CHAPTER II
The First Four Books

Naipaul's first four books of fiction deal with the East Indian Trinidadian community into which he was born. This community was employed exclusively in agriculture labour under indenture. They had rural village experiences of British India and their disagreements between Hinduism and Islam. Many people arrived here to discover more opportunities and advantages. This community had become by the mid-twentieth century a significant portion of the population and developed cultural changes in order to maintain their customs and traditions. Thus, their attachment to categories of caste, and their kinship patterns all changed to adopt to the colonial setting of Trinidad's arranged society. This chaotic mixing of cultures resulted in brutality, violence and corruption. These social and cultural differences of Hindu East Indians in Trinidad occupy a place in his early fiction.

His first three books show the start of protest during the late 1930s and how Trinidad changes during and after the Second World War. *Miguel Street* (1989) is a loosely connected collection of stories, each focused on a specific character that lives in a bereaved neighbourhood in Port of Spain. These characters have ambitions which can't be fulfilled in Miguel Street. They are not in touch with the realities of their place and time. Most of these characters fail because they live in a condition of cultural vacuum and have no cultural heritage. The seventeen characters associated with a composite fictional Trinidadian street community, are held together by the narrator. Naipaul refers that the origins of *Miguel*
Street can be found in Prologue to an Autobiography where he writes the first sentence of Bogart from his memories of Trinidad. To quote Naipaul:

Every morning when he got up Hat would sit on the banister of his back verandah and shout across, "What happening there, Bogart?"

Bogart would turn in his bed and mumble softly, so that no one heard, "What happening there, Hat?"

Naipaul presents a fine fusion of time and space in the act of recollection. In "Prologue", Naipaul gives a brief description of his family's migratory history and the structure of society which influenced the people of that time. Naipaul remarks:

Luck was with me, because that first sentence was so direct, so uncluttered, so without complications, that it provoked the sentence that was to follow...The first sentence was true. The second was invention. But together – to me, the writer – they had done something extraordinary. Though they had left out everything – the setting, the historical time, the racial and social complexities of the people concern – they had suggested it all; they had created the world of the street. And together, as sentences, words, they had set up a rhythm, a speed, which dictated all that was to follow.

Miguel Street presents the small world having its manners and morals. In these stories, Naipaul reflects a time when his family had moved from India to Port of Spain. In Miguel Street, there are many communities - black, brown and Indian. Spanish, Portuguese and White
also join them. Here people are generally dirtier, poorer and are thought of as slum-dwellers. They want to follow style so that they may assert their identity in a colonial society, where there are few opportunities for advancement. Bogart, the mysterious bigamist copies a current movie star of the film, *Casablanca* and disappears from time to time. Laura has no regard for social conventions and has eight children by seven fathers. Thus Naipaul has reflected an impoverished area of Port of Spain with its cultural diversity.

*Miguel Street* lays the foundations for Naipaul’s examination of colonised condition. This area of Port of Spain has changing standards, its mistaken notions of masculinity and mistreatment of woman. Generally relations between men and women are responsible for the maintenance of codes of behaviour in a community, but in a colonial atmosphere, people have different outlook for different class and races, so social relations fluctuate. Naipaul presents a male-centred vision through his narrator:

George’s wife was never a proper person. I always thought of her just as George’s wife, and that was all. And I always thought, too, that George’s wife was always in the cow-pen.

And while George sat on the front concrete step outside the open door of his house, his wife was busy.

George never became one of the gang in *Miguel Street*. He didn’t seem to mind. He had his wife and his daughter and his son. He beat them all. And when the boy Elias grew too big, George beat his daughter and his wife more than ever. The blows didn’t appear to do the mother any
good. She just thinner and thinner, but the daughter, Dolly, thrived on it. She grew fatter and fatter, and giggled more and more every year. Elias, the son, grew more and more stern, but he never spoke a hard word to his father.  

George beats his wife to death, opens a brothel and bargains of his daughter in marriage. Hat also beats his wife. Bogart is bigamist and Popo starts doing work only after his wife runs off with the gardener. Thus his early fiction shows that woman characters play a significant role in a male-cantered society. His descriptions of domestic violence are the result of his memories of a colonial community. Such descriptions dominate his early fictions, but among his characters, there is strong telling that familial and marital loyalties must be maintained at all costs.

