CHAPTER - 2

THE DEVELOPMENT OF NAIPAUL'S

RELIGIOUS VISION

V.S. Naipaul arrives at his religious vision after a long experience of different religious traditions, eventually marked by a process of acceptance and reflection, a process spread over his entire life. Chronologically its development can be understood in two ways: in phases and by the discussion of his views on important religions. In the first way it can be understood in three different phases. In the first phase Naipaul goes on to acquire the knowledge of different religious traditions, their rites and rituals, their scriptures, their modes of worship, their superstitions and their prejudices exemplified in the Caribbeans. It mars his awareness how religious practices received from their place of birth of a particular religion lose their significance and meaning in alien lands and how religion becomes simply something superficial. The experience of this phase finds its expression in such novels as *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958), and *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961). In the second phase, Naipaul goes on to have the first hand experience of different religions, their central values, including modes of worship, their vision, and philosophy of life, their fundamentalism, their contributions, and even the dangers they pose to the contemporary life. The experiences of this phase are embodied in such works as *An Area of Darkness* (1964), *The Mimic Men* (1967), *India: A Wounded
Civilization (1977), A Bend in the River (1979) and Among the Believers (1981). In the third phase Naipual develops a deeper view of religion, as he comes to understand the spiritual aspect of different religions. He no longer sees religions from the prism of his professed atheism, and the prejudices that he had formed during his Caribbean days and which he got confirmed during his first lap of visits to several countries. The experience of this phase is incorporated in A Turn in the South (1989), India: A Million Mutinies Now (1990) and Beyond Belief (1998).

The second way enables us to study the development of Naipaul’s vision in terms of different religious traditions e.g. Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam in that order. This way also involves a chronological order, as the discussion starts with the experience of the Carbibbean days and eventually goes on to cover his worldwide travels and interaction with different religious groups, the Hindu, the Muslim, the Christian, and the African. The second way is more rewarding in as much as it has the benefits both of the chronological order and discussion of religions separately. Naipaul begins with Hinduism.

Significantly, Naipaul’s earliest scrutiny of his Hindu heritage is embodied in the The Mystic Masseur, in which he questions the veracity of the religious ideas and practices of the Hindu community of his village. But in The Suffrage of Elvira, he traverses a much larger area that of Trinidad and Tobago. In his next novel, A House for Mr. Biswas, although Naipaul is concerned with the decay of the Hanuman House with its typical Hindu beliefs, the area continues to be large enough to cover most of the Island. In The Mimic Men Naipaul further enlarges his area of experience to cover London as well.
The Mystic Masseur, published in 1957 is, according to Bruce F. MacDonald, “an allegory of the history of the Hindu community in Trinidad.”¹ This history includes the description of the cultural activities including their customs, manners, rites, and rituals of the East Indians living in rural areas. However, Hinduism prevalent in the countryside was in a decaying condition, reduced to as Bruce King states, “a crude sense of ethnicity without any understanding of its philosophy and rituals.”² Naipaul was actually conscious of the contemporary hollowness of the religious practices of his community. He found that East Indians had rites without philosophy. The condition of their religion deteriorated to such an extent that its own adherents began to fight shy of it. Hinduism which provided them self-identity in that wilderness and which they preserved so jealously now became a thing of ridicule. In this novel Naipaul tells us how the rituals of initiation and marriage with its traditional ceremonies of kedgereee eating, became contaminated with the invasion of the Western culture. The evils of Hinduism like dowry, child-marriage, denial of education to women, and caste-system persisted in their worst forms. The East Indians, according to Sushanta Goonatilake, became the victim of “Cultural Schizophrenia.”³

Fawzia Mustafa observes that Trinidadian Hinduism welted under the pressure of the Trinidadian social environment. The Hinduism of the Indian indentured labourers had already undergone tremendous change after their departure from their native land. Under new circumstances, they had to make some crucial adjustments in their theory and practice of religious rites and sacraments. They had to reduce their ceremonies to their minimum. This
"reductive" tendency is visible in Aunt Gold Teeth’s fetishism and Ganesh’s Brahminical initiation. We can mark how Dookhie, a minor character in The Mystic Masseur runs after Ganesh saying:

Cut out this nonsense, man. Stop behaving stupid. You think I have all day to run after you? You think you really going to Benares? That is in India, you know, and this is Trinidad.  

We can mark this reductive tendency everywhere in Naipaul. Fawzia Mustafa observes, “Examples... are repeated throughout the novel, indeed that” in all Naipaul’s works where Hinduism and other religions are encountered in their evolution from one form of practice to another.  

Another significant feature of the decaying Trinidadian Hinduism is its fusion with social functions. In The Mystic Masseur, “a talesmanic Hinduism” reinstates, though for the time being, cultural or religious practices as a social function. Furthermore, with the acceptance of the conventions of other religions Hinduism becomes the victim of colonial hybridity. Besides the invasion of Christianity accelerates a process of anglicanization. Subsequently, most of the Trinidadian Hindus began to incline towards Christianity. The process of anglicanization is visible as much in Naipaul as in his characters. Mustafa writes that “Ganesh Ramsumair’s transmutation into G. Ramsay Muir MBE, for example, does suggest that his career marks the character’s voyage to ‘whiteness,’ a conceit that persistently recurs in all of Naipaul’s work as the sign of colonialism’s power to posit the fact of ‘whiteness’” (Mustafa 54).

Selwyn R. Cudjoe interprets the decay of Hinduism and the process of anglicanization in terms of feudalism and capitalism. While feudalism stands for
Hindu values, capitalism is related to Christian values. "The novel," as Cudjoe states, "concerns the problems of arranged marriages, the inevitability of one's karma or fate, tradition versus modernity, and the act of writing as a means of appropriating one's reality." Naipaul unfolds the tension between the Eastern and Western value systems through career of Ganesh Ramsumair, through his rise from masseur to mystic and then to the position of Member of British Empire (M.B.E.), the highest honour to a colonial subject.

