meat which Ganesh cannot touch because he is a Hindu. The narrative states that Ganesh felt "alien and uncomfortable" and that once at home, he wanted to eat because he was done with dining (197). An example of the third type of relationship, that of Hindu ritual, is seen when Ganesh is initiated into Brahminism. The incident is framed out of empty ritual; it is a matter of form and Naipaul says "it is the play of a people who have been cut off" (Literary 41). Only the force of Ganesh's character makes the incident come alive. The passage states, "they shaved his head, gave him a little saffron bundle and said, 'All right, off you go now. Go to Benares and study'" (11). The ceremony is not meant to be taken literally but it is significant that when Ganesh starts to walk away, he continues until

he is repeatedly called back. The villagers claim he was “taking this thing really serious” (11). Ganesh really means to pursue Hinduism but the villagers expect him to realise that it is only an empty ritual.

The Indians from the village of Fourways identify with Hinduism, but at this point, Hinduism is only empty ritual. Naipaul himself has argued about the power of ritual, about continuities that persist in spite of the fracture that distance has produced. He states,

Indians do not know what so many of the rituals mean, but they persist with them anyhow. Continuity is maintained because we have no tradition of self-examination, and when self-examination does arrive, with the descendants of the indentured labourers theorizing about the past, it arrives only to spell out the loss. (East Indians 3)

Naipaul suggests that the rituals are a debased form of Hinduism, however they serve to identify the villagers as Hindus. Whether examined or unexamined, the Hindu ritual enacted above connects the Trinidadian villagers to their original homeland of India and therefore it cannot simply be seen as hollow. Ritual remains a specific mode of articulating Hinduism that revives it constantly for the villagers.

Another example of a different relationship to ritual is seen when Ganesh gets married to Leela. After the agreement is made, the narrator states,

He never saw Leela again until the night of their wedding, and 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. (37)

Here, again, Hinduism is represented as more form than substance. The ritual of the Hindu wedding is carried on to the ceremony of the kedgerree eating the following

morning and because Ganesh upholds the ritual, he ends up with a significant dowry. He states that he wants to use the dowry to set up a cultural institute at Fuente Grove. Ganesh publishes this: "The aim of the Institute, which has yet to be named, will be the furthering of Hindu Cultural and Science of Thought in Trinidad" (54-5) but this enterprise does not take off. Nonetheless, it is an authentic expression of the character's desire to further Hinduism and he is lauded by the villagers because of it. Ganesh is devoted to the cause of furthering Hinduism, and he seems to be trying to identify with Hinduism, however, he is frustrated at each turn. The narrative suggests that Trinidadian Indians should use Hinduism as a mode of identification only if they can support this in a substantive way.

Naipaul goes on to compound this Orientalist view when he introduces the character of Stewart who is a British man "recently appeared in South Trinidad dressed as a Hindu mendicant. He claimed that he was Kashmiri" (27). Stewart exoticizes Ganesh and suggests that he can become a Hindu mystic simply because Ganesh says he has been thinking. Stewart also gives Ganesh a set of books called "The Science of Thought Review." Ganesh is taken aback because he expects the books to be Hindu. But Stewart merely brushes off the fact that they are not Hindu books. Stewart himself is later revealed to be nothing more than an Orientalist. Six months after meeting with Ganesh, he returns to join the army in England. Naipaul represents Stewart as an Orientalist; however, through him, the impact of colonialism and how the dominant culture influences the other is revealed. Stewart has adopted Hinduism and melded it with Science. By presenting the science books to Ganesh, the novel suggests that the British influence also brings reason to religion. There can be no denying that the legitimacy of reason in the form of books is later instrumental to Ganesh's success as a mystic.

While the narrative describes the Hindu rituals as hollow, an alternative reading suggests that the Hindu practice resurrected by Ganesh dramatically changes the village. When Ganesh first arrives at Fuente Grove, the narrative states

Right from the start Fuente Grove looked unpromising. The Great Belcher had said it was a small, out of the way place. That was only half true. Fuente Grove was practically lost. It was so small, so remote and so wretched, it was marked only on large maps in the office of the Government Surveyor; the Public Works Department treated it with contempt; and no other village even thought of feuding with it.