*Miguel Street* is a collection of stories about failure. B. Wordsworth tells of a tragic love affair and claims that he will write a great poem, but his romantic story is a lie and he is an unemployed singer who has never composed a poem. Popo who used to call himself a carpenter, always remained busy hammering, sawing and planning. He said that he was making a thing without a name, but he makes nothing. Later Hat finds that even all the new furniture of Popo's house was stolen things and remodelled by Popo. Naipaul knows that the entrance and exit of a woman from a man's life brings some changes in behaviour.

In *Miguel Street*, there is no business, no inspiration for any creative art and no love or marriage lasts. These characters are not responsible for their failures, but they live in such a society where the
desire to be a doctor, or a mechanic, or a teacher appears meaningless. It is not personal failure, but Trinidad being a colonial country, is a place without the means to enable a better life. It has few secondary schools and no university and if a person pursues higher education, he will have to go abroad. For this he requires money or one of the few Government scholarships. He will have to break with the past and face an alien world without the support of family and friends. When the boy narrator leaves at the conclusion, he says:

I left them all and walked briskly towards the aeroplane, not looking back, looking only at my shadow before me, a dancing dwarf on the tarmac.  

The boy narrator of *Miguel Street* lives with his mother. He reports the events with all the enthusiasm and involvement of a child who lives among the characters and shares their ambitions and atmosphere. Thus, Naipaul uses a device that allows the story to fluctuate between a matured boy recollecting the impressions of childhood and child’s limited vision. In the last story the boy utters his own view of things:

‘You getting too wild,’ my mother said.

I paid her no attention until the time I drank so much in one evening that I remained drunk for two whole days afterwards. When I sobered up, I made a vow neither to smoke nor drink again.

I said to my mother, ‘Is not my fault really. Is just Trinidad. What else anybody can do here except drink?’  

In Miguel Street, no body can progress because there are few opportunities for riches, fame or achievement. Ganesh Pundit tempts the boy to go to England as a student in ‘drugs’, with a scholarship. Thus, Naipaul presents the scene of cultural displacement. Naipaul deals with literacy and aesthetic issues when he writes about the poet and calypsonian “B. Wordsworth”, the mad man “Man-Man”, and the teacher “Titus Hoyt I.A.”. B. Wordsworth believes that he has the heart of white Wordsworth and never composes and sells his poems. He says:

‘Black. Black Wordsworth. White Wordsworth was my brother. We share one heart. I can watch a small flower like the morning glory and cry.”

Naipaul’s character Man-Man is based on facts. There was a well known person like him in Port of Spain. Everybody in Miguel Street use to say that Man-Man was a mad person. His life is not different from the rest of the community, but he has some strange habits. Titus Hoyt is literate and has ambition to have his recognition in the news papers.

Naipaul has given proper place to newspaper and their local and international coverage in his early fictions. In Miguel Street, Naipaul has taken twelve years period; the boy narrator is eight years old at the start and over eighteen at the conclusion. Naipaul presents Trinidad as a colony dependent on England. During the war, the Americans with their money affect social relations, attitudes and jobs. As a result, there come elections and people talk of independence. These stories point to a time, when Trinidad was prosperous and important for its trades in the field of
plantation. This view of Trinidad is imaginative because the decade from the late 1930s until after the war Trinidad was thought as impoverished and neglected and the outside world had no interest in its economy as well as its inhabitants. Miguel Street is considered a cultural judgement presented through the boy narrator. Naipaul, who is an expatriate colonial writer, makes the boy narrator nostalgic for his lost childhood home land.

His early fictions are based on his memories of Trinidadian cultural and political life before he left for England in 1950. In both The Mystic Masseur and The Suffrage of Elvira, Naipaul uses Miguel Street’s communal space in a national frame and in A House for Mr Biswas, he presents an allegory of colonialism. Naipaul’s early work serves as an experiment and he reworks the same material in his more successful novels. In both The Mystic Masseur and The Suffrage of Elvira, Trinidadian Hindus utilise politics as a vehicle to become a part of a larger national society. They use politics for personal gain and prosperity and not for social justice and independence.