The Mystic Masseur revolves round the career of Ganesh a self-made hero, born in a backward society which holds no promise for his advancement. Rebelious by nature, he breaks all the rules, refuses to an arranged marriage, quits his job as a school teacher and develops a strong sense of destiny. He believes that he is ordained for something larger. For realizing this dream, he makes a persistent effort, assuming different roles including that of a mystic masseur and politician. He is so shrewd that he compels Ramlogan not only to give him dowry but also to pay for his survival, till he finds a way to his advancement. Later as his fortunes rises as a mystic, he becomes a man of great prosperity, controlling a fleet of taxies, and a restaurant. He also shares the profits from materials to be used in rituals. Though a mystic, he is a modernizer as well; for he wants to use his learning especially that of psychology to cure his patients. With his persistent efforts he brings together various cultures of Trinidad – Hindu, Muslim, and Christian. He also combines different dialects English, vernacular Hindi, and a bit of Spanish. "He is," in the opinion of Bruce King, "a hero of the people, an example of a people, especially Trinidadians of the Indian Diaspora" (King 31).
According to Fawzia Mustafa, Ganesh is, “an important social and cultural marker for Hinduism, not as a system of belief, but as the resident Hindu institution which offers recourse to an idea of amelioration in the heart of Trinidad’s Hindu Indian community” (Mustafa 45). It is, according to Mustafa, a small gesture to his Hindu heritage. The novelist begins with pointing out a certain ambivalence in Ganesh regarding his Indian identity. It is interesting to observe how Ganesh is anxious to pose himself as an Englishman:

He was so ashamed of his Indian name that for a while he spread a story that he was really called Gareth.

(The Mystic Masseur 10-11)

This ambivalence is also visible in Ganesh’s love of the Western books and the icon of Lord Vishnu, the Hindu God. It is exemplified in the description of his hut:

There were books, books, here, there, and everywhere; books piled crazily on the table, books rising in mounds in the corners, books covering the floor. I had never before seen so many books in one place...

I tried to forget Ganesh thumping my leg about and concentrated on the walls. They were covered with religious quotations, in Hindi and English, and with Hindu religious pictures. My gaze settled on a beautiful four-armed god standing in an open lotus.

(The Mystic Masseur 5-6)

According to Cudjoe, this tendency is, “emblematic and paradigmatic of Naipaul’s early approach to the representation of the East Indian’s dual position in Caribbean society” (Cudjoe 45). Naipaul uses the icon of the Hindu deity to structure the plot of the novel in order to suggest the East Indian way of life, “within the feudal communal world of Trinidad and Tobago” (Cudjoe 38). With
this device he elevates the story of Ganesh, making it a representative story not only of the East Indians living in Trinidad but also of the other people of the island.

Ganesh’s dualism is intensified with his entry into the capitalist world of Port of Spain for education. In his school, as we have cited earlier, he feels ashamed of his Hindu name. He is also humiliated by the principal of the college for disturbing a class on his return after his initiation into Brahminism. Ganesh’s religious convictions suffer another jolt of a different kind with his encounter with an Englishman Mr. Stewart, who poses himself as a self initiated Hindu. Mr. Stewart provides a fresh dimension to his religious sensibility. He sets Ganesh on the road to mysticism. As Landeg White explains, “Ganesh’s Hinduism at this time amounts to little more than nausea at having to bite into Mr. Stewart’s sandwiches, but he is enchanted to hear Hindus described as the ‘only people pursuing the indefinite’ and to have his own loafing called ‘meditation.’”

However, Ganesh does not take road to mysticism but to spiritual healing suggested by the older way of rites and rituals. “By contrast,” adds White, “it is The Great Belcher, a delightful creation and our one glimpse in the novel of an older Indian way of life dominated by the family rituals of weddings and funerals, who supplies the stimulus and the sacred texts for Ganesh to become a spiritual healer” (White 70).

Yet another dimension to Ganesh’s Hinduism is provided by the Gita. After World War II he comes in touch with the Gita as well as with some other books on Indian philosophy. His readings in the Indian texts brings important
changes in his religious sensibility. It gives a new direction to the choice of his subjects:

He read them, marked them, and on Sunday afternoons made notes. At the same time he developed a taste for practical psychology and read many books on The Art of Getting On. But India was his great love. It became his habit, on examining a new 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. Soon he owned a curious selection.

(The Mystic Masseur 102)

Ganesh’s Hinduism suffers another change. Now he endeavours to fuse the Eastern and the Western ways of thinking and determines to use his learning to help out other people. Subsequently, he becomes a pundit. After receiving his uncle’s great books from the Great Belcher, he resolves to use the great legacy of the past, to guide himself and his people, in the newly emerging world of capitalism. However, the ancient wisdom buried in the books, cannot be understood by an ordinary intellect. It requires the insight and experience of a mystic to unravel the mysteries lying hidden in the texts. Subsequently, Ganesh decides to don the mantle of a mystic. In his new incarnation, he combines the mythologies of the East and the West.

This approach is exemplified in the conversion of his room to welcome the African boy Hector to his home. In an interesting move Ganesh places a picture of Laxmi, the consort of Vishnu in a prominent place and goes on to place a candle below the goddess and burns the camphor and the incense. In him as Cudjoe remarks, “the tenets of Hinduism and Christianity, the theology of feudalism and capitalism, respectively, merge” (Cudjoe 41). Obviously, this tendency to merge
the practices of the two religious traditions cannot be viewed as process of anglicanization of Hinduism, as some critics, especially Fawzia Mustafa, are inclined to believe.

With the passage of time Ganesh’s mysticism, an embodiment of the Hindu and Christian elements, merges with social commitments, or to be precise, with the socio-political history of Trinidad. Nevertheless, from the Hindu point of view, the most important moment in Ganesh’s life is invariably the moment, when he comes to understand the Gita, in the backdrop of his mysticism and the Gandhian philosophy. As a result he develops a complex religious consciousness, which becomes, inspired with the twin ideals of desirelessness, renunciation, and liberation through the service of the people:

His main point was that desire was a source of misery and therefore desire ought to be suppressed. Occasionally he went off at a tangent to discuss whether the desire to suppress desire wasn’t itself a desire; but usually he tried to be as practical as possible... At other times he said that happiness was only possible if you cleared your mind of desire and looked upon yourself as part of Life, just a tiny link in the vast chain of Creation.

