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SENSE OF ALIENATION AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN NAIPAUL'S FICTION: *THE MIMIC MEN*

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The major themes that emerge from a reading of his novels are related to the problems of the colonized people: their sense of Alienation from the landscapes, their identity crisis, the paradox of freedom and the problem of neocolonialism in the ex-colonies. The people who can no longer identify with a cultural heritage lose the assurance and integrity which the indwelling racial ancestor provides. In addition, the harsh conditions of colonialism have left the West Indian crippling under the burden of poverty and ignorance. Because psychological and physical conditions correspond so closely, the unhoused, poverty-stricken West Indian is so often culturally and spiritually dispossessed as well. His only alternative is to strive after the culture of his ex-colonial masters even though he is unable to identify with their traditions and values.

It is clear that Naipaul's first three books allowed him to experiment not only with the art of writing but with his West Indian material as well. The West Indian society and the individual's arbitrary and perplexing relation to it have already been defined in the earlier chapters. The themes of rootlessness, alienation and escape have also been given comprehensive treatment in the first two chapters. This chapter deals with the roots of the matter in Naipaul's fiction.

Published in 1971, *The Mimic Men* marks a significant phase in the fictional career of V.S. Naipaul. The novel is remarkable for various reasons. It is perhaps the most emphatic expression of the themes that shape Naipaul's novels, namely, the escape of the Third World into fantasy on being poverty-ridden and alienated on the circumference of power. The emergence of various political and religious movements which, though ineffective, offer a sense of drama and hollow excitement finally ending up in disorder, politics dominated by appeals to race and colour, the absence of real power, myths, culture or competence which have resulted in a tendency to mimic, and a feeling of homelessness and identity crisis. *The Mimic Men* also seems to provide a reply to the charge that Naipaul is an exponent of the metropolitan values and ideologies. And, "The Mimic Men clearly marks the end of ... absorption with his [Naipaul's] personal homelessness, a final release from ... 'a barren cycle of events,"[1] as Naipaul in this novel seems to be concerned with the rootlessness and placelessness of a typical modern man, let alone a colonial individual.

The story which V.S. Naipaul narrates can be described as tracing Ralph Singh's transition from innocence to experience and his passage from external chaos to personal harmony. "The writing of his story becomes the very means to endure the terror, shipwreck, abandonment and loneliness of his situation."[2] 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. The social analysis which he attempts in *The Mimic Men* is not confined to the West Indies but extended to the entire Third World:

It was during this time, as I have said, that I thought of writing. It was my hope to give expression to the restlessness, the deep disorder, which the great explorations, the overthrow in three continents of established social organizations, the unnatural bringing together of peoples ... …I was attracted less by the act and the labour than by the calm and the order which the act would have implied. [3]

Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* portrays the state of psychic unease that plays out in the interior monologue of the narrator/protagonist, Kripal Singh. Singh is retired West Indian colonial politician, who writes his memoirs while living in self- imposed exile in a private London hotel. Singh writes his memoirs as an attempt at giving his life a sense of order and cohesion. His narrative moves in non-chronological fashion between his life in England and in the West Indies, shifting between the past and the present, childhood and adulthood, fantasy and reality. The narrator delivers these events in a detached, despairing tone to the point where, at the end of the novel, he appears as nothing more than an insecure man living an anonymous, ghostly existence in a transient- style private hotel in a London suburb.

The Mimic Men proffers a view of the postcolonial subject struggling to find a sense of locality and subjectivity within a shifting political epoch. Ralph Singh writes in order to examine the way in which his subjectivity has been constituted by the colonial experience and the ramifications of that in a period of postcolonial independence. The very nature of the colonial subject's experience is rooted in uncertainty and uprootment; identity-formation is always contingent and, as Singh, experiences it, fragmentary and haphazard. His narrative is located at the interstices, at the struggle between psychic representation and social reality.

Kripal Singh is the tragic anti-hero of Naipaul's more serious fiction following the success of *A House for Mr. Biswas.* Comedy no longer serves the maturing writer: it becomes emptied and meaningless. Naipaul turns to face the pathos and tragedy of the colonial condition with a searing and penetrative gaze. The realism and detail given to the Caribbean landscape and the matrix of social relationships depicted in *A House for Mr. Biswas* is replaced with a detail that is more psychological in nature.

