

## DIASPORA IDENTITIES AND PSYCHIC TRAUMA IN V.S. NAIPAUL'S THE MIMIC MEN

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### ABSTRACT

*V.S. Naipaul is an expatriate from Trinidad whose primary business as a novelist is to project carefully and objectively the complex fate of individuals in a cross-cultural society. Naipaul in his fictional concerns is renewing a kind of novel in those cultures where his search for a sense of identity and the need to establish a past on which the present can properly stand has a special force. From a vision of the past as a wound, Naipaul carries three conflicting components in his personality of being a Trinidad colonial, an English metropolitan, and a person of Indian ancestry. He thus moves in his self-exploration towards a new restoration and vision of wholeness. As Naipaul confront: India in this work he visualizes a more whole world than mere country. There is a growing compassion and a wish to understand that are stronger in Naipaul's writing now. This compassionate narrative vision enables Naipaul to capture the theme of India collapsing, mutinying, and reaching after a final integration which remains a significant aspect of writing. This paper investigates the notion of up rootedness and cultural shipwreck in the Trinidadian novelist V. S. Naipaul's novel *The Mimic Men* (1967). Although the novel's fictional island may stand for Trinidad, this paper focuses on the fact that, according to Naipaul, the disordered Isabella may well match the characteristics of other chaotic Third World nations.*

**Keywords:** Identity, Location, Techniques, Diaspora, Alienation, Homelessness, Mimicry Up Rootedness.

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### Introduction

Jamaican-born British Marxist sociologist Stuart McPhail Hall in one of his articles "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" stated "Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference." Naipaul's characters also constantly construct and reconstruct themselves to adapt to the new situations. The aim of this research paper to explore the scope of literary research on V.S. Naipaul and focusing on the issue of identity in the most comprehensive sense in his novel: *The Mimic Men* (1967).

The close affinity of the well-informed narrator of *The Mimic Men* with Naipaul, to begin with, leads to considering the novel a fictional autobiography. *The Mimic Men* is the story of Ralph Singh, a forty year-old postcolonial West Indian politician whose constant sense of missing a society urges him, like his creator Naipaul, to live torn between his native island Isabella and a hotel room in London. Singh sets to writing his personal history in an attempt to impose order on his life and find a geographical place to anchor his displaced identity. From the beginning of the novel, Naipaul exposes the inability of a postcolonial society to provide an ex-colonial with a coherent self-definition. Singh is a man adrift in the world, an ex-colonial whose quest for order is worthy of Naipaul's seminal theme in his other novels: The mimic men displayed between their past lives in the colony, their unstable present in the metropolis which aggravates their sense of up rootedness, and a dark future which promises to intensify their sense of between. Moreover, like Naipaul, Singh feels himself torn apart between two poles, India and England, the first being the land of the ancestors and the second the headspring of his literary and cultural tradition. He starts dreaming about his Aryan ancestry and Indian roots while feeling "shipwrecked" on his island Isabella. He exhibits a deep interest in his Indian belonging by retaining his family name, Singh, which means lion or warrior and which has a connection with the history of the Rajput's, a ruling class of the Indian subcontinent. However, Singh, like Naipaul, suffers from an identity crisis because he feels himself marked by his Indian heritage, his real name, and his father's failure as a political activist.

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**The Enigma of a Shipwreck** in two Cultures *the Mimic Men* approach to the Caribbean loss of culture and identity. It is profoundly concerned with the cultural vacuum from which the islands suffer. Naipaul subtitled his essay on Anguilla: "The Shipwrecked 6000" (1969, pp. 9-16), for shipwreck is the word Ralph Singh uses to refer to his being adrift on Isabella. To be shipwrecked, on the real Anguilla or the fictional Isabella, is to be adrift on the fringe of the Empire at a time when the imperial power is withdrawing. Anguilla and Trinidad are closely linked to Isabella by virtue of their smallness: "the problem of a tiny colony set adrift, part of the jetsam of an empire, a near-primitive people suddenly returned to a free state, their renewed or continuing exploitation" (Naipaul, 1969, pp. 15-6). Elsewhere, 'A dot on the map of the world' is what Naipaul says of his native Trinidad. The smallness of the island has long haunted Naipaul, and his eagerness of space is justified by the urge to leave an island still awaiting Columbus, a flagless island that a character in *A Flag on the Island* calls "a floating suspended place to which you brought your own flag if you wanted to Haunting his presence, the image of shipwreck intensifies Singh's fears of the "haphazard, disordered, and mixed society" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 57) of Isabella, the "most inferior place in the world". Conjuring up his creator's views, Singh argues, "to be born on an island like Isabella, an obscure New World transplantation, second-hand and barbarous, was to be born to disorder".