(The Mystic Masseur 150)

Ganesh is fascinated by the Gandhian philosophy for its fusion of the elements of action and contemplation and for the reconciliation of the Eastern and Western ways of thought. “The teaching of desirelessness,” Cudjoe writes, “that is embodied in the Gita and that was the central message of Mahatma Gandhi’s life becomes the central focus of Ganesh’s. Indeed, Gandhi’s attempt to synthesize the dichotomy between Western and Hindu culture, which lay at the heart of his
greatness, is also Ganesh’s central concern during Trinidad’s transitional period” (Cudjoe 45).

Naturally Ganesh likes Gandhi’s idea of self-realization through social and political action. For self-realization, Gandhi did not follow the way of renunciation, but the way of communion with the masses. He identified his aspirations and the longing with the people and became one with them. In doing so he fused the two barring ideals of contemplation and action which characterized the Oriental and the Occidental worlds respectively. To quote Cudjoe again, “As such he (Ganesh) became the symbol of the Indian liberation movement, a representation of the attempt to synthesize the traditional world of Hinduism and mysticism (feudalism) and the contemporary world of Christianity and pragmatism (capitalism)” (Cudjoe 45). It is practically this ideal which inspires Ganesh. In his thought word and deed, he becomes a Gandhi in the West Indian Wilderness.

In short, though in The Mystic Masseur, Naipaul unleashes a bitter attack on the decaying rites, rituals, social customs, and evil practices of the decaying Hinduism, he, at the same time, enunciates his notion of an ideal Hinduism, a Hinduism in practice. He seems to believe that the essence of Hinduism does not lie in the performance of its rituals, which are always in a process of change but in the philosophy behind those rituals, in its quest of self-realization, not through renunciation but through desirelessness, social action, and the service of the people. This philosophy fuses the central elements of Hinduism and Christianity. For adopting this philosophy of public action, we cannot accuse Naipaul of anglicanization.
However, in his next novel, *The Suffrage of Elvira*, Naipaul does not maintain this high profile of religion. He takes up other aspects of religion especially superstition and communalism. Though he continues to portray the process of decay and contamination of rituals, he now blends them with the loss of ethical values. Now using a much larger canvas and a pronounced political context, Naipaul examines the role of religion in the democratic institutions. He goes on to expose the role of money in undermining not only religious and social values but also democratic values. In *The Suffrage of Elvira* Naipaul, while pointing out the rising trend of communalism, a fearful legacy of democracy in a pluralistic society, underscores the need for the development of a composite culture, suggested in *The Mystic Masseur*.

In *The Suffrage of Elvira*, Naipaul’s focal point is again the East Indian community but this time the community is projected in a larger Trinidadian community, which includes not only Hindus but also Muslims, Negroes, and the Spanish. The novel tells us the story of the election campaign of Surajpat Harbans. His rival in the election is Preacher, who is favoured by the black people of the region. The other chief players in the election-drama are Baksh, a Muslim leader, Chittaranjan the Hindu jeweller, Ramlogan, the owner of rumshop, and Dhaniram the local pundit. There are also some characters who represent the progressive minded young generation. They are Foam, the son of Baksh, Lorkhoor, the Hindu manager of Preacher’s Christian campaign, Chittaranjan’s daughter Nelly, and pundit Dhaniram’s daughter-in-law doolahin deserted by her husband.
Harbans is a man of superstitious nature. Even though he kills the mother of Tazan (superstition), he cannot get rid of superstitions. He continues to read signs of misfortune in accidents like his near collision with Jehovah’s witnesses and killing of the stray dog. His superstitious nature also makes its impact upon his election campaign. In The Suffrage of Elvira, superstition is not an isolated phenomenon. Its influence is much wider Naipaul does not fail to mention the dragnet of superstitions which assumes a number of forms including religious and racial. It influences not only the old generation but also the younger. For instance, if Harbans is the victim of religious superstitions, Nelly Chittaranjan is the victim of ethnic superstition. Harbans’s superstitious nature is also mixed with passivity and with an aroma of victimization, which produce a false notion about his character. Surprisingly, Harbans develops a political understanding with Baksh as well as with Chittaranjan on some pretext or the other. However, persons belonging to the younger generation eventually outmanoeuvre the deeply rooted corruption of their elders.

Structing his novel on the progress of the election campaign, Naipaul conveys his religious message through symbols. He makes a symbolic use of the picture on the wall of the big drawing room where Chittaranjan, Baksh, Foam, and Harbans have gathered for chalking out an election strategy. The picture reminds us of the picture of Ganesh’s hut with the icon of Vishnu and religious quotations from Hindi and English books. According to Cudjoe, the picture of Gandhi gives us a message that the East Indians have ability to solve their problems by themselves. They can do so by eradicating the evils of their community, their
obsolete religious practices as well as their superstitions. “The Suffrage of Elvira,” writes Cudjoe, “that East Indians could solve their problems in the Wilderness only by rejecting such feudal practices as the taking of child brides, the proscription against educating girls, and the belief in fate and the preordination of events. These practices are dramatized by the many supernatural powers the community attributes to Tiger, the black bitch” (Cudjoe 46). Naipaul, through this symbolism, reaffirms the East Indian’s power to root out superstitious beliefs.

In the novel, Naipaul points out how under the crushing weight of democracy and its institutions social and religious values suffer. Champa Rao Mohan explains how money influences capitalism and makes people, the worshippers of money i.e. Lakshmi or Mammon. In the novel, it is interesting to find how Chittaranjan gets political and social leverage because of money:

Easily the most important person in Elvira was Chittaranjan. And there was no mystery why. He looked rich and was rich.⁸

Money goes on to hold precedence not only over politics but also over religion, Baksh, though not a good Muslim, becomes the leader of his community because of his money power:

It was a puzzle: how Baksh came to be the Muslim leader. He wasn’t a good Muslim. He didn’t know all the injunction of the Prophet and those he did know he broke. For instance he was a great drinker.