(57)

This barren landscape holds little promise for Ganesh but in some ways, his success can be attributed to the smallness of the place. Fuente Grove is represented as a wilderness as “sugar-cane was the only thing that could grow” (57). Ganesh, as a self-examining, introspective Hindu who reads widely is able to revitalize the place since he has nothing else to do there. Ganesh reads widely in Fuente Grove and he responds to “every advertiser’s request to fill in coupons for free booklets” (67). When he buys three hundred books from the Everyman Library, it is a major event in Fuente Grove. It also causes an upheaval in his household. He begins to take notes on what he has read and eventually, he writes his own booklet, 101 Questions and Answers on the Hindu Religion. Ganesh does not make any money from this enterprise, in fact, he has to spend money to have the book published. In addition, he is unable to find a distributor for the book. However, the book lends him a certain legitimacy and after he cures Hector, Ganesh finds that his business flourishes and he becomes a sought after mystic.

This is the exact point where Fuente Grove begins to flourish. The narrator states,

Fuente Grove prospered. The Public Works Department recognised its existence and resurfaced the road to a comparative evenness. They gave the village its first standpipe. Presently, the standpipe, across the road from Beharry's shop, became the meeting-place of the village women; and children played naked under the running water. (142)

Beharry also owes the success of his shop to Ganesh and his mystic practice. Ganesh exhorts his clients to buy ingredients for offerings from Beharry's shop. The shop thrives and soon Beharry can send his son off to a boarding school in San Fernando. Ganesh also erects a mansion for himself with two stories and concrete blocks. In order to solidify his role as Hindu mystic, he hires an Indian architect to build a proper Hindu temple. Ganesh publishes an anonymous book called The Guide to Trinidad in which he states that there is "a genuine Hindu temple which looked as if it had been bodily transported from India" (147) in Fuente Grove. This draws members of the American Army to visit Fuente Grove. Leela counts more than five thousand American visitors, many of whom ask Ganesh for spiritual advice. By this time, Fuente Grove has changed from a small, insignificant village to a thriving commercial tourist destination.

Ganesh's decision to enter politics takes Hinduism from the personal sphere to the public sphere. He also desires a nationalist identification with India. Hence, in a bid to seal his legitimate place as a spokesman and representative of the Indians in Trinidad, he becomes leader of the Hindu association. The initial tenuous subject position of Ganesh is replaced by a firm identity, one that is contingent on his role as an elected representative of the Indians in Trinidad. Since the Indian constituents he

serves are Hindus, his political life is initially dependent on his religious identification. Ganesh's political career, however, is governed by a clear transition from Member of the Legislative Committee to Member of the British Executive and this rise in politics redefines his identity again. He has moved away from Indianness and Hinduism to articulate a new mode of being. This identity is entrenched firmly as that of the secular politician. As a politician, he lives in Port of Spain, thus he is now a city dweller as opposed to a villager. He has discarded his mystic practice and is now rooted in the material world. Ganesh's new identity displays what Bhabha states is "the binary logic through which identities of difference are often constructed – Black/White, Self/Other" (3). In Ganesh's case, the binary logic defining his identity is townsman/villager, secular politician/religious mystic. Hinduism cannot survive in Ganesh's new life because he knows that the elite status he occupies, which is given to him by the British, cannot accommodate the superstition and prejudice that accompanies his mantle of mystic. As a British backed politician, he will not identify himself with the esoteric and intangible anymore.