He struggles about both landscapes which witness his failure to find a place for his shipwrecked soul. In an attempt to bridge the gap his life between parentheses on Isabella Singh continually reminds us that his existence on Isabella is just an accident of history: "the locality where accident had placed me". Shipwreck is an expression of his being "cut off", "that feeling of having been flung off the world". The image of "the trunks of trees washed up by the sea", scattered along Isabella beach, is perhaps most telling of the kind of deracination Naipaul evokes. He writes: "Here lay the tree, fast in the sand which was deep and level around it, impossible now to shift, what once had floated lightly on the waters". Joshi (1994) is for the view that: This image suggests not only uprooting but also the impossibility of return. The bitter truth is that all these displaced people can never be at home again in the homelands they dream of. They have been altered by their experiences in the New World and would, were they to return, find themselves aliens in their former homelands. (p. 169)

Another aspect of Singh's denial of Isabellian landscape – his refusal to accept the world around him – is that he tries to pattern his life in a way that not only denies the realities around him but also leads him to self-hatred, a self-destructive aesthetic. As Nandan (2003) emphasizes, Singh "reimagines the Caribbean and remakes 'home' through a mythology of Englishness". Singh looks to Isabella as a landscape "as manufactured as that of any great French or English park. But we walked in a garden of hell, among tress, some still without popular names, whose seeds had sometimes been brought to our island in the intestines of slaves" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 158). This is an undermining of the colonial narrative in which the Caribbean islands were depicted as a paradise by showing that in reality "paradise is a battlefield" (White, 1975, p. 174). At this stage, Singh struggles between his psychic representations and social realities. In spite of his attempts to bridge the gap, Isabellian realities still disturb his fantasies. In his imagination, he sees his "mother's mother leading her cow through a scene of pure pastoral: calendar pictures of English gardens superimposed on our Isabellian villages of mud and grass" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 95).

Realizing that "in a society like ours, fragmented, inorganic, no link between men and landscape, a society not held together by common interests, there was no true internal source of power, and that no power was real which did not come from the outside" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 224) Singh decides to leave for London. He embarks on a ship and sails to England, thinking of Columbus's reversed journey across the ocean, identifying with the experience of the discovery and saying to himself, out of determination: "No more foolish fears: I was never to return" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 194). His decision to leave for London is sustained by the inadequacy of his fantasies, which in turn accentuates his sense of separateness. He decides to leave for London where "there was no one to link [his] present to [his] past, no one to note [his] consistencies or inconsistencies" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 19). Ralph's statement corresponds to what Memmi (1957) observes the psychological formation of the colonized subject. When Memmi (1957, p. 92) argues that the colonial, denied national structures that stem from his culture, must content himself with the passive and perplexing present, he speaks of Singh's lack of a cultural link between his present and his past, the wounds of a culture he has diagnosed. His move to London proves to be an investigation of the myth of his childhood, the myth of a real world existing outside of Isabella. Like Naipaul, Singh comes to London in search of nurture for his fantasies, in search of something that would consolidate his relationship to his abstract ideas.

### The 'Liminal Space' of a Cultural In-between

After this second shipwreck, Singh feels himself belonging to nowhere. Hamner (1973) argues that "between the obscure derelict Isabella of his Youth and the sterile, evasive metropolis of his early retirement, Ralph is suspended without vital roots in either environment" (p. 137). He moves to England in search of an identity but he soon discovers that his fantasies, in which he imagines himself more like a real person, are rather more illusionary, and his arrival to England sharpens the sense of shipwreck that haunts him. The fissure, the cultural split that Singh experiences on Isabella, seems to have been recorded. His fantasy that a camera in the sky is following him, marking him as the outsider to be surveilled (Bhabha), is typical of this failure to claim the place as his:

**"The camera was in the sky. London landscape urges Singh to repress his difference through alienating him further from his desire to belong to the crowds, a life "poisoned by a feeling of shipwreck and wrongness among crowds" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 127).**

Insofar as he belongs to none, being always bothered in both places, Ralph accepts the cultural parameters that have been imposed, accepted, reproduced and taken as fact.