(The Suffrage of Elvira 12)

The election process also takes a heavy toll of religion and its values. The genuine spirit of religion eventually suffers an eclipse, while the pseudo-religious tendencies of communalism and its concomitant elements, racial feelings of hatred
and hostility, come to the fore. In novel we find, how amity among the communities ends. The feeling of religious and racial hatred flare up between Chittaranjan and Baksh because of the false scandal involving their children, Nelly and Foam. “The insults,” writes Champa Rao Mohan, “they aim at each other expose the race relations in Elvira.” To quote from the novel:

“What is Muslims?” Chittaranjan asked, his smile frozen, his eyes unshining, his voice low and cutting. ‘Muslim is everything and Muslim is nothing.’ He paused, ‘Even Negro is Muslim.’ Baksh’s retort is equally venomous”: “All you is just a pack of Kaffir, if you ask me.”

(The Suffrage of Elvira 129-130)

Besides the decay of the true religious spirit which becomes a casualty in the election process, Naipaul visualizes the contamination of rituals, and a break down of the Hindu social structure. This process of decay can be marked in the character of Dhaniram, the pundit of the Hindu community. Interestingly, he is educated at a Presbyterian school and sings Christian hymns. He is not ashamed of his Christian training but proud of it as it makes him aware of the religious beliefs of Christians. He rather gloats over this double heritage. As Naipaul writes:

There were many Hindu coloured prints; but by far the biggest thing was a large Esso calendar, with Pundit Dhaniram’s religious commitments written in pencil above the dates. It looked as though Dhaniram’s practice was falling off. It didn’t matter, Foam knew that Dhaniram also owned the fifth part of a tractor and Baksh said that was worth at least two hundred dollars a month.

(The Suffrage of Elvira 48)

Naipaul goes on to mark with interest the transformation of the Hindu ceremonies, especially marriage. Among Hindus it is girl’s father who approaches
groom’s father. But in Elvira, it is the boy’s father who makes the offer. As for the breakdown of the Hindu social order, “it is suggested through incidents like Dhaniram’s daughter-in-law’s elopement with Lorkhoor” (Mohan 40).

However, in *The Suffrage of Elvira*, Naipaul earmarks some positive gains from the religious point of view. The religious pluralism, which we find in the communities of Trinidad, reasserts the need of a composite religion. Realizing this need, people of Elvira begin to pay respect to every religion and its scriptures. They not only possess the copies of these books but also read them. At the same time they go on to participate in the festivals of other religious communities. Furthermore, Naipaul provides them an opportunity to recognize the merits of the cultural diversity and need for cultural and racial unity. “The election,” writes Cudjoe, “offers the people of Elvira a chance to recognize their cultural diversity and to rejoice in its richness. There is no need to wage a divisive struggle to achieve temporary power. Lorkhoor, for example, rhapsodizes about the unity of the races and the religions as the most important prerequisite for the realization of the liberation and identity of Elvira’s people” (Cudjoe 48). Lorkhoor becomes the champion of this unity. While urging people to vote for Preacher, he gives a call for unity:

Unite and cohere. Vote for the man who has lived among you, toiled among you, prayed among you, worked among you. This is the voice of the renowned and ever popular Lorkhoor begging you and urging you and imploring you and entreating you and beseeching you to vote for Preacher, the renowned and ever popular Preacher. Use your democratic rights on election day and vote one, vote all. This, good people of Elvira, is the voice of Lorkhoor.

*(The Suffrage of Elvira 74)*
The religious vision which Naipaul unfolds in *The Suffrage of Elvira* can be summed up as a call for the end of feudal values of Hinduism like caste system, child-marriage, denial of women education. Through this vision Naipual urges people to sink religious and regional prejudices as well as racial superstitions in order to build a new society with its faith in a composite culture. He also warns people against the unholy marriage of politics and religion that encourages the worship of the money power as well as energizes communal feelings.

While attacking Hindu rituals in *The Mystic Masseur* and Hindu values and superstitions in *The Suffrage of Elvira*, Naipaul’s tone is rather milder. But when he comes to examine the dogmatic Hinduism in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, his tone becomes increasingly harsher. In his examination the Hindu dogma he pours all the venom he possesses. However, it must be kept in mind that Naipaul’s bitterness is not the bitterness of an outsider but that of an insider who actually suffers for the dogmas of Hinduism. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Naipaul presents his religious and social predicament as an Indian in the Wilderness of Trinidad by inverting the Indian mythology dealing with the banishment of Lord Rama.

Indeed, as Cudjoe believes, *A House for Mr. Biswas* is “a product of Naipaul’s Hindu sensibility” (Cudjoe 51), which is eventually fortified by the philosophy of the Ramayana. Thematically, it extends subjects of the earlier novels, *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Suffrage of Elvira* especially the subject dealing with, “the Hindu concept of self, and the nature of self-realization” (Cudjoe 51). With the allegorization of the story of Indians in the West Indian
Wilderness, Naipaul revives his old religious themes of the rejection of Hindu rituals, evil practices, and superstitious beliefs. But now he goes a little deeper, considering the conspicuous dogmas of Hinduism on an epical scale. He reinterprets the Hindu concepts of fate, karma, and dharma. Inspired by the spirit of iconoclasm, he does not spare even holy places from his attack, as he goes on to desecrate them. Obviously, Naipaul seems to go all out to undermine Hinduism and to eulogize Christianity.

Naipaul begins his denunciation of the dogmatic Hinduism with the description of Hindu way of life in the first section of the novel, entitled “Pastoral.” He gives a detailed description of, “the customs, traditions, rituals, and the social philosophy of the people” (Mohan 57). First of all Naipaul relates the story of the Indians who came to Trinidad as indentured labourers and created a mini-India in the island. Naipaul gives, “a vivid representation of the complete communal life, which is made evident through their superstitious beliefs, their faith in the pundit, the customs and rituals they still follow and above all in their belief in preordination” (Mohan 57).

