

## Postcolonial Chaos in V.S.Naipaul's "*The Mimic Men*"

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Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul's wide range of literary activity – both fiction and non-fiction – have been a matter of continuous debate and discussion. Naipaul was born in a Hindu family in Trinidad. His grandfather was an indentured worker from Uttar Pradesh. Naipaul was educated at the Great School in Trinidad, Queen's Royal College and then in the University College, Oxford. Naipaul found the setting of his native island unsuitable for a man of his intellectual genius. It was with the help of a scholarship that he escaped to London and started his literary journey. His literature presents the image of an author who did not receive any sense of belonging anywhere but the wide range of experience of this author has resulted in many memorable books. His literary works present the image of a person who is constantly in search of a cultural mooring. Although he has a vast repertoire of literary output at his disposal, he is not only a natural writer but a natural novelist.....His vision is his own, unaffected by contemporary social cliché or political routine. He is independent but also relevant. He is engaged with the stresses and strains that we recognize crucial in our experience now. His writing is the mixture in him of creeds, cultures and continents, with his expatriate career, his being able to practice an art in and of totally dissimilar worlds, all gives him peculiar contemporary quality."

"*The Mimic Men*" (1967) marks an important land mark in the literary career of Naipaul. The novel presents the condition of a newly independent country in the Caribbean, the island of Isabella and projects before us the condition of the people in postcolonial era. The title of the novel signifies the condition of colonized men who imitates and reflects colonizers lifestyle and views. The novel presents the life of formerly colonized people of the island who are unable to establish order and govern their country. The colonial experience has caused the colonized to perceive them as inferior to the colonizer. Colonial education and cultural colonization have presented the English world, with its rich culture, as a world of order, discipline, success, and achievement. As a result, the natives who are devoid of their own culture, customs and traditions, religion, and race consider themselves to be inferior to those of their master and try to identify themselves with the empire. As they are far away from their original homeland, their own original traditions and religions have become meaningless to them and being completely different from the master in cultural, traditional, racial, and religious backgrounds, they can never successfully associate themselves with the colonizer either. They suffer from dislocation, placelessness, fragmentation, and loss of identity. As these psychological problems remain unsolved even after independence is achieved, independence

itself becomes a word but not a real experience. Without the colonizer, the colonized see themselves as lost in their postcolonial society that fails to offer a sense of national unity and identity.

Ralph Singh, the narrator of "*The Mimic Men*", is a forty-year-old colonial minister who lives in exile in London. By writing his memoirs, Singh tries to impose order on his life, reconstruct his identity, and get rid of the crippling sense of dislocation and displacement. In other words, Singh is the representative of displaced and disillusioned colonial individuals, and colonization is depicted as a process that takes away their identity, culture, history, and sense of place. Thus, the novel considers the relationship between the socio-political and the psychological consequences of imperialism (Thieme 1987: 113). Therefore it becomes essential to read the novel not just for its politics but to study and analyze the impact of colonialism on the psyche of colonial people even after independence. Champa Rao Mohan writes in this connection:

"The themes of alienation, homelessness and mimicry still preoccupy Naipaul but the perspective has changed. They are now viewed as a universal condition of the modern world afflicting both colonized and colonizers alike. Besides the familiar themes that still haunt Naipaul's pen, there are themes that appear for the first time- the broader post-colonial themes of power and freedom and neocolonialism."

We can establish a relevant connection between Ralph Singh and V.S.Naipaul, the author himself. While in his other works Naipaul maintains separateness from his characters that provides objectivity to his technique in use of irony to showcase the follies of the characters. But in *Mimic Men*, Naipaul makes no attempt to maintain such separateness of identity. The autobiographical portion covers his early days in England, his meeting Sandra, his marriage and breaking up of it. The merger of identities is further underscored by the fact that many of Naipaul's attitudes and tastes have been transferred on to R.Singh.