The Mystic Masseur is the story of Pundit Ganesh Ramsumair of Fuente Grove. He starts his career as a school teacher after completing secondary school and the elementary training as a teacher. He tries to become a masseur in the family tradition and become a psychic and healer. He appears as a representative of the Hindu community in Trinidad. To quote Naipaul:

At first they fed him out of enamel dishes. Now they gave him earthenware ones. They knew no higher honour.
The table was to offer a further surprise. One day a whole series of booklets on The Art of Salesmanship appeared on it.

Ramlogan said, ‘I bet you does miss all the big books and thing you did have in Port of Spain, eh, sahib?’

The reference is important because it preserves the traditional cast structure of the Hindu community – reverence for the learned Brahmin here. Ganesh constructs a miniature India in Fuente Grove and people who are anxious to preserve their cultural identity often visit him. With the commercial enterprises of his father-in-law, Ramlogan, he strives to become an entrepreneur. He joins politics and is elected a member of the Legislative Council. Ganesh’s financial success leads him to a political office. It suggests the rise of the colonial entrepreneurs who made fortunes on the political opportunities of that period. He becomes a public figure within the cultural, political and social life of Trinidad. He becomes an emblematic for Hinduism. His concept of Hinduism is positive as it helps Trinidad’s Hindu Indian community to make advancement.

Naipaul makes the protagonist of his first published novel the god’s namesake, thus he pays tribute to his Hindu heritage. This also illustrates that the novel covers different cultural peculiarities - Hinduism, colonial education, English and Commerce. During the course of Ganesh’s political creolization, these cultural peculiarities combined and displaced one another. Naipaul makes the narrator as a young man, to misread the significance of books by confusing quantity with content.
When he visits Ganesh’s house he and all the characters present are surprised to see the number of the books he has. To add their surprise, Leela, Ganesh’s wife tells about the purchase of the last three volumes. To quote Naipaul:

She started to count off the fingers of her left hand. ‘Four hundred Everyman, two hundred Penguin – six hundred. Six hundred, and one hundred Reader’s Library, make seven hundred. I think with all the other book it have about fifteen hundred good book here.’ ……How much book I buy last week, Leela?’

‘Only three, man,’ she said. ‘But they was big books, big big books. Six to seven inches altogether.’

Ganesh collects books with little regards for their content. Ganesh’s disciples never try to read them. He collects books for the impact of their presence than their usefulness. Pundit Ganesh’s career and experience present the condition of Trinidad and its people. Pundit Ganesh takes various roles and careers whichever fit him as a representative of Trinidadians as the island moves towards independence. Ganesh who succeeds in getting elected as a Member of Legislative Council is finally recognised by an MBE, and appears in London as a colonial statesman under the name of G. Ramsay Muir. His political success takes place at a time after the Second World War, when the British Government was trying to unburden themselves of their colonies. There were no real political parties and ideologies in the colonies, so it was good time for ostentatious personalities like Ganesh. In Trinidad the
first elections to the legislature were held by universal adult suffrage in place of appointed representative. During this period, Trinidad politics was known for its corruption and some intellectuals who had studied in England became politicians. To Quote Naipaul:

Indarsingh didn’t have a chance. But he fought gamely. He got the support of the Party for Progress and Unity, the PPU, an organization hastily slung together two months before the elections. The PPU’s aims, like its organization, were vague; and Indarsingh had to fend for himself. His speeches were long, carefully thought-out things – later published by the author in book form with the title Colonialism: Four Essays – about The Economics of Colonialism, Colonialism in Perspective, The Anatomy of Oppression, The Approach to Freedom. Indarsingh travelled about with his own blackboard and a box of coloured chalks, illustrating his arguments and diagrams. Children liked him.9

Indarsingh, an Indian attends a famous British university and returns to Trinidad. He is superior to Ganesh but has inappropriate attitudes. On the other hand Ganesh is untalented but makes his fortunes first in religion and then as a leader of the people. During 1946, political career in Trinidad was seen as absurd, for there was no feeling of nationalism, lack of education and no political discussions and policies. Ganesh manages to seize the time and make use of opportunities, thus he succeeds. On the contrary Indarsingh is treated with contempt.