An eloquent instance of the superstitions of these Indians can be found in the story of the birth of Mr. Biswas, the protagonist of the novel. When the grandmother of Mr. Biswas, Bissoondayé comes to know that the child is born the wrong way and is six-fingered, without minding that it is midnight, she walks to the next village to get leaves of Cactus, which she cuts into strips and hangs on every door and window, in order to ward-off evil spirits. She sends for a pundit, to read child’s horoscope. After consulting his astrological almanac, the pundit
predicts that Biswas will have an “unlucky sneeze.” He goes on tell, “much of the evil this boy will undoubtedly bring will be mitigated if his father is forbidden to see him for twenty-one days.” The pundit instructs Raghu the father of the baby to observe certain formalities, before taking the first look at his son:

You must fill this brass plate with coconut oil – which by the way, you must make yourself from coconuts you have collected with your own hands and in the reflection on this oil the father must see his son’s face.

(A House for Mr. Biswas 13)

Although Raghu follows, the instructions of the pundit faithfully for twenty-one days, he cannot ward off the evil. Biswas’s birth proves unlucky to him. Raghu dies and Bipti, the mother of Biswas, becomes a widow. Naipaul portrays elaborately the ritual through which Bipti is initiated into widowhood:

Bipti was bathed. Her hair, still wet, was neatly parted and then filled with red henna. Then the henna was scooped out and the parting filled with charcoal dust. She was now a widow forever.

(A House for Mr. Biswas 29)

Naipaul provides us with an elaborate description of not only of superstitions and rituals of the Indians in Trinidad but also of their dogmatic beliefs. He tells us how they retain their beliefs in preordination or fate. The East Indians believe that fate is inevitable. When Bipti tells her father about her unhappy marriage, he consoles her by saying, “Fate, there is nothing we can do about it” (A House for Mr. Biswas 11). According to Champa Rao Mohan, Naipaul himself is an adherent of the doctrine of fate. His belief in preordination can be marked from his observation about Bipti’s father:
Fate had brought him from India to the sugar-estate, aged him quickly and left him to die in a crumbling mud hut in the swamp lands.

(*A House for Mr. Biswas 11*)

It is because of her staunch belief in fate that Bipti continues to show passive resignation to whatever happens to her.

In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Naipaul displays the same concern for the contamination of the native rituals as in his earlier novels like *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Suffrage of Elvira*. But here he emphasizes a need for change necessitated by the alien atmosphere. If the East Indians have replaced as the language used in the ceremonies Hindi by English it is because the participants are habitual of using English. Furthermore, they have to adapt their rituals to the laws of their new homeland. For instance, they have to bury the dead bodies of their relatives, because the Health-Department does not allow to cremate them. Naipaul also shows that social compulsions that force the East Indians to accept inter-caste and inter-racial marriages. He also hints at religious conversions, which pose direct threat to the East Indian Hinduism. That is to say that Naipaul mentions the difficulties of Hinduism which do not allow them to maintain its the pure and pristine form of traditional Hinduism.

Resuming the story of the novel, we find that after Raghu’s death Bipti and Biswas have no option but to look towards Tara, Bipti’s well-to-do sister. Subsequently with Tara they have to move to Pagotes and begin to live on Tara’s charity. Tara sends Biswas to the Canadian Mission School. But after sometime she changes her mind and decides to send him to Pundit Jairam, in order to train
him as a pundit. But after eight months, Biswas is expelled by Jairam. Now Tara sends him to work at her husband’s rum-shop which is looked after by her brother-in-law Bhandat. Dismissed from the shop Biswas takes up sign-painting. At the same time develops a taste for reading and making inventions. During his stint with sign-painting, Biswas comes in contact with the Hanuman House belonging to the Tulsi family.

The Tulsis were the adherents of dogmatic Hinduism, believing in everything which characterized the Hindu traditions. “The family,” states Cudjoe, “followed most of the dogmas of Hinduism: they believed that the caste system was of utmost importance to the maintenance of the social order, converts should not be accepted into the religion, idols should be worshiped, women should not be educated, the children’s spouses should be selected by the family, pujas should be observed, and Hindu ceremonies should be respected” (Cudjoe 53).

Subsequently, Biswas is trapped into a modern marriage without dowry with one of Tulsi’s daughters. But in any case he does not curb his atheistic propensities. While living in the Hanuman House, Naipaul, “joins the Aryans, a group of revisionist Hindu Missionaries from India, and proselytises for them by advocating girls’ education, abolition of child marriage, caste system and idol worship” (Mohan 62-63). Under their influence, he begins to preach against all the doctrines of dogmatic Hinduism that are dear to Mrs. Tulsi. She is also perturbed over the invasion of Roman Catholicism on her own family. Tulsi finds that her younger son Owad is trying to join a Catholic college. Meanwhile her other son Shekhar starts to wear the Crucifix. In the second part of the novel
Naipaul describes Biswas’s attempts to break away from the Tulsi household not only in matters of religion but also physically, as he intends to build a house of his own. During Biswas’s efforts to build his house and his prolonged confrontation with the people residing in Hanuman House or elsewhere i.e. in Port of Spain and Shorthills, we can visualize an invasion of Christianity on Hindu rituals.

With great literary skill Naipaul in *A House for Mr. Biswas* underlines the difficulties faced by Hindus with their religion in the new environmental conditions. He mentions a number of factors behind these difficulties. The first important factor is the time-gap. The Trinidadian Hinduism is cut off from this source for a long time. Subsequently, bereft of the spiritual succour from the native sources, it loses its vitality and dynamism. The second important factor is the space-gap or distance. Bruce F. MacDonald thinks that the root cause of the diluted Hinduism is the distance or geographical barriers. “The thinking,” he writes, “of his society had already moved towards the West and away from India. Hinduism has not completely broken down, but it is succumbing to the ‘seepage’ from the surrounding society.”

