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**The Politics of Home and Identity in V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men***

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**Abstract**

The motive of "home" and "identity" seems to be a recurrent one in African-Diasporan literature, especially the literature of the Caribbeans. This study presents V. S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* as a postcolonial novel that depicts the effects of colonialism on colonized people. The article clarifies the influence of colonialism on identity and how it affects the social, political, and psychological aspects of the people of a small Caribbean Island. The study highlights the manifestations related to the impact of colonization on self-identity and psychological confusion. The paper concludes that characters are emblematic of home and identity crisis and attest to the mimicry of displaced men.

**Introduction**

Home and the loss of home constitute a recurring motif in Postcolonial literatures. It encompasses the psychic and physical experience of colonized and colonizers, the contact zone where cultures meet and identities are formed, and of course embrace heterogeneity and

hybridity. Generally, the idea of home has some significant function in our lives. Thinking of home, we associate notions like shelter and comfort and when we come home, we want to feel safe and welcomed. John McLeod argues in this sense that "to be 'at home' is to occupy a location where we are welcomed, where we can be with people very much like ourselves" (210). What this means is that when we talk about home, we are looking for who we are (identity), where we come from (home) and how to find our place in life. When one is born in country then moves to another, where is one's home country then? This question is hard to answer, because migration and displacement are processes which imply a struggle of identities. Traditionally, home can be defined as the place where our ancestors used to live, the place of our origin. This traditional idea implies that people define their identity according to their roots. Identity as a root construct in social science forms part of different terms that describe and explain individual and groups behaviour. As a key independent variable, identity is widely used in social and behavior research (Albert Sidney, et al, 60). Although identity has received a lot of research interest that includes a vast array of conceptualization (especially since 1990) there is no consensus on the meaning of the term identity (Rawi Abdelal, 51).

The term identity is used in different contexts. First, it refers to the existence of something that displays one or more attributes (characteristics). For example, organizational identity is referred to all the attributes an organization may possess where attributes can include the values, goals, action or descriptions of the organization or its members (Vanessa Lane, and George Scott, 201). Secondly, identity is used as a reference to the self, the answer to the question "who am I?" Thirdly, identity is used with reference to a social category that contributes to social identity, the answer to the question "who are we?" (Ravishanker Moraj and Leon Pan, 222). Our interest in this study is in the third context of identity as a social category as explicitly recreated in V. S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* (1967).

Thomas O'Halloran critique of *The Mimic Men* depicts the Naipaul's exploration of the political and social elements of cultural identity within the third world (144). Naipaul's hostile views against controversial distinctions between the first and third worlds are cited along with the balance of personal psychology and group politics manifested through the characters of the story. Halloran further opines that Naipaul's narratives reflect deep feelings of despair and melancholy accompanying the migrant position in the present age of all types of migrations and technology (33). His commitment to a "politics of difference" is a key point in tackling Naipaul's fiction and its presentation of the colonial experience (12). On the other hand, Medrea Marcu Nicoleta explores identity patterns in writings that belong to postcolonial literatures and highlights the split identities that inherently appear within the postcolonial discourse (207). The split consciousness of postcolonial writers such as Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Kazuo Ishiguro, places them between different types of cultures and mentalities. In fact, the idea of identity under such circumstances is a recurrent topic in the studies about cultural and postcolonial discourse. Stuart Hall views the question of identity under the colonial pressures. There is always something wrong with the identities of such people who seem to be oscillating between the past and present, attraction and revulsion (19). By Hall's view, identity is possibly a postcolonial construct.

### **Home and Identity in Caribbean Literature**

"Home" and "Identity" seems to be a major consideration in African-Diasporan literature, especially the literature of the Caribbean. This can be attributed to its peculiar history which some scholars see as definitive and irrevocable. Besides the accidental nature of the "discovery"

of the area and the brutal mode of occupation and violence among the colonizing forces, there was also the problem of racial and cultural diversity of the area. With the exception of the indigenous Indian population which was largely swiftly exterminated, the inhabitants of the Caribbean either migrated or were forcibly transported there, which is why John Figueroa remarks that the mixture of the people making up the West Indies is remarkable, for as the history of the world goes, nowhere else, (except, perhaps, the U.S.) have Africans, Asians, Amerindians, Europeans and every possible mixture of these come together to form a new people, thus, giving rise to a multi-cultural or plural society (78).