The novel illustrates that in Trinidad there was very little understanding of literature and there was need for self definition. It makes
Beyond Belief describes Naipaul's visit to the same four countries again sixteen years later. This travel book also repeats the same observations. After sixteen years he finds that his observations about the Islamic polity and its subjects were true. He observes the regressive nature of Islamic dogmas in all the countries he visits. In Among the Believers, Naipaul concludes that Islamic dogma and faith have no concrete and realizable state. It attempts to dominate cultures that are not Islamic and wants to convert people. Beyond Belief illustrates how non-Arab Muslims had been and are being arabized under the guise of Islamization. Naipaul finds in this process the seeds of a terrible cultural and spiritual colonization. This process is not determined to improve the lives of their people but it is destroying the cultures of the past and the person who change their religion, do not feel at home with new religion and they have to forget their own culture. When Christianity happened long ago in Europe, the local religion disappeared and Christianity tried to uproot the original culture of people. In Indonesia, Malaysia and non-Arab areas of the Islamic world, fundamentalist intellectuals are trying to uproot everything, which does not confirm the Koran.

For Naipaul has interest in history and regard for historically famous places, so in Beyond Belief, he shows great reverence for such places associated with older religions or cults. He asserts that Islamic expansion outside Arabia is the most debilitating form of imperialism. To quote Naipaul:
account of the man Ganesh Ramsumair, masseur, mystic, and, since 1953, M.B.E.¹¹

Finally, Ganesh transmutes into G. Ramsay Muir MBE and his career takes him to support the colonial rule. It reflects the power of colonialism. To quote Naipaul:

In the Colonial Office report on Trinidad for 1949 Ganesh was described as an important political leader.

In 1950 he was sent by British Government to Lake Success and his defence of British colonial rule is memorable. The Government of Trinidad, realizing that after that Ganesh stood little chance of being elected at the 1950 General Elections, nominated him to the Legislative Council and arranged for him to be a member of the Executive Council.

Indarsingh was elected in Ganesh's old ward, on a platform of modified Socialindiuism.

In 1953 Trinidad learned that Ganesh Ramsumair had been made an M.B.E.¹²

Ganesh is a hero of the people especially Trinidadians who have migrated from India and try to make their fortunes in crude and comic manners. This work can be seen as the beginning of the process of Naipaul's embodiment in books. It presents a perfect example of society wavering between pretence and reality. In an impoverished society words and ideas do not have the same meaning as they may have elsewhere and Trinidad being a colonial country provides few means to enable a better life.
The Suffrage of Elvira continues the political theme of The Mystic Masseur. The Mystic Masseur mainly deals with Ganesh’s life, The Suffrage of Elvira gives detail of a campaign in a remote part of the island, after Trinidad and Tobago has achieved self-government. In the first novel, Naipaul describes the social history of Trinidad through the 1930s and 1940s until the first election in 1946 under universal adult franchise. Ganesh represents the first generation of politicians at a time when there was lack of political parties and ideologies. In The Suffrage of Elvira, Naipaul describes the period of 1950 and the second general election under universal adult franchise.

The Suffrage of Elvira is set in an isolated, neglected region. It has a large Indian population. There is politics between individuals of the Hindu and Muslim - Indian communities. The novel shows that British electoral processes are mimicry of alien practices in such a community, otherwise there is no criticism of British rule by the narrator or his characters. The suffrage of Elvira is the last of Naipaul’s social comedies of the inconsistencies of colonial Trinidad. It deals with the farce of elections in an unsophisticated part of Trinidad which is surrounded by superstition and ignorance.

In The Mystic Masseur and The Suffrage of Elvira, Naipaul illustrates his view of society and politics in forties and early fifties Trinidad. Both books examine the personalities who have become success symbol of the colonial establishment in Trinidad. It may be useful to describe the political development during the period between 1910 and
1936. During this period, people had desire to prove themselves in the field of politics. For this, several factors were responsible. Many Trinidadian Indian organisations as the East Indian National Association and the East Indian National Congress were formed to represent Indian interests. In the industrial sector the oil field workers gave rise to Trade Union Organisations and a movement. During the depression age, there was economic crisis which resulted in the oil workers' strike in 1937, under the leadership of Uriah Butler. Later, this strike was joined by Indian Trinidad Sugar Estates and Factory Workers Union. Thus, the British government decided to conduct election in Trinidad and Tobago. In Trinidad election with universal suffrage were held in 1946.