The strength of Hinduism is further depleted by the invasion of modernity on its adherents. Modernity stands for eclecticism and initiates the process of merger, which fuses different traditions, social as well as religious. It usually surfaces in form of clashes between the interests of young and old generations. The new generation has its own interests which are not always similar to the interests of the people of the old generation. This clash is nowhere so prominent as in the colonial communities. Dwelling upon this aspect, Paul Theroux writes, “The
Indians dream of going to India, the Negroes to Africa, the Muslims to Mecca; this is the older generation, with the pictures on the walls of their houses of Gandhi and Mr. Nehru, Joe Louis and Haile Selassie, Nasser and the holy mosque. Their children have other fantasies of Oxford, The New York, of Jessie James and the Saltons – of the ‘poly’ on the Regent street.”

The clash of generations is exemplified in Biswas’s reaction to know Owad’s intentions of going abroad for education.

Modernity influences the people of old generation as well. It brings a change as much in orthodox people as in their liberal counterparts. Imbued with the spirit of modernity, the staunch adherents of religion, like W.C. Tuttle of Tulsi family, change their minds. Tuttle who once thought himself as the only custodian of Hinduism in Trinidad becomes the votary of modernism. As Naipaul observes:

> Despite the strict brahminical regime of his household, W.C. Tuttle was all for modernity. In addition to the gramophone he possessed a radio, a number of dainty tables, a morris suite; and he created a sensation when he bought a four foot high statue of a naked woman holding a torch.

>(A House for Mr. Biswas 460)

The spirit of modernity also surfaces in the form of the introduction of new religious practices of a mixed nature. It is no wonder that the younger son of Tulsi, worshipper of Hindu deities, begins to bear the cross, an emblem of Christian faith. This tendency which has been defined as “cultural ‘seepage’” by S.N. Pandey, is visible in the disintegration of the Hanuman House. “The cultural seepage,” writes Pandey, “which begins early with the death of Pt. Tulsi gets completed with the elder Tulsi son, Shekhar’s marriage with a Christian lady and
younger Tulsi son, Ovad's going abroad. With Biswas' movement to Port of Spain, almost all Tulsi members leave the rural Hanuman House to live in urban Port of Spain. The House is now completely disintegrated and so is the relationship of its members with one another" (Pandey 7).

Modernity makes inroads even in the minds of liberal Hindus as well. Biswas who, in spite of his atheistic inclinations, believes in reforming Hinduism. But in the course of time, he gets hypnotised by the Western modernity. Once a bitter critic of the religious confusion of the Tulsi family, he is no longer displeased with the changing stances of the Tulsis, as he finds his own son Anand chanting hymns from the Bible. Naipaul shows that the onslaught of modernity on the East Indian community is accelerated by Christianity which energizes capitalism, the religion of the Western culture. Many of the East Indians think to revitalize their faith with the doses of the western religion, to reinforce their religious vision by introducing the practices of Christianity in their life. We can mark this tendency in Hari, the pundit of the Tulsi family. It is interesting to see how Hari transforms his Hanuman into Christ.

The elder god did wear a crucifix. It was regarded... exotic and desirable charm. The elder god wear many charms and it was thought fitting that some one so valuable should be protected. On the Sunday before examination he was bathed by Mrs. Tulsi in water consecrated by Hari, the soles of his feet were soaked in lavender water, he was made to drink a glass of guinness stout, and he left Hanuman House, a figure of awe, laden with crucifix, sacred thread and beads, a mysterious sachet, a number of curious armlets, consecrated coins, and a lime in each trouser pocket.

(A House for Mr. Biswas 128)
Mrs. Tulsi who stood like a rock for traditional Hinduism observing its rituals in letter and spirit throughout her long life, succumbs to the pressures of modernism and feels fascinated by the rituals of Roman Catholicism. Naipaul states:

Regularly too, she had pujas, austere rites aimed at God alone, without the feasting and gaiety of the Hanuman House ceremonies. The pundit came and Mrs. Tulsi sat before him; he read from the scriptures, took his money, changed in the bathroom and left. More and more prayer flags went up in the yard, the white and red pennants fluttering until they were ragged, the bamboo poles going yellow, brown, grey. For every puja Mrs. Tulsi tried a different pundit, since no pundit could please her as well as Hari. And, no pundit pleasing her, her faith yielded. She sent Sushila to burn candles in the Roman Catholic church; she put a crucifix in her room; and she had Pundit Tulsi’s grave cleaned for All Saints’ Day.

*(A House for Mr. Biswas 551)*

It is not for the first time that Mrs. Tulsi changes her religious stance to suit her purpose. She has done it earlier to promote her business interests. She had gone out of her way to exploit the institution of arranged marriages to trap people to work for her. “The ceremony,” writes S.N. Pandey, “so sacred according to Hindu-religion has been reduced to business and bargain and it seems to be the root cause of the dissipation of Hinduism under the onslaught of extremely material western culture” (Pandey 4).

However, the changing stance of Mrs. Tulsi and for that matter the East-Indian community should not be regarded as a sign for the process of liquidation of Hinduism. It should be treated only as the natural outcome of the process of merger and the religious and the ritualistic hybridization. Obviously, in the merger of races and cultural traditions, old taboos and old cultural practices yield place to
new rituals and ceremonies. This process is visible everywhere including India and Trinidad.

There are two different interpretations of this hybridization or transformation of Hinduism. There are Indian scholars like Bhagabat Nayak who believe that it is an internal change surfacing as the replacement of older tradition (sanatan dharma) by the new tradition, aryasamaj. It is certainly Biswas’s quest for self-realization which motivates him to reject the dogmas of the old Hinduism. “Mrs. Biswas’s struggle against the Hindu fate,” writes Nayak, “dramatized on more secular level as his quest for self-realization, takes the form of his attempt to emancipate from the old Hindu world of the Tulsis. Biswas’s rebellion is less a revolt against Hinduism in favour of western individualism than a revolt against the orthodox Sanatanist Hinduism of the Tulsis in favour of the reformed Hinduism of the Arya Samaj, whose missionaries greatly influence him when they visit Trinidad.” In A House for Mr. Biswas Naipaul attacks the old Hinduism with a definite purpose in mind. He denounces it because he wants it to awaken from its dogmatic slumber, “On the evidence of his Indian travel books,” adds Nayak, “one might expect Naipaul to adopt a more committed stance and to attack the inertia he feels lying at the heart of Hinduism, but in the novel his art remains one of detached ironic observation” (Nayak 113).