In *The Mimic men*, however, Kripal Singh is not handicapped by poverty, ignorance, a lack of natural talent or the persecution of a grasping Hindu family. He has gained the material success, public eminence and apparent independence that Ganesh, Harbans and Biswas all longed to have. In addition, because of his university education and his exposure to a more sophisticated society in London, he is better able to recognize and articulate the many ills of his native back ground. but his clearly superior status and acute consciousness do not make him any less vulnerable to the subtle, yet over powering consequences of his psychologically fragmented and confusing past. In fact, his ability to rationalize his own condition sharpens rather than reduces his total alienation from his environment and his final rejection of an active life.

The Mimic Men, however, is more than a mere elaboration of Naipaul's' previous West Indian novels: it is a profound re enactment of the growth and nature of the East Indian, west Indian psyche and its reaction to the three cultures, Indian, Creole and English, which influence it. In the process, Kripal Singh, the narrator, confessor and visionary, comments on power, politics, social and racial interactions, sex, education, displacement, isolation and identity as experienced by the ex-colonial. Each topic is used to illuminate a facet of his mind. Because of their intricate entanglement, however, Singh's attitude to any one of these subjects is often

influenced by his experience of another. This book, therefore, more than any other work of V.S. Naipaul, offers a compact, panoramic view of a displaced new World inhabitant, shown through his eyes, but often allowing an insight for deeper than his own.

It takes him only a few months in London, his fantasy city, to realize that there is a greater disorder here and a more painful shipwreck of lives**.** In Mr. Shylock's boarding house where he stays, he meets a multitude of lonely immigrants in "a conglomeration of private cells. In the city as nowhere else we are reminded that we are individuals, units."[4] The plight of the Maltese housekeeper, Lieni, abandoned with her illegitimate child yet always able to play the part of the "Smart London girl" is typical of the sophisticated veneer handing a greater panic. Taking the lead from Lieni, Singh develops the fatuous theory *that* "We become what we see of ourselves in the eyes of others. She pretended that I was richer than I said. She made me aware of my looks, to which up to then I had paid little attention, content with the knowledge that I was no monster."[5] Since Lieni is willing to accept him as the dandy, the extravagant colonial, he earnestly undertakes the part. He develops in the way a further level of mimicry which he takes quite seriously on his returns to Isabella.

Singh continues his search for order and the flowering, the extension of himself away from London: "from room to room I moved, from district to district, going even farther out of the heart of the city."[6] Like a lost soul in search of a resting place, this rootless, homeless progeny of the New World wanders on. But Singh is really a body in search of a soul; a life in pursuit of an authentic identity; a personality in need of approval and reassurance. No landscape, except of the mind, can satisfy these needs; no order, unless created within, will give direction to such a lie. With sickening despair, the futility of Singh's search becomes apparent: "The signs were all there. The crash was coming, but I could see this only when the crash had come and when the search for order had been abandoned for something more immediate and more reassuring. And the need for reassurance was constant. I began, as the saying is, to frequent prostitutes. Instinct alone didn't suggest this; I was also influenced by what I had read."[7]

The movement if from the sublime to the shabbily mundane yet there is a crucial connection. The prostitutes, like London, hold out to Singh the false promise of fulfilment. It is significant that he is often disgusted and humiliated by these sexual adventures. They lead in the same direction as his earlier quest, deeper down into emptiness. What this psychological cripple (the word play on Kripal is appropriate and quite deliberate) does not realize, but what the reader can easily is Singh's perpetual need for a crutch. London, childhood fantasies, prostitutes, Sandra, business, politics and finally Hindu philosophy all fulfil the same function.

Singh's relationship with Sandra most clearly demonstrates the depth and urgency of this need. At the end of his disappointment with London, he discovers Sandra: "To me, drifting about the big city that had reduced me to futility, she was all that was positive. She showed how much could be extracted so easily from the city; she showed how easy occasions were."[8] He makes no secret of the reason he 'attaches' himself to her:

But, and always my mood must be borne in mind, I had such confidence in her rapaciousness, such confidence in her as someone who could come to no harm a superstitious reliance on her, which was part of the strength I drew from her – that in that moment it seemed to me that to attach myself to her was to acquire that protection which she offered, to share some of her quality of being marked, a quality which once was mine but which I had lost.[9]

But it is more a 'protection' Singh needs than one which Sandra offers. If he were to so blinded by his own weakness, he would have noticed that Sandra also seeks 'protection and

assurance'. "It was with surprise that I discovered that, though of the city, her position in it was like my own. She had no community, no group, and had rejected her family. She saw herself alone in the world and was determined to fight her way up."[10] She is, in fact, homeless too. She looks upon marriage to Singh as an escape from the common fate which awaited her in her own society. Singh, however, with childish insecurity seeks to be comforted by her rather than comfort her. With Sandra's protection and luck, Singh decides to escape from London "I abolished all landscapes to which I could not attach myself and longed only for those I had known. I thought of escape, and it was escape to what I had so recently sought to escape from .But I couldn't leave right away." [11]