Ganesh's old ward, initially defined by a strict Hindu sensibility, has become a model of capitalism. An example of the new capitalism is evident when the narrator states,

Beharry prospered. Suruj was sent as a boarder to the Naparima College in San Fernando. Suruj Mooma started a fourth baby and told Leela about her plans for rebuilding the shop. (143)

Beharry also commends Ganesh by saying "New road. My new shop. Standpipe. We getting electricity next year. All through you" (198-9). Beharry's prosperity is only one example of how Ganesh's initial Hindu mystic business has positive economic implications for Fuente Grove. But the capitalist mentality of Beharry's

family still allows for a selfhood based on Hinduism. When Ganesh leaves, Beharry states, “Is go Ganesh have to go. He do his duty here and God call him somewhere else” (198). Ironically, it is not for religious reasons that Ganesh is leaving but because he has decided to work for the colonial powers. However, Fuente Grove has prospered through Ganesh’s Hinduism and thus, this sensibility has served the community well.

Another example of how Hinduism has served the community is the existence of the Hindu Association. When first presented, Narayan, who also publishes a paper called “The Hindu,” heads the Hindu Association. In the paper, Narayan attacks Ganesh for his views and shortly thereafter, in a meeting that is presented as being ludicrous, Ganesh defeats Narayan to become head of the Hindu Association. The Hindu Association is not particularly effective but ironically, it sponsors the young boy who has worked on Ganesh’s political campaign. Swami tells Ganesh not to worry about the boy and states how the association remains committed to Hindus. Swami says, “The Hindu Association fixing up a little something for him. A little cultural scholarship to travel about learning” (198). Thus, the group enables and promotes both the religious identification and the personal ambitions of individual Indians.

In The Mystic Masseur, Naipaul reveals that Hindu identity is important in that it allows the diasporic Indians to articulate a mode of belonging in a colonial world. In the absence of viable alternatives, Hinduism is a necessary way for the Indians of Trinidad to define themselves and to unify their community. However, the manifestation of Hindu identity is highly amorphous and any attempt to render it simply underscores its complexity. In the particular case of Ganesh himself, religion offers an authentic alternative to mimicry because mimicry would not have allowed

for the creativity that fuelled Ganesh's success. In The Mystic Masseur, Ganesh demonstrates Bhabha's point about the ambivalence of mimicry, that it is not just imitation, but also invention. Ganesh does not simply repeat, but rather he creates and produces a new mode of being. In the end, however, he succumbs to mimicry again but even here, his act of copying is resourceful because his logic is to appropriate power. The postcolonial individual in The Mystic Masseur is not redeemed, but he does become empowered and the overwhelming rise of Ganesh from simple village boy to respected politician cannot be overlooked. Ganesh has offered his community a sense of pride and redemption, and therein lies the success of all his efforts.

Conclusion

The texts for this analysis were selected because they both offer protagonists that are trying to fulfill a vision of Hindu identity. In The Romantics, Samar is in Benares and says “This holiest of pilgrimage sites that Hindus for millennia have visited in order to attain liberation from the cycle of rebirths has grown into a noisy little commercial town” (3). Ganesh, in The Mystic Masseur, tries to walk to Benares and the man who is told to call him back says ““You think you really going to Benares? That is in India, you know and this is Trinidad”” (11). Benares becomes a focal point for both novels. However, the similarities in the novels end there.

Naipaul and Mishra have widely divergent views about the history of India. The particularized history that informs The Romantics constantly reminds the reader that Hindu national identity and the politics of Hindutva is one of the preoccupations of Pankaj Mishra. Mishra rejects the Hindu nationalists’ view that wants to make India an insular province of Hindus. He lauds the reformists’ desire to make India accessible to all. Mishra is proud of the history of India, and he venerates the Mogul period for bringing cultural diversity and cosmopolitanism to India. Hence, Marjorie Sabine states that Mishra creates

bonds between past and present in a history that becomes a continuing ongoing story. Mishra dissociates his own writing from the fixed boundaries of political and cultural fundamentalists, who try to reject this experience altogether by turning to what they think is an uncontaminated past: the time before foreign rule when the world was whole and everything was in its place. (“Cosmopolitanism”)

Naipaul, on the contrary, is known for his acerbic attacks on the Mogul period. Naipaul sees the Mogul period as having negative ramifications for the Indians. He sees India as having been defiled by the Muslim invaders. He states,

Actually it was the period of invasions. You have proper mental health if you possess your history truly. If you don't, if you are living with a series of lies, it is terrible, terrible. There are some people who want to make black white, who want to make the invasions a time of affection and love and things like that, you know...The Moguls had no business being there.