But there are foreign scholars, like Cudjoe who try to interpret this process of hybridization as a process of the defeat of Hinduism as an outdated form of religion that cannot respond to the demands of modernity. It is precisely because of this reason that Biswas rejects Hinduism. “Mr. Biswas,” writes Cudjoe, “denies
all the external practices and internal values of Hinduism (that is, feudalism) and opts for, and subsequently comes to represent, the central moral and spiritual principle of Christianity (that is, capitalism): that it is possible to be socially mobile and to reject the static, hierarchical position ordained by Hindu tradition” (Cudjoe 71).

Cudjoe puts forward two arguments in support of his thesis. First, he refers to Naipaul’s inversion of the story of the Hindu epic the Ramayana. Secondly he cites certain biblical resonances, in the imagery approximating, “that of the return of the Christian prodigal son” (Cudjoe 72). As for parodying the story of Rama, Cudjoe states that, “[i]n the present text, the author inverts and distorts the Ramayana to express his new historical reality. More important, the unity of the old epic, which tells of the noble lives of Rama and Sita, must be destroyed to capture the disunity of the new world and the apparent helplessness of a man and his wife caught up in the ambiguity of a new social situation. Paralleling the story of the Ramayana, A House for Mr. Biswas tells of a colonial man who has been banished from his homeland and is destined to wander in the Wilderness of Trinidad and Tobago” (Cudjoe 64-65). Cudjoe’s argument is not without a grain of truth. Indeed to some extent the life of Biswas parallels that of Rama. However, there are differences as well. Where as Rama’s life is an embodiment of action with a belief in fate (karma) and dharma (duty), Biswas’s life is just the opposite. Even though there is a semblance between Rama’s banishment and that of Biswas as an Indian in the Wilderness of Trinidad, it cannot be extended too far.
Likewise, the imagery of the Christian prodigal son should not be treated as Naipaul’s preparation for baptism in Christianity. There is no denying the fact that Bipti’s way of welcoming Biswas after his return is loaded with Christian images and symbols. Let us see how Bipti welcomes Biswas:

She poured water for him to wash his hands, sat him down on a low bench and gave him food – not hers to give, for this was the communal food of the house, to which she had contributed nothing but her labour in the cooking – and looked after him in the proper way. But she could not coax him out of his sullenness.

*(A House for Mr. Biswas 56)*

Indeed Bipti’s way of welcome reminds us of the Christian prodigal son. However, it should be remembered that in this welcome, there is a touch of irony, as Biswas himself thinks. Naipaul’s use of the biblical resonances is most probably inspired by his Christian education and atmosphere than to his growing fascination for Christianity.

In his next novel *The Mimic Men*, Naipaul introduces another dimension to his religious vision. He portrays a new type of religious mentality which emerges under the backdrop of the colonial politics. Amid the din of political turmoil and the psychic tensions of the protagonist, the novelist furnishes us with a vision of the Aryans and their rituals, which were responsible for the birth of Hinduism. At the same time he gives us an account of the sound and fury produced by modern religious movements with their corrupt practices. Thus in the novel, while presenting the political predicaments of the colonial people, Naipaul portrays their religious problems as well.
The Mimic Men unfolds the fictional autobiography of Ralph Singh, a West-Indian politician. Naipaul presents these memories in three parts. The first part contains Singh’s disillusionment with London, his marriage with an English girl Sandra, their return to Isabella, his rise in business, and finally the breakdown of their marriage. The second part embodies Singh’s childhood memories, whereas the third part deals with Singh’s political career.

While in exile, Ralph Singh begins to write his autobiography in superb London hotel owned by a Jew named Shylock. He, as a man, possesses “a strong and moral” Hindu “vein”\(^1\) in his character. Singh relates us all about his marriage with Sandra, a charming but not an enchanting English girl, separated from her family. He relies rather too much on the strength of his wife. However, his marriage is disapproved by his mother. Subsequently after his return to Isabella, he has to stay in a local hotel with his wife. After his disenchantment with the artificial freedom and cosmopolitanism of the island, Singh sells away his plot in the wasteland inherited from his grandfather. The township of the locality is eventually named after his father, “Kripalville,” later corrupted as “Crippleville” (Rama\-devi 73). After sometime Sandra, disillusioned with the place as well as with her marriage, leaves place in disgust. Thus the marriage which once held bright prospects for Singh ends in emptiness. In his frustration Singh now turns to India for relief. His mind goes to the Aryan culture with which he feels an identity:

How right our Aryan ancestors were to create gods... The larger erotic dream, the god, has eluded us. It is so whenever, moving out of ourselves, we look for extensions of ourselves... We seek the
physical city and find only a conglomeration of private cells. In the city as nowhere else we are reminded that we are individuals, units. Yet the idea of the city remains; it is the god of the city that we pursue, in vain.\textsuperscript{15}

In the second part of his autobiography Ralph Singh relates the story of his childhood, including the story of his eccentric father who leaves his job in the Education Department and renounces his home and family to become a preacher and a mentor to a group of frenzied disciples including slaves, dock-workers, and the volunteers. He (father) begins to wear the robes of a mendicant and comes to be known as Gurudeva. He soon initiates a religious movement for a new version of Hinduism:

It was a type of Hinduism that he expounded; a mixture of acceptance and revolt, despair and action, a mixture of the mad and the logical. He offered something to many people;... His movement spread like fire.