As a child, Singh responds to his sense of abandonment by dreaming of India, the homeland, and of his origin. He reads books on Asiatic and Persian Aryans and dreams of horsemen who look for their leader ("*The Mimic Men*", 98). He creates an ideal and heroic past which is in conflict with the real-life condition in Isabella. He is completely shocked when his father sacrifices Tamango, the race horse, although he is aware of the symbolic significance of such an act in Hindu tradition. As Donald A. Mackenzie has explained, the aim of the sacrifice is to secure prosperity and fertility (1985: 90-91). Although Singh idealizes his Hindu past and culture, he is in fact unable to understand Hinduism and thus, as Thieme has observed, when the horse is killed, the ideal past collapses and the concrete experience shocks the child (1987: 133). In other words, this sacrifice causes Singh to see an Indian world that is in contrast with the noble and ideal realm of imagination (Hughes 1988:

74-75). Hindu rituals have lost their meaning in Isabella as the people have lost their connection with India, its culture, customs and traditions. Thus, as Bruce King observes,

“The process of losing one’s Indianness started with leaving India. That was the original sin, the fall. After that Indian traditions could only either decay into deadening ritual or become diluted, degraded and eventually lost through outside influences and intermarriage with others.” (1993: 68)

In his room in a hotel in a London suburb Singh reevaluates his life in the hope of achieving order, as the place in which he is born is associated with chaos. As he says: “to be born on an island like Isabella, an obscure New World transplantation, second-hand and barbarous, was to be born to disorder” (*The Mimic Men*, 118). Singh does not follow any chronological order in his writing but he constantly moves backwards and forwards, writes about his childhood and adulthood, his life in Isabella and in England, his political career and marriage, and his education to give shape to the past and his experiences, and to understand himself. By analyzing and interpreting his own experiences he hopes to find some order within the chaos of the present, and the uncertainty of the future in the contemporary colonial society. For there was much in his life to reckon with; an uneasy childhood, a painful youth, a broken marriage, an abortive political career.

By presenting different times, places, and situations, he tries to put the parts together to complete the puzzle and rewrite his life. He considers the notions of colonisation, decolonisation, history, culture, race, and politics, to write his own story and to give meaning to his existence. The constant shifts between the past, the present, and the future may also reflect Singh’s internal chaos; as John Thieme has suggested, this technique is suitable for presenting “social and psychological disturbances” (1987: 114). However, the irony is that in his search for order, Singh is unable to follow a chronological pattern to impose order on his writing.

Still, at least, writing becomes an activity by means of which he can find the reasons for his failure. Since, his writing truthfully reflects the shaping influence and the effect of imperialism on the life and personality of the colonized individual. As he is born to disorder, Singh longs for a sense of control over his life and, therefore, he turns to writing which becomes a “means of releasing” from the “barren cycle of events” (White 1975: 180). As Kelly has pointed out, it is through the expression and presentation of the events that he can reduce the pain of being a displaced colonial man: the act of writing his memoirs provides him the final solution to his sense of dislocation, for through writing he is at last able to take control of the fragments of his past and shape them into a spiritual and psychological autobiography. (1989: 90)

Like other immigrated people to Caribbean with their ancestral origin in some far off country Singh suffers from “genetic” dislocation which, according to Rob Nixon, refers to the condition of the East Indians in the Caribbean. They crossed the *kala pani*, black water, and thus, they lost their Indianness (1988: 4). Moreover, Singh, as a member of an ethnic minority on the island also experiences “ethnic displacement” which refers to his status as an Indian in Isabella (Nixon 1988: 6). By idealizing the past, Singh wants to reconstruct history to establish his identity; however, he realizes that such a task is impossible and, therefore, he becomes disillusioned. Like Singh, his Chinese friend, Hok, reads books on his own origin, China, and idealizes his past and is humiliated when it is discovered that he has black ancestors. Browne, Singh’s black revolutionary friend, also fantasizes his origin and his room is full of pictures of black leaders. Thus, according to Dolly Zulakha Hassan, each boy is in fact obsessed with his own racial origin and the ethnic group to which he belongs and the novel, therefore, implies that the emotional security and a real sense of identity are unachievable in heterogeneous societies of the Caribbean (1989: 253).