(“Gloomy”)

The two authors views on the history of India are diametrically opposed. A larger irony lies in the fact that Mishra is fully aware of Naipaul's oeuvre and that he admires it. He states,

To recognize the fragmented aspects of your identity; to see how they enable you to become who you are; to understand what was necessary about a painful and awkward past and to accept it as part of your being – this ceaseless process, the process, really, of remembering, of reconstituting an individual self deep in its home in history, is what much of Naipaul's work has been compulsively engaged in. (“Literary” xvi)

Mishra feels that Naipaul offers an honest if painful depiction of the effects of colonialism. We see such effects on the character in The Mystic Masseur. Ganesh exploits Orientalist attitudes to fashion himself as a mystic, a sort of anti-colonial figure who later reverts and transforms into a colonial mimic. He is represented as more colonial than any of the other colonial figures. Naipaul represents this transformation,

but he does not comment on it. Hence, we do not know if he is critical of the transformation, although it can be inferred that Naipaul views it as being inevitable, the effects, as it were, of the consolidation of power by an individual. By writing so powerfully about a character like Ganesh, Naipaul is condemning the culture of the colonized, and yet the mere fact of his creating such a character then challenges this phenomenon of condemning the aforementioned culture and allows him to embrace the contradiction.

In The Romantics, the central character, Samar, cannot escape the fact that caste is instrumental to his Hinduness. It is all around him. We see it in his immersion in the University, where his friend Vijay “asked for nothing in return from those he favored other than their votes for Brahmin candidates in elections to the student union” (23). Here, we find the single defining element that differentiates the Hinduism we see in The Romantics from the Hinduism in The Mystic Masseur. In The Romantics, caste, in this case the Brahmin caste, is constantly in evidence. Samar, also a Brahmin, finds he is unable to overcome his caste restrictions even though when told he is a Brahmin and that he should not mix with lower caste people, he states,

And the Brahmin bit didn't make sense. It smacked of melodrama; it harked back to an India that had long ceased to exist, the India of classical times, where learning and the arts were the almost exclusive province of the Brahmins. (86)

This vital observation takes on a graver note when Rajesh himself says, “I am a Brahmin, (...) but I have done things no Brahmin would ever do” (170). Caste is central to the Hinduism observed in The Romantics. This phenomenon is absent from The Mystic

Masseur. Here, the Hindu element is most evident in the reenactment of rituals. One of these rituals occurs when Ganesh is initiated into Hinduism. The narrative states,

The initiation ceremony was held that very week. They shaved his head, gave him a little saffron bundle, and said, 'All right, off you go now. Go to Benares and study.' (11)

Ganesh takes this ritual literally and continues to walk until he is called back. Another ritual occurs when Ganesh gets married:

All through the ceremony he had to pretend, with everyone else, that he had never seen Leela. She sat at his side veiled from head to toe, until the blanket was thrown over them and he unveiled her face. (44)

The wedding ceremony and the reenactment of ritual continue into the second day when "Leela was taken away and Ganesh was left alone to face the kedgerree-eating ceremony the next morning" (44). In this ceremony, Ganesh does not touch a plate of kedgerree until he has exacted from his father-in-law a cow and a heifer, fifteen hundred dollars in cash and a house in Fuente Grove (45). Earlier on, Ganesh had insisted on the kedgerree eating ceremony because it is the custom. In response, his father-in-law states,

'Yes sahib, the custom. But still, I think is a disgrace in these modern times. Now, if I was getting married, I wouldn't want any dowry and I woulda say "To hell with the kedgerree, man."' (40)