His return to Isabella begins a phase of his life which he calls "that Period of my life which was to follow, the period between my preparation for life and my withdrawal from it, that period in parenthesis, when I was most active and might have given the observer the impression of man fulfilling his destiny, in that period intensity of emotion was the thing I never achieved."[12] It is the period in which he becomes the successful businessman and then the dandy socialist politician. But these careers are no more than a continuation of the role playing he is attracted to even as a child when he discovers "that many were willing to take me for what I said I was was pure Joy. It was like a revelation of wholeness."[13] Only much later does he realize how poor and deceptive a substitute for wholeness this is. In London, however, with Lieni's encouragement, he renews this attitude and on his return to Isabella is immediately attached to a group with similar pretensions: "We were a haphazard, disordered and mixed society in which there could be nothing……we had found ourselves attached to the neutral, fluid group which was to remain ours for the next five or six years. The men were professional, young, mainly Indian, with a couple of local whites and coloured; they had all studied abroad and married abroad." [14]

In the West Indies, the word abroad is purely magical, carrying with it depths of richness and mystery which the untraveled native worships and which the returnee wears like a badge of honour. But within their own group they scarcely deceive themselves: "After this I begin to be aware of the attention of studied inattention. The talk is a bit too loud, too hearty, too aggressive or too defensive; these people are acting, overdoing domesticity and the small details, over-stressing the fullness of their own lives."[15] It is the perfect description of the colonial middle class. They are mimicking, from memory, their counter-parts in the foreign societies they visited.

This volatile shallow group cannot give Singh and Sandra the anchorage they need. While the young couple is initially dazzled and flattered by the attention paid them, especially after the enormous success of Crippleville, they soon become bored with their own roles and the inanity of those about them. In addition, Singh now recognizes Sandra's personal insecurity--"One morning – we had for some time been sleeping in separate rooms - She told me she had awakened in the night with a feeling of fear, a simple fear of place, of the absent world." [16] Her dislocation is as frightening and acute as Singh's own. They had indeed come together for self-defense. Such an admission can only dissolve their individual illusions and bring to an end a fragile union. Their Roman House becomes the symbol of their now futile relationship: "We had both lost interest in it, but we both kept this secret from the other. It is a strain to inspect the progress of a house in which you know others will live." [17]

Significantly, the break with Sandra and his middle class friends comes at the housewarming party. He abandons his extravagantly gaudy mansion to his equally pompous and wasteful friends. His deep, blind, damaging anger is as much against their pointless behaviour as

against his own. He seeks consolation at the ruins of an old slave plantation. The trip from his Roman House to the slave plantation is symbolic. In marks the chasm between the present and the past which he is unable to bridge. It is also a grim reminder that the grandeur of his present home and life is an ineffectual cover for the origins he is unwilling or unable to acknowledge. It anticipates his final move in search of wholeness and his fight against absolute despair. He enters politics on the side of the descendents of the slaves.

His isolation after Sandra's departure and his rejection of the middle class world set him aimlessly adrift. Brown makes the initial suggestion that Singh should use the notoriety of his father and his own reputation as a businessman to enter active politics. The obvious incongruity of the folk leader and the middle class businessman combined in one person disturbs no one and Singh is immediately accepted and loudly endorsed as nationalist politician.

Singh is affected in both ways. As a youth, he wills himself not to share the distress of those thousands who, from their fields, could look forward to nothing but servitude and days in the sun. As a politician, purportedly representing these very people, his stand does not change. But now the withdrawal is complete. He is unable to share the people's plight. He relies on his sense of drama to carry him through his role as a politician.

In this regard, however, Singh is not alone. The Chief Minister and his boyhood friend, Browne, is equally affected by an ambivalent attitude towards the subject he most exploited; the distress of his race. Like Singh, Browne also plays a part- "So that, absurdly, we became close again on the public platform, when we each became our character."[18] The other politicians and politics in general on Isabella are lightly touched on but the tone is obvious unreality, ineffectuality, futility. For Isabella, so totally dependent on foreign capital, goods and values**,** no power is real which did not come from the outside. These men with the mere trapping of power are mimic men, overestimating the parts they play. These are the puppet politicians who talk of nationalism and nationalization, but who can attempt neither without foreign sanction or participation.

These puppet politicians can only take themselves seriously if they believe in the parts they play. Mark the following statement by Kripal Singh: "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; thoughts of irresponsibility or duty dwindled, became absurd." [19] He finds this an irrevocable loss, the collapse of another prop, one step closer to absolute disillusionment and despair. His political career effectively ends even before he fails on his mission to London on behalf of his government. This trip is important, however, for two significant encounters.