Only half the seats in the Legislative Council were put up for the election and the rest reserved for members nominated by the governor or for senior civil servants. After this, the next election was held in 1950. In both the 1946 and 1950 elections, the Indian middle class got success and the radial and left-oriented organisation confronted failure. In this election, race factor entered in the electoral politics. Ranjit Kumar, president of the East India National Congress, won by playing the race card. He demanded for communal representation. He was of the opinion that largely black majority party wouldn’t deal fairly with the interests of Indian population.

After the 1950 elections, the Butler Party got the majority in the elections of the Legislative Council. Of the six seats that the Butler Party won, four seats were represented by Indians. Indians had always
supported the left-oriented and trade union organisations. After 1952, there was rise of the Hindu organisation The Sanatan Dharma Mahasabha and the political party People’s Democratic Party under the leadership of B.S. Maraj. Dr. Eric Williams’s People’s National Movement got majority in the election of 1956 and formed the government. In 1961, this party won again and saw the freedom of Trinidad in 1962. Thus, it is clear that though during this period, there were deep communal and racial differences, yet there were ideologies and leaders, and people had interest in politics.

In *The Suffrage of Elvira*, electoral politics has no ideologies and it depends on the structure of society and interests of people. In Trinidad, there are three communal groups - Christians, Hindus, Muslims and the two racial groups - black and coloured. All groups have their own communal and racial ideologies and don’t want to come out of their boundaries. To quote Naipaul:

‘Things were crazily mixed up in Elvira. Everybody, Hindus, Muslims and Christians, owned a Bible; the Hindus and Muslims looking on it, if anything, with greater awe.’

Surujpat Harbans contests election to the Legislative Council from Elvira. He wins favour of Muslim voters by appointing Baksh’s son as his campaign manager because Baksh has a control on the Muslim voters. Chittranjan controls the Hindu votes so Surujpat promises him that he will marry Chittaranjan’s daughter to his son. Eventually he defeats Preacher and wins. Thus the three novels make it clear that society of
Trinidad had passive individuals who were ambitions but they had no means to fulfil them and bring social change.

Naipaul’s fourth and most successful book, *A House for Mr Biswas* is politically sagacious novel. This novel is based upon events and circumstance of Naipaul’s childhood. Naipaul’s father Seepersad Naipaul like Mr. Biswas had come from a rural Hindu society, established himself as a journalist for the *Trinidad guardian* and wanted to become a story-writer. Later Naipaul collects some of his stories as *Gurudeva and other Indian Tales* in 1943.

Like Seepersad Naipaul, Biswas was also dissatisfied with the Hindu community to which he belonged. He was doubtful towards conservative Hinduism and communal rituals and conventions. Seepersad had criticised the animal sacrifices in Hindu rituals, he faced violent protest for his criticism and passed through a nervous breakdown. In *A House for Mr Biswas*, Naipaul has mentioned two main points. First, Naipaul describes different domestic atmosphere to which Mr. Biswas had been accustomed to from his childhood and then he describes Mr. Biswas’s search for domestic independence. Mr. Biswas starts his career as a sign painter. To quote Naipaul:

His hand became surer, his strokes bolder, his feeling for letters finer.
He thought R and S the most beautiful Roman letters; no letter could express so many moods as R, without losing its beauty; and what could compare with the swing and rhythm of S? With a brush, large letters were easier than small, and he felt much satisfaction after he and Alec
had covered long stretches of paling with signs for Pluko, which was
good for the hair in various ways, and Anchor cigarettes.\textsuperscript{14}