The villagers in The Mystic Masseur use ritual to connect themselves to India and its attendant Hinduism. With ritual, they remind themselves of their homeland and they constantly confirm their Hindu identity. However, the novel itself is derisive about

whether a true Hindu identity can be achieved. We see this when Naipaul mentions the Hollywood Hindus in relation to Ganesh. The narrator states,

Ganesh discovered the Hollywood Hindus. The Hollywood Hindus are Hindus who live in or near Hollywood. They are holy, cultivated men who issue frequent bulletins about the state of their soul, the complexities and variations of which are endless and always worth description (106).

When the narrative states that “Ganesh was undoubtedly inspired by the Hollywood Hindus” (108), it becomes evident that his practice is being mocked. Although authorial intention is never overt, these paragraphs suggest that the narrator is derisory about Hinduism and mystic practices in Trinidad.

The novels also have different approaches to language. In The Romantics, Vijay, a Brahmin friend of Samar says “ ‘Studious’ Brahmins like myself, he would say, pronouncing the English words with relish, needed ‘backers’ if they were to go on studying” (23). The narrative states that Vijay pronounces “the English words with relish” and this signals the existence of the privileged Brahmin that is the result of collusions between Brahmins and the colonial elite. Pankaj Mishra is signaling this particular history and how identity is foregrounded through the use of English. We are also reminded of Brahmin privilege through the use of English. The English they speak is not questioned and it is assumed to be standard English. The language is not susceptible to questioning or change and they seem to accept it as a fact of their colonial heritage. The use of English invests the Indians in The Romantics in the colonial enterprise. In The Mystic Masseur, however, the language comes to be questioned when the narrator states, “Like many Trinidadians Ganesh could write correct English but it

embarrassed him to talk anything but dialect except on very formal occasions” (65). The narrator goes on to say that one day Ganesh tells his wife ““Leela, is 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”” (65). Ganesh’s enterprise to speak proper English fails and he has to fall back to his local English dialect. This difference in English usage in the two novels tells us that in the diaspora, everything, including language, has to be created. Both novels indicate that the use of English in colonial and former colonial locations is always shot-through with a particular politics.

The novels also depart from one another on the issue of the politics of the protagonists. In The Romantics, Samar tries to stay away from politics and states,

I had no sympathy for sectarian, caste- or religion-based politics; I wanted to keep as far away as possible from the constant skullduggery and intrigue that went on among different political factions, and frequently resulted in violence. (23)

The allusions Samar makes to politics are observations on the rioting in the University. Later on, he also observes the violence surrounding the then still standing Babri Masjid and comes to the conclusion that he can no longer passively be aligned with Hindutva aspirations. In The Mystic Masseur, however, Ganesh consciously enters the political arena by first becoming president of the Hindu association and then running for Member of the Legislative Council in Trinidad’s first general elections (185). He also invokes God in his election campaign by printing posters that say “Ganesh will do what he can, a vote for Ganesh is a vote for God” (187). The two protagonists in the novels are thus completely opposed in their approach toward politics. Where Samar stays away, Ganesh

consciously enters the political arena, exploits his religious identity and goes on to become a member of the British Executive. As a member of the Legislative Council, Ganesh first works for the people. However, by the end of the novel, he no longer does so. This dramatic turn around from representing the people to furthering only his own interests is presented by Naipaul as an unfortunate effect of colonialism. The figure in the diaspora is more susceptible to the effects of colonialism than the figure in mainland India.

A final point that can be made about the difference between the two novels is their approach to the issue of hybridity. Samar, in The Romantics, is a fully hybrid individual. The books he reads are by Western authors, particularly Proust, Edmund Wilson and Flaubert. He also associates with Westerners and says of his association with them that,

It was too late to withdraw. Without quite realizing it, I had become addicted to their company; it was the regular fix I needed in addition to my daily visits to the library. I went often to Catherine's house, and stayed for long periods. (63)

Later on, he even has an affair with the French woman, Catherine. He says the affair assuages a "great yearning that had laid suppressed" (136) within him for a long time.