Being completely alienated in the island of Isabella and devoid of any coherent past to hold on to Singh tries to become politician to cater to his psychological need of identity and fulfillment. He tries to achieve order, meaning, and success as a political figure. In other words, Singh needs a real view of himself and of the world around him so he participates in politics. Singh’s political career is then potentially a means by which he can satisfy his ego. He opts for a political career without any lofty ideal and sense of meaning. Singh’s desire to become a politician arises out of the feeling of incompleteness and meaninglessness of his role as a colonial Politician. To him, politicians in Isabella seek power and order without knowing the real meaning of those concepts:

Having no gifts to offer, they seldom know what they seek. They might say they seek power. But their definition of power is vague and unreliable. ... The politician is more than a man with a cause, even when this cause is no more than self-advancement. He is driven by some little hurt, some little incompleteness. He is seeking to exercise some skill which even to him is never as concrete as the skill of the engineer ...” (*The Mimic Men*, 37)

His inability to lead the people of independent Caribbean Island in the chaotic condition in postcolonial era was quite evident to Singh himself; therefore, he refers to his political activity as a “*drama*” and examines its effects on himself and on his people in course of his writing.

Singh’s obsession with politics also gives rise to his obsession with naming anything that comes in his way. The township that he develops in the land gifted by his grandfather was name ‘*Kripalville*’ after his

father and later on, ironically enough, it gets corrupted into 'Cripple Villi'. This act of naming clearly shows his psychological need for power and ownership:

So I went on, naming, naming; and, later, I required everything - every government building, every road, every agricultural scheme - to be labelled. It suggested drama, activity. It reinforced reality. It reinforced that sense of ownership which overcame me whenever I returned to the island after a trip abroad ... ("*The Mimic Men*", 215)

By naming roads and buildings, Singh reinforces the reality of his power and political career, and by renaming himself, he redefines his own reality. However, the irony is that by changing his name, Ranjit Kirpalsingh in fact has changed the very identity for which he is searching so desperately. In his attempt to define himself through his political activities, Singh realizes that he has become separated from his people and has to play a role to preserve his position. He feels incomplete because he is aware of the meaninglessness of his role as a colonial politician.

Naipaul's surgeon like skill of diagnosing the root cause of social ailment and the act of dissecting it with dexterity is quite obvious in this work. Singh is very well aware of the fact that postcolonial politics and its activities cannot promise to bring peace and order to the island but it can only create a dramatic illusion of order. The island society suffers from social and racial unrest and economic problems even after independence. Under such conditions the government decides that the nationalization of the sugar estate, owned by an upper class Englishman called Lord Stockwell, is the only way of solving the economic problems and uniting people. Consequently, Singh is sent to England to carry out the negotiations. However, he fails to persuade the English to help his government and is also humiliated by one of the English ministers in the meeting:

His manner indicated clearly that our game had gone on long enough and he had other things to do than to assist the public relations of colonial politicians. ... I said, "How can I take this message back to my people?"... He said: "You can take back to your people any message you like." And that was the end. ("*The Mimic Men*", 224)

Moreover, Lord Stockwell refuses to talk seriously about labour problems and sugar estate; instead he treats Singh like a child and says that he has got nice hair. Both the minister and Lord Stockwell, the representatives of the imperial power, impose their superiority on Singh who is reduced to a child. Hence, by refusing to consider Singh as a political figure or acknowledge the importance of his task, they in fact, push Singh to an inferior status, and finally to a sense of political

dislocation and failure. Without any help from the English, Singh is unable to find any solution to his country's problems, and thus, nationalization becomes a word and finally Singh faces his "private loss" as he cannot act without the master's approval or help:

"My sense of drama failed. This to me was the true loss. For four years drama had supported me; now, abruptly, drama failed. It was a private loss ..." (*The Mimic Men*, 221)

Isabella's lack of a political awareness makes its politicians absurd characters who suffer from their own insignificance and displacement. With no political reality there is no real sense of identity and without that the island politicians suffer from non-existence as politics does not have any real meaning on the island that has been controlled, ruled, and exploited by the empire. Therefore, without a real political history of their own, colonial politicians are used as political stooges by the super-powers.