(The Mimic Men 154)

The movement turns into a rebellion against social relationship. Gurudeva creates a sensation by performing the \textit{aswamedha}, an ancient Hindu ritual, belonging to the Aryan period. Ralph Singh mentions yet another important event of his life, his self-baptism through which he changes his name from Ranjit Kripal Singh to Ralph Ranjit Kripal Singh or simple Ralph Singh. Furthermore, becoming conscious of his Rajput heritage, he inculcates the dreams of Rajputs and Aryans, Knights, horsemen, and the wanderers, as he tells us:

I lived a secret life in a world of endless plains, tall bare mountains, white with snow at their peaks, among nomads on horse-back... And I would dream that all over the Central Asian plains the horsemen looked for their leader. Then a wise man came to them and said,...
the true leader of you lies for away, ship-wrecked on an island, the like of which you cannot visualize.

(The Mimic Men 118)

In the third part of his autobiography, Ralph Singh produces a brilliant portrait of his political life that provides a universal significance to his personal experience. He again takes recourse to his dreams of the Aryan past, visualizing their elusive sex-gods. As Bruce F. MacDonald writes, “[t]he symbolism of their respective acts cements the bonds with the culture of their ancestors as they pursue the elusive gods of sex, city and state” (MacDonald 251). Singh recalls the heroic acts of his father. “His father,” writes N. Ramadevi, “gave his followers heroic identity by sacrificing a horse in the ancient tradition of the heroic Aryans. And the Roman house is the temple of this new ritual provided by Ralph for his people” (Ramadevi 80). Naipaul gives a vivid description of the sacramental atmosphere of the Roman house of Mr. Singh:

In the feminine atmosphere of the Roman house all was goodwill and dedication. A sacramental quality attached not only to food and drink but to liaisons that had grown up among our courtiers... Sex a sacrifice to the cause and a promise of the release that was to come.

(The Mimic Men 233)

Though The Mimic Men does not deal with religion as such, it throws ample light on many obscure elements which characterize Hinduism. For instance, the novel elaborately describes the religious movement of his fanatic father “whose cult,” according to Peter Hughes, “parodies Singh’s fantasies about his Aryan origins among the horsemen of the high Asian plains.” He mentions yet another ancient ritual aswamedha, which belongs to the Aryans. The ritual,
according to Bruce King has personal echoes. As King writes, the ritual was forced upon Naipaul’s father by the orthodox members of his family, “as expiation for challenging them” (King 73).

Nevertheless, in spite of the echoes of the ancient rituals, and the repulsive rites of Hinduism, the novel has something positive to offer. It reveals in the character of the protagonist, the most defining quality of Hinduism, its spirituality. King finds in Ralph Singh something like “an implied Hindu spirituality” (King 72). Robert M. Greenberg also visualizes in his cultural heritage, “his Indian Hindu ancestry and the philosophical resignation imbued in him by an ancient culture.”17 Apart from it, in The Mimic Men, the novelist continues to ventilate his feelings about the corruption of the Hindu religious practices. “Naipaul elaborates upon,” writes Cudjoe, “the East Indians fears of this contamination in The Mimic Men” (Cudjoe 48). In this way The Mimic Men also brings out some characteristic element of Naipaul’s religious vision.

To sum up, Naipaul’s early novels occupy an important place in the development of his religious vision. They embody the elements which define his religious outlook. In The Mystic Masseur he charts the progress of its protagonist Ganesh from an ordinary West Indian to a mystic and ultimately to a spiritualist. With the career of Ganesh, the novelist portrays the state of Hinduism in the Caribbeans, its anxiety to preserve its legacy and adapt its rituals and dogmas to an entirely different environmental and local conditions. He brings out not only the baser aspects of religion like magic and superstition but also the higher aspects of religion by incorporating the central elements of the Gandhian or for that matter

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Hindu philosophy – desirelessness and liberation through public service. At the same time, the novelist provides us with a blue-print of the composite culture, incorporating elements, central to all religions, especially Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity.

Naipaul extends the idea of the composite culture in his next novel *The Suffrage of Elvira*. Using a much larger canvas, he examines the state of Hinduism and its rituals in the back-drop of religious and racial pluralism of the mixed Trinidadian society, undergoing through the process of democratization. He earmarks the power of money which corrupts everything, ranging from the democratic institutions to the religious rituals. He also mentions the role of superstitions in one’s private and public life. Moreover, Naipaul goes on to throw light on the newly emerging trend in the pluralistic society already suffering from the throes of democracy. This new trend is communalism which is the product of marriage between politics and religion. He also points out the emergence of a new generation which is inclined towards the merger of races and religious traditions.

However, from the religious point of view, the most important of the early novels of Naipaul is *A House for Mr. Biswas*. The novel incorporates almost all the salient features of his religious vision. While dealing chiefly with the onslaught of modernity, capitalism, and its religion Christianity, Naipaul portrays the decay of dogmatic Hinduism and its characteristic ritualism. The spirit of modernity, as Naipaul shows, invades not only liberal Hinduism of *arya samaj* represented by Mr. Biswas but also the dogmatic Hinduism or *sanatan dharma*, represented by Mrs. Tulsi, and other members of the Hanuman House, including
W.C. Tuttle who considers himself the only custodian of Hinduism. Under the impact of modernity dogmatic Hinduism suffers a sea-change, as its rituals are revised and dogmas discarded. The old conventions and practices including a distinct cultural identity, caste system, child-marriages, denial of education to women, ban on inter-caste, inter-racial, and inter-religious marriages are thrown to the wind. However, these changes are the result of the process of an inner correction. They are not entirely the outcome of the attack of modernity, capitalism, and Christianity over Hinduism, as some scholars believe.

Naipaul's next novel, The Mimic Men, though not very significant from the religious point of view, reveals some obscure elements of religion. It brings into relief the sound and fury produced by religious movements and portrays the dangers posed by religious fanatics like the so-called Gurudeva, the father of the hero, Ralph Singh. At the same time it recreates the vision of the Aryan culture, which was responsible for modern Hinduism. The novel reminds us the glories of the Rajputs and their heroes. Significantly it presents before us the central element of Hinduism in the form of its spirituality, its spirit of philosophical resignation and self-realization.
Chapter 2 – Endnotes