The first is his affair with Lay Stella, the fairy tale lover, for whom the sex act, although involving two persons, is essentially a private frenzy. It is the prime substantiation of the fantasy world where every action, regardless of how intimately it involves others, is experienced alone. Singh has known this world for a long time. In Stella, he sees himself, pathetically frenzied. First drama, than fantasy deserts him: "And really it was time to go, to leave the city of fantasy; to leave the fairyland of the hotel, no longer fairyland." [20] He makes another departure and experiences a greater sense of desolation.

The final withdrawal occurs in his bizarre encounter with the fat prostitute. In a moment of neurotic revelation he realizes that the prostitute offers no more than mounds of "helpless flesh". He is horrified and enlightened, "The Highway Code Through poor hideous flesh to have learned about flesh; through flesh to have gone beyond flesh."[21] Both imaginative and physical impotence overtake him.

On his return to Isabella, he is able to test this numbness of body and spirit. His political overthrow is borne with resignation and utter passivity. He also finds that "I read them every morning like any other private citizen. I soon ceased to react to the sight of my name; it was no longer something I could attach to myself." [22] He is not affected by the bloody racial conflict which erupts about him and because of him. A supporter who seeks consolation is offered instead a "horsemen riding to the end of the world." [23] He retreated or progresses into the final emptiness.

The movement can be taken both ways. From childhood, he dreams of escaping his shipwrecked, life in the West Indies by riding to the end of a flat, empty world with his Asian ancestors. It is an early, subconscious urge to destroy his past and abolish himself. Naipaul admits to the darkness of this image; "It's a very private image, not at all political. Just a sense of loss and rootlessness and despair a very consoling image for these things."[24] Its consolation lies in the horseman's dual goal of escape and extinction.

On the other hand, all of Singh's adult life is spent in a futile search for order and meaning as he changes landscapes and roles with continuing disappointment. He seeks support from people and professions but is incapable of true involvement with either because he is so intent on avoiding self violation. The paradox here is that the self which he nurses and shelters is the very cause for his failure to relate to life in Isabella or London and is his greatest obstacle to true extension and growth. His successive withdrawals set a pattern which can only lead to the total rejection of all activity and effort. Such an absolute detachment from life leads in no other direction than the final emptiness.

The child and the adult, therefore, working from two separate points of departure, arrive at a common station. But maybe they are not separate at all and maybe Singh is right, at least about himself, when he says, "We could no longer draw strength from one another. It was one of those occasions when each person looks down into himself and finds only weakness, sees the boy or child he was and has never ceased to be."[25] The adult Singh never escapes the child's insecurity and lack of identifiable foundation. The damage and pain of the infant injure and deface the efforts of the man. From disorder to a rejection of all order is a simple and cyclical journey.

The fact is, because he is a victim, the story of his life becomes a powerful and gripping expression of the restlessness and deep disorder he has inherited from history. It is a much more revealing and vivid account of the consequences of empire building and exploitation than any chronological documentation of events can give. It shows, through a single member, how the physical and cultural dislocation of a people can lead to cultural, psychological and actual rootlessness. In *The Mimic Men*, Singh succeeds in the most dramatic and elaborated fashion in telling the East India, West Indian tale of rootlessness and fragmentation which Naipaul sought to give expression to in each of his previous West Indian novels. This success, however, makes him no less a permanent victim than the other protagonists.

V.S. Naipaul begins to hint at a rootlessness which is becoming increasingly widespread, one which compels him to widen and deepen his vision on this theme. He has, by this time in his career, fully articulated the West Indian version. But Naipaul cannot overlook its similarity to and involvement with the growing feeling of isolation experienced by persons from many differing cultures. Much of Naipaul's writing issues from his personal experience of being a displaced member of a minority race and religion in Trinidad. However, his multiple heritage

places him in a position that makes it possible for him to render a detached account of his subjective experiences.

In the first four novels Naipaul deals exclusively with the colonial society of Trinidad, the island of his nativity, and is preoccupied with the themes of dispossession, homelessness, alienation, mimicry and the search for an authentic selfhood. The characters in these novels are continually in search of an identity and home. In the later novels he emerges as a novelist of post-imperial crisis. His critical, observant eye and his uncompromising commitment to truth lay bare the hard facts about the ex-colonial societies. Naipaul makes it clear that political independence has changed nothing and the imperialist states continue to retain their hold on the former colonies through the newer, more camouflaged methods of neocolonialism.

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