In Singh's case, mimicry is not fully possible because he is more than he is supposed to be. In other words, he exceeds what he is asked to be. By the end of the novel, he realizes that part of his permanent sense of insecurity is his feeling of being unreal, virtual, unstable and inauthentic, especially through his suppression of his own story. After leaving the island, Singh tries to establish a meaningful relationship with his surroundings by unsuccessfully responding to identities and fake pretenses that he thinks others see in him or want him to be. Put differently, he tries to redefine his self through Western eyes. To liberate himself from his fantasies, placeless, and disorder, Singh resorts to adopting roles; he tries to give himself personalities which correspond with what the metropolis requires from a mimic man.

On the verge of a breakdown and in his attempt to find roots for his homeless identity, Singh marries an English woman, Sandra. The suffocating Isabella had forced him to leave, but he feels the need to return, perhaps to understand better what forced him to withdraw. He decides to return to his island with his wife believing that his fears will fade with an English woman by his side. He describes his morning arrival in terms of alienation: "I saw through each porthole the blue, green and gold of the tropical island. So pure and fresh! And I knew it to be, horribly man-made; to be exhausted, fraudulent, cruel and above all, not mine" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 52). He senses that Isabellan landscapes exercise the same effects on his English wife, for his feeling of shipwreck suddenly invades her. Before he marries her she appeared to him rooted, secure, and resourceful. He begins to look for the virtues that she can guide him through. But the bond with Sandra that begins with certainties ends in vacuum. He soon discovers that Sandra carries her own darkness, the same sense of homelessness he tries to escape: **"I with my past, my darkness, she no doubt with hers"** (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 24). She has indeed turned to him out of a similar need for reassurance.

*The Mimic Men* furthers the divide when Singh says that mimicry is "the larger erotic dream moving out of ourselves, we look for extensions of ourselves. It is with cities as it is with sex". The climax of this realization is reached during one of Ralph Singh's sexual adventures. His encounter with a prostitute during a visit to Europe proves to have brought some relief from the futile search of his self-outside himself: It is a moment that has remained with me. After three years I can call it back at will: that moment of timelessness, horror, solace. The Highway Code Through poor, hideous flesh to have learnt about flesh: through flesh to have gone beyond flesh.

Sexual relations compel him to seek identity and self-definition in another flesh. He constructs his sense of sex as an ideal extension of self, an appeal to another self (the prostitute's body), and more importantly, a stepping out, even for a short moment, of his own disturbing self. This soon proved to be a failure, as it drives him to a near breakdown. His longings for anonymous human flesh turn into a reminder of his failure to overcome his inability to identify a particular moment of the famous shipwreck in his life. Therefore, it becomes a series of shipwrecks evoked whenever he fails to assemble the several fragments of his broken history.

*The Mimic Men* is a novel in which Naipaul endeavors the construction of migrant identity. The narrator-protagonist does not feel himself attached to any one discourse or geographical place. He occupies an in-between cultural space, "a liminal space" in Homi Bhabha's words. Singh's uncertainties and disorder prevent him from assimilating in both London and Isabella. He is torn between the two. Isabella is a place of disorder while London proves to be the greater disorder. As an autobiographical character to a certain extent, Singh feels betrayed by a history that excludes him from the colonial relations: "The descendent of the slave-owner could soothe the descendent of the slave with a private

patois. I was the late intruder, the picturesque Asiatic, linked to neither" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 82). His self-exile to London is motivated by his sense of being rejected in both places. *Mimic Men* exposes the failure of both metropolitan and peripheral societies to provide a mimic man with a coherent self-concept, an individual whose inauthenticity, triggered essentially by his postcolonial in-between, appeals to the others for self-esteem but, when the process fails, his sense of distress is intensified.