In the Prologue to *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1969), Mr. Biswas the central character reflects:

How terrible it would have been, at this time to be without it: to have died among the Tulsis, amid the squalor of that large, disintegrating and indifferent family; to have left Shama and the children among them; in one room; worse, to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one's portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated (Naipaul, 13-14).

The home metaphor therefore, forms the core of the novel. It initiates and sustains the novel especially where Mr. Biswas first vows to build his own house after being beaten up by Bhandat, long before he met the Tulsis. His experience with the Tulsis only pushes him faster towards his goal. But as soon as he sees the Tulsis' "barracks" in Green Vale, he makes up his mind that the time for him to build his own house has come. Initially, he had told Bipti, his mother, after the beating: "I am going to get a job on my own. And I am going to get my own house too" (67). At first, this crucial declaration seems to reflect a little more than dissatisfaction with the hut as well as the hut being a place of shame for him among his school friends. But before long, it is given a new significance by his reflection on the number of houses available and none belonging to him:

Suppose, "Mr. Biswas thought in the long room", suppose that at one word I could just disappear from this room, what would remain to speak of me? A few clothes, a few books. The shouts and thumps in the hall would continue; the puja would be done; in the morning the Tulsis store would open its doors. He had lived in many houses. And how easy it was to think of those houses without him.... In none of these places was he being missed because in none of these places had he ever been more than a visitor, an upsetter of routine. Was Bipti (his mother) thinking of him in the back trace? But she herself was a derelict. There was nothing to speak of him (131-132).

Here is virtually the whole story of Mr. Biswas's life; shunted from one decaying hut to another, and as Beverley Ormerod puts it "a microcosm of 300 years of West Indian history" (173).

Mr. Biswas seems to have achieved his ambition at last! But even as we begin to appreciate this achievement, doubts are raised. Nevertheless, Naipaul goes on to list Mr. Biswas' achievements and concludes: "but bigger than them all was the house, his house!" (14). But we know that Naipaul is having fun at Mr. Biswas' expense for we are told that Mr. Biswas has just lost his job, that the house is irretrievably mortgaged, that the house is uncomfortable, that it cost him far more than it is worth and that it is proving expensive to maintain. We also find that the house came into his hands not through his own initiative but because the solicitor's clerk was looking for someone to swindle. Above all, the house is jerry-built and will collapse at any

time, thereby rendering Biswas "unnecessary" and "unaccommodated" as the man hinted at in the Prologue. It would thus, seem that the world contemptuously and consistently denies Mr. Biswas' entire attempt to find a home for himself and his family. Naipaul therefore, writes about the attempt of Mr. Biswas to fight back against this cosmic denial of his very existence. His explanation of his disillusionment with the directionless life in Trinidad parallels the accounts of many other Caribbean writers of his generation, like Samuel Selvon. According to Susheila Nasta, Selvon echoes, "I was finding myself in a situation where life was beginning to become very complacent and easy-going" (Susheila Nasta, 1). And so, it is not surprising that Selvon addresses the same issues as Naipaul. For instance, in his trilogy - *The Lonely Londoners* (1989), *Moses Ascending* (1984) and *Moses Migrating* (1983) - Selvon presents the aimlessness, homelessness and frustration of West Indian immigrants in London.

Identity grows from collective group consciousness that gives a sense of belonging derived from membership in a community bound by common descent and culture. As a phenomenon, it gives the individual a sense of belonging and to the community a sense of solidarity. Belonging to somewhere plays a very important role in human life, because just as people need to eat and drink, to have security and freedom of movement, so too they need to belong to a group. Deprived of this dimension in life, they feel cut off, lonely, diminished, unhappy. Therefore, to be human means to be able to feel at home somewhere, with one's own kind. Selvon's immigrants seem unable to find a home either in Britain or in Trinidad. Neither in *The Lonely Londoners*, nor in *Moses Ascending* nor in *Moses Migrating* nor in *An Island is a World* do Selvon's immigrants arrive at a promised land. Selvon's and Naipaul's works in particular, depict the difficulties of their characters finding a homeland, whether in the West Indies or elsewhere. Even Tiger's move from Chaguanas to Barataria, to Five Rivers and then, to Barataria again in *Turn Again Tiger* (1979) is not unconnected with the problem of finding a homeland. Therefore, the Caribbean can be many things to many people: a geographic region somewhere in America's backyard, an English-speaking outpost of the British Empire, an exciting holiday destination for North Americans and Europeans, a place where dirty money is easily laundered, and even an undefined, exotic area that contains the dreaded Bermuda Triangle, the mythical lost city of El Dorado, the fabled Fountain of Youth and the island home of Robinson Crusoe. The concept of home and identity is what is portrayed by the works of Caribbean writers such as C.L.R. James, George Lamming, Derek Walcott, Wilfred Cartey, Carole Boyce Davies, Claude McKay and Edward Kamau Brathwaite and V. S. Naipaul amongst others.