Nonetheless the affair submerses him in hybridity and he states,

I couldn't get over the affinity that had so abruptly and spontaneously sprung up between us, this intimate proximity with someone who was until a few minutes ago a remote and unsettling stranger. (136)

When the affair does not work out, Samar retreats to Dharamshala, another hybrid place where remarkably, he teaches English, another hybrid element. The Romantics is replete with the element of hybridity. In the Mystic Masseur, the hybrid element undergoes a reevaluation. It is a claim to authenticity that obscures hybridity but the embrace of hybridity is a positive element. Ganesh becomes the voice of the people and confirms what his aunt says when she states,

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)

Hence, Ganesh becomes a masseur and tries to heal people. In his healing, he speaks Hindi. He also builds a mansion and the narrator states "An Indian architect came over from British Guiana and built a temple for Ganesh in proper Hindu style" (143). During this transformation from ordinary citizen to masseur, Ganesh revitalizes Hinduism in a unique way for the villagers in his precinct. The narrator states,

Fuente Grove prospered. The Public Works Department recognized its existence and resurfaced the road to a comparative evenness. (...)

Beharry prospered. Suruj was sent as a boarder to the Naparima College in San Fernando. Suruj Mooma started a fourth baby and told Leela about her plans for rebuilding the shop. (142-3)

At this juncture, Ganesh celebrates his hybrid character to his advantage and he manages to promote a functional Hinduism for those in his surroundings. The opportunism that characterizes his performance of Hinduism prefigures his second transformation into a

politician with distinctly colonial tastes and aspirations. However, he has a relationship to his community and the narrator states

There was no doubt that at this time Ganesh was the most popular man in Trinidad. He never went to a cocktail party at Government House. He never went to dinner there. He was always ready to present a petition to the Governor. He exposed scandal after scandal. And he was always ready to do a favor for any member of the public, rich or poor. (201)

This period is significant in that Ganesh has the potential to establish an anti-colonial identity. However, he gets derailed because of his overriding self-interest. The two stages of Ganesh's life signal two defined areas. The end of the mystic period signifies a loss of potential where he could have been different but he emerges as exactly the same as the colonizer. Nonetheless, he has already revitalized Hinduism for his community and through him, the villagers consolidate and reaffirm their Hindu identity.

In conclusion, it is important to note that both writers have written with great penetration about Hinduism and Hindu identity. In both books, the characters are trying to fulfill a Hindu vision, although it is clear that the authors of both novels have widely divergent views about the history of colonialism and about its effects. Pankaj Mishra, as a writer, critiques any essentialist pigeonholes that define and constrain Hindu identity. He decides to turn a critical lens on his whole outlook by turning his own personal essay into a novel where the main character who has a nostalgia for the past is implicated in the violence that unfolds. Samar becomes an example of a middle-class Hindu Indian whose complacency about his religion opens the door to Hindutva activities. Through the character of Samar, Mishra reveals that Hindutva negates the essential character of Indian

society. Naipaul, on the other hand, is marginalized in his view which supports the claim that Hindu nationalists make, that of reclaiming India for the Hindus. Naipaul is, in fact, the diasporic figure that Hindutva nationalists dream of. Through his scathing critique of the Mogul period and of foreign intervention in India, he confirms the Hindutva ideology that India should belong exclusively to Hindus. He also feels that the diaspora in Trinidad practice their religion in a sort of cultural wasteland, and though he writes about it so powerfully, his many scathing remarks have suggested that he is embarrassed about representing the rituals that seem to have so little meaning to the Indians in Trinidad. However, Naipaul's stance sustains the ferment of dissent that is essential to ongoing debates about Hinduism and Hindu identity and lends a vigorous challenge to writers such as Mishra, who though they disagree with him, find in his work a compelling and vital voice that offers alternative representations.

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