Naipaul gives more narrative space to the period of Singh's exile in London than his established career as postcolonial politician in Isabella. Towards the end of the novel, Singh justifies this when he comments: "this present residence in London, which I suppose can be called exile, has turned out to be the most fruitful" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 271). It is here that he realizes that this 'fruitful exile' is what leads him to dismiss his fantasies and "no longer yearn for ideal landscapes and no longer wish to know the god of the city" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 273) since "the god of the city was elusive" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 18). The nature of Singh's, hence Naipaul's, uprootedness, loss, alienation, and loneliness is not physical or geographical but spiritual, inside him. The physical world is a private fabrication, a place of higher disorder, and Naipaul relegates his narrator-protagonist to an imaginary world to 'look for the extension of his self' and to allow him access to the lost order. In London, he seeks the god of the city, the ideal he created in his imagination when he was still living in Isabella, but this ideal remains with him since the real London cannot fit its image created in Singh's imagination. As Weiss (1992) has pointed out, it stands for Singh's "romantic desire for the 'real world' beyond Trinidad. This real world, or imagined home, is not exactly England but a construct of it, a collective, colonial fantasy of the metropolis, the centre to which all things from the colonies gravitate (p. 88). Singh is then not expected to find order in the physical aspect of the city but in his fantasized construct of it. At this stage, he detaches himself from the actual realities, both Isabella and metropolitan, and resorts to the world of fantasy and utopia.

Like Naipaul, Singh seems to have found his home in writing, through the very possibility of reimagining his belonging. Tracing his transition from external disorder to internal harmony, Singh realizes that the binaries he creates between London and Isabella in the end do not define geographical spaces but imagined – fictionalized – spheres. In the words of Ciompi (2002), Naipaul "demystifies both the Nietzschean and postmodernist ethics of living daringly and groundlessly by squandering oneself in the world, and, at the same time, the pre-political view that home may be an idealized free zone outside history". To carve out a narrative space in which his alterity can be renegotiated, Singh turns to accept his homelessness as what makes him a free man, no longer seeking the guidance of something outside of his self. He succeeded to turn isolation to strength. Disorder is ultimately individual and not societal. The individual has to face his own disorder since failure comes only when "moving out [of] ourselves, [when] we look for [the] extensions of ourselves" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 17).

**The narrative technique** he chooses for his writing is, to quote Walsh (1973), "dissolving and non-linear, in correspondence with the starts and swerves of the recovering memory, his instrument of self-examination" (p. 62). Likewise, Joshi (1994) argues that "chronological order is discarded as Kripal Singh seizes each episode brought up by memory and examines it in the context of his present situation thus keeping the act of composition constantly before us". Ralph decides to rearrange his memoirs in a non-chronological order since he often breaks sequence and shifts from one historical period to another, forward and backward. This method helps him "to impose order on my own history, to abolish that disturbance which is what a narrative in sequence might have led me to" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 266). The distinction between a narrative written in a chronological order and the always-interrupted, sequential, narrative Ralph intends to write is essentially the difference between 'art for art's sake' and art as "a substitute" for what it pleased him to call life. As such, Naipaul suspends the narrative and allows Singh a look back at the fragments of his life in order to examine the possibility of rearranging them into a meaningful history. The narrative movement backward and forward in time would have intensified Singh's sense of disorder. Therefore, Singh establishes the order in his life through writing it up in a non-chronological order. The haunting colonial past, the loneliness of the big city, the futility of chasing ideal landscapes, and the traumatic homelessness impel Singh to reassemble the fragments of his identity as an ex-colonial in a metropolitan center and attempt to unlock the closures of his present postcolonial disillusionment.

## **Conclusion**

Significant postcolonial writer, Naipaul takes a strong interest in the exploration of colonial problems and confusions resulted from the withdrawal of imperial order. The novel is a powerful plea for freedom from the tragic burden of colonial exploitation.

In a nutshell, *The Mimic Men* is the novel that provides Naipaul's diagnosis of the estrangement of ex-colonials, a significant aspect of his vision of postcolonial societies. The well-informed narrator Ralph Singh comes indistinguishably too close to Naipaul. His narrative is "a more than autobiographical work, the exposition of the malaise of our times pointed and illuminated by personal experience and that knowledge of the possible which can come only from a closeness to power" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 6). The novel unfolds the clearest expression of Naipaul's various ideas regarding the mimicry of the Third World, and the escape from its uncertainties into fantasy and imagination. The life trajectory of Naipaul is very similar to that of Singh who's intellectual and emotional development, as well as the conclusions he arrives at about Isabella and London are very similar to Naipaul's life experience and the conclusions of his nonfiction. The intensity of Naipaul's reflection on his identity formation is what provides Ralph Singh with the narrative threads along which his own sense of 'shipwreck' is questioned. Just as Ralph Singh imposes order on his life through writing, Naipaul has always believed in the power of narrative to understand life, art as a liberating means from alienation. Singh's search for a home in London is Naipaul's perpetual search for origins, and Singh's attempt at finding order in his life is Naipaul's disgust about his being always straddled between cultures, with none being really his.

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