### **Home and Identity in *The Mimic Men***

*The Mimic Men* presents and examines a newly independent country in the Caribbean island of Isabella. The island, a former colony, has now become independent but the formerly colonized people of the island are unable to establish order and govern their country. Clearly, the colonial experience has caused the colonized to perceive themselves 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 consider their own culture, customs and traditions, religion, and race to be inferior to those of their master and try to identify themselves with the empire. Basically, the history of the Caribbean resonates with discourses of dislocation, placelessness, fragmentation, and loss of identity. They become mimic men who imitate and reflect the colonizer's life style, values, and views. As these psychological problems cannot be solved after independence is achieved, independence itself becomes a word but not a real experience. Without the colonizer, the

colonized see themselves as lost in a 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 the displaced and disillusioned 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 (John Thieme, 113). This means that to read the novel just for its politics is to destroy its emphasis on the psychological problems of colonial people (King Bruce, 72).

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. Therefore, according to Richard Kelly, Singh is the centre of his small world, and his childhood, political carrier, and educational background. 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 colonization, decolonization, history, culture, race, and politics, to write his own story and to give meaning to his existence. Hence, the novel presents Singh's desire to learn "what it means to be a colonial subject in a postcolonial society" (Selwyn Cudjoe 99). 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" (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. From what he writes we can learn, like him, how colonial experiences have affected and shaped his life and personality. Singh longs for a sense of control over his life therefore, he turns to writing which becomes a "means of releasing" from the "barren cycle of events" (Landeg White, 180). As Kelly points 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 (90).

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. For example, he goes to the beach house owned by his grandfather and one day he sees the death of three children who are drowned in the sea while the fishermen do nothing to save them. (*The Mimic Men*, 108-109). At that point he realizes that Isabella cannot be the ideal landscape he is searching for. Thieme observes that the beach scene refers to the myth of Perseus who was saved from being drowned in the sea by

Dictys, a fisherman and a hero, who presents a contrast with the passive and selfish Carib-African fishermen. Hence, Singh's experience on the beach makes him too aware of the distance between Isabella and his true, pure world (117). Moreover, 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 (90). Although Singh idealizes his Hindu past and culture, he is in fact unable to understand Hinduism and thus, Thieme opines that when the horse is killed, the ideal past collapses and the concrete experience shocks the child (133). 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 has claimed, by leaving India and going to the Caribbean islands, the Indians are doomed to isolation and dislocation:

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 (*The Mimic Men*, 68).

Hence, 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 (Rob Nixon, 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 (Rob Nixon, 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. As a result of his psychological need for identity and fulfillment, Singh becomes a politician. 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 refers to his political activity as a "drama" and examines its effects on himself but he does not concentrate on his people or on the shoe shops, filling stations, and schools that are established on the island with his help. Singh's obsession with 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 labeled. 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. 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)

Singh is very well aware of the fact that the "drama" has not brought peace and order to the island but only created a dramatic illusion of order, and that island society still suffers from social and racial unrest and from economic problems. 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.

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, 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 points 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 (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. 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.

### Conclusion

Naipaul through the novel *The Mimic Men* reflects the life; history, aspirations, feelings and reactions that colonized societies go through after colonialism. The fictional character of Singh is a typical presentation of the real postcolonial character. Details of the life of ordinary people of a postcolonial country is represented in an artistic style that allows readers to feel the double identity, confusion, alienation and displacement the colonized people have had to face. In *The Mimic Men*, V.S. Naipaul employs the confessional narrative technique through his main character Singh so that the final outcome is an autobiography rather than a novel. Naipaul is keen to make the reader sympathize with Singh's cause and feel the pain. He deals with the problems that the colonized societies confront in establishing their identity in a chaotic world that is full of challenges facing their culture and history. Naipaul's insistence on determining the identity of the individual is preconditioned to be able to continue the quest for political identity and solve the rest of colonial problems.

In general, the novel represents the conditions of colonized men who imitate and reflect colonizers' lifestyle and views. Through *The Mimic Men*, the author declares that freedom and liberation are the main concepts that all nations search for. However, getting liberated from the colonizer's military grip does not necessarily mean that they are liberated from their political, economic, and cultural interference.



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