Singh also suffers from dislocation and alienation because of his educational background. As a victim of the colonial education system and curriculum, Singh has always been encouraged to imitate the empire and to become a "mimic man":

My first memory of school is of taking an apple to the teacher. This puzzles me. We had no apples on Isabella. It must have been an orange; yet my memory insists on the apple. The editing is clearly at fault, but the edited version is all I have. (*The Mimic Men*, 90)

Moreover, Singh's colonial education has taught him that the mother country, England, is the symbol of order. When he studies English culture and history, he feels that his own culture, if there is any, is inferior to that of the colonizer. Hence, Singh's colonial education has caused him to become a homeless man with no self-image. Singh keeps asking himself whether he is the product of his colonial education. He both recognizes and criticizes colonial mimicry, but he also knows that he cannot help being a mimic man as he is "a specific product of a particular socioeconomic formation called colonialism" (Cudjoe 1988: 100). In his attempt to find his identity and the ideal landscape, Singh goes to London only to realize that the city does not promise anything to an East Indian colonial subject as he can never identify himself with it. In London, Singh realizes that he can never be an Englishman in spite of his public school education, and that one can be English only if he is born in England. Thus, Louis Simpson has pointed out that the West Indians can only face dislocation in the metropolis:

The descriptions of the immigrant's life in *The Mimic Men* show how disillusioning that life could be. Nothing would have prepared the West Indian for the English climate or the dreariness of living in a boarding house. Confronted with greasy wallpaper and a gas

meter into which you had to feed shillings to keep warm, he would have had long thoughts. (1984: 574)

Singh does not find a complete solution to his psychological problems. Hence, his writing reflects moods of displacement, disillusionment, and sadness. Alienated from his own society, Singh travels to different places to overcome his feeling of isolation but he is aware of his "imminent homelessness" ("*The Mimic Men*", 249).

Although Singh cannot completely solve his psychological problems, he reaches a conclusion through writing his memoirs. He realizes that his experiences and his feeling of abandonment and displacement cannot be separated from his colonial backgrounds ("*The Mimic Men*", 50). Without a real and identifiable historical background, Singh has become desolate and that is why he constantly tries to impose order on his past, present, and future. To Robert Morris, Singh's final state is a real "final emptiness" as he has lost everything at the age of forty (1975: 66-67). However, to Hena Maes-Jelinek, the very emptiness refers to his detachment from the events and proves that he is now ready to start a new life (1967: 513). In other words, he is now aware of how and why he finds himself in the condition of a homeless citizen of the world, and concludes that he has achieved a new perception of himself.

In conclusion, Singh examines and analyses the colonial and postcolonial periods, historical, cultural, and political backgrounds, economic problems and psychological conflicts and finally concludes that writing can be decolonisation itself. He realizes that colonial societies like Isabella suffer from lack of cultural, historical, and racial homogeneity. Although he fails to reconnect himself to India, the homeland, or to connect himself to London, the metropolis, by writing his memoirs, Singh finally takes control of his sense of dislocation as he realizes that there is no ideal place with which he can identify himself. His final detachment is an expression of a "distance from any clear-cut national identity or notion of home" (Nixon 1988: 3). Hence, in "*The Mimic Men*", "home" can never ultimately be more than the books he writes or, perhaps more precisely, the action of writing them" (Gottfried 1984: 443).

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