Mr. Biswas abandons this career and establishes himself as a
journalist for the \textit{Trinidad Guardian}. He learns the art of writing stories
and transforming ordinary events into sensational and coloured stories.
He gains ability to apprehend and yet escape. He aspires to be a writer
and wants to translate his own life into a story. Naipaul presents other
characters fascinated by the magic of words. As they felt that academic
achievement was the only way to escape from the tensions of Hindu
Trinidad. There is no link between learning and the material existence of
the written words or books. To quote Naipaul:

He was the eldest Tuttle boy. He had impressed his parents by a constant
demand for exercise books and by a continuous show of writing. He said
he was making notes. In fact he had copied out every word of Nelson's
West Indian Geography, by Captain Cutteridge, Director of Education,
author of Nelson's West Indian Readers and Nelson's West Indian
Arithmetics. He had completed the Geography in more than a dozen
exercise books, and was at the moment engaged on the first volume of
Nelson's West Indian History, by Captain Daniel, Assistant director of
Education.\textsuperscript{15}

In \textit{Miguel Street}, Naipaul suggests escape from Trinidad as actual
departure, while in \textit{A House for Mr Biswas}, he makes his hero escape in
the tangibility and alternative reality of text, of books. The actual
departures of Ovad and Anand seem to be far less satisfactory escapes
then Mr. Biswas's own into words. This fiction will be discussed elaborately in the next chapter.

Naipaul's first four works of fiction illustrate the self-consciousness of the tangibility, self-contained ness, reality and indelibility of books. Naipaul himself achieves this and provides to his readers. His early fiction presents the state of Trinidadian culture, politics and society of the thirties and forties. The society is known for its narrowness, passivity, conservatism and lack of genuineness. Naipaul has written about such individuals who have aspirations inappropriate to their society and illustrated that politics of Trinidad lacks the ideological commitment. In his novels, men live in constant fear of change, insignificance and alienation. They attempt to escape into an ideal static vision of the self. They like profession which best symbolize the need of their particular condition. They fail because their symbolic acts are not supported by their real condition. When Mr. Biswas finally settles in his house in Sikkim Street, he is happy that he lays claim to his portion of the earth, his symbolic search is not escape but an ordering of the chaos. He realises that he must face his own reality instead of escaping and the responsibility for order lies with the individual and not with the society.

To give an elaborate description of decolonisation and self determination, Naipaul has made his character appear with scepticism and self-denigration. Hat in *Miguel Street* is not satisfied with the help services or judicial system and the banquet at government house at the end of *The Mystic Masseur* presents the scene of similar self-
depreciation. These pictures of self denigration are selected to present the colonial portraits of colonial people and analyse their psychic condition. Naipaul has succeeded in presenting the existence of colonial social institutions such as the educational system, the civil service and the judiciary. He has presented agriculture and animal husbandry as the commercial organisation. Thus, he successfully presents the picture of administration and the maintenance of a dependent social system.

*Miguel Street* portrays a less privilege class of Trinidad and describes the issue of colonial dependency in the domestic life of its characters. It doesn’t touch the social conditions. The scenes of domestic violence and double standard attitudes towards man and woman also serve to examine the peculiarities of a colonial dependent society. These novels refer to a specific period in history, they are presented with a sense of self containment, which makes their observation more general. Critics think that it will not be relevant to look at the actual Trinidadian history of the forties to assess these novels. Naipaul has created a world not in historical terms but rather in terms of broader and deeper insights into a certain culture and society.

Thus, the interpretation of these four books in this chapter reveals that as it was the start of his career, so the author has used his experiences of Trinidad as the writing material in these books perfectly. These books give the actual portrait of the social issues of the tradition and domesticities of the world in which he grew up. In *Miguel Street*, the issue of colonial dependency is reflected in the brutal domestic situation
in the characters' lives but it is not discussed in the social sphere. The scenes of domestic violence and double standards for men and women become symbol of moral decay and anarchy and may be helpful if the material and psychological result of colonial dependency is examined. In these works Naipaul does not seem to be satisfied with the Trinidad culture and politics because the culture lacks authenticity and politics lack ideological commitment and are contradictory in purposes.
Notes

4. Ibid, p. 179.
8. Ibid, p. 5.
9. Ibid, p. 188.
10. Ibid, p.11.
15. Ibid, p. 463.