DISPLACEMENT AND THE NEW (POST)COLONIAL IDENTITY IN V.S. NAIPAUL'S THE MIMIC MEN AND ONE OUT OF MANY

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Abstract: The present paper focuses on two writings by V.S. Naipaul, the novel The Mimic Men and the short story One out of Many as narratives of displacement, telling the story of two apparently different characters, the educated and soon-to-be politician Ralph R. K. Singh and the domestic Santosh. Both will pursue the dream of a metropolis, leaving their native lands (the island of Isabella and the city of Bombay) in order to live in a global city where their identities should indeed become "one out of many", less visible but at the same time reassuringly close to their idea of "home". Ralph Singh is the perfect portrayal of Governor's Macaulay definition of the colonial as a "mimic man raised through our English school", trying to become one with the colonizers on the island. Educated in English thought and spirit he cannot do otherwise but think of himself as being English, altering his given identity in order to better fit into drawer-like definitions of the self and finally going to London in order to escape the chaos specific for the colonials and thus to (re)gain the dreamed-about order of the metropolis. Having the mobility of a postcolonial will not be enough for Santosh either, who cannot even deal with the immediate reality of the great city, unable to comprehend behavioral patterns or the irreality of television. His choice will be that of hiding from the city and from the strangeness it implies. Both of V.S. Naipaul's characters are lost colonials in the new postcolonial reality, who cannot recreate the idea of home nor adapt themselves to the hybrid facets of the new surroundings.

Keywords: postcolonial identity; narratives of displacement; the flight to the centre; translating identities; the rejection of multiculturalism.

The present paper focuses on two early writings by V.S. Naipaul, namely the novel *The Mimic Men* and the short story *One out of Many* (included in the volume *In a Free State*), which shall be read as narratives of displacement. They both tell the story of apparently different characters: the highly educated and soon-to-be politician Ralph R.K. Singh and the domestic Santosh. The characters pursue their dream of the metropolis, leaving behind their native lands (the island of Isabella and, respectively, the city of Bombay) in order to live in a global city, where their identities should indeed become "one out of many": less visible but, simultaneously, reassuringly close to their idea of "home". The big city will, however, fail to fulfill their illusions of wholeness, as their search is limited to spatial coordinates, unable to recreate the inner stability of the individual.

The first novel to be discussed, *The Mimic Men*, has a rather simple - or, if I may, "postcolonially predictable" – plot. Ralph Singh, the central character, is born on the island of Isabella and decides to complete his education in England. After a few failed relationships he marries Sandra, an English girl, comes back to his original place of birth and builds a business of his own. His marriage, however, does not seem to work out: he gets divorced and afterwards becomes politically involved, alongside one of his former school colleagues, Browne. Politics will also fail to offer him the desired kind of order, so that he flees again to England, hoping to hide in a remote village and write his memoirs. His neverending trips to and from England will not grant him the feeling that he is actually looking for. Being constantly on the move, he hopes to reach his destination and, consequently, his dream.

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A Colonial Childhood

Although the novel opens with his life in London, I have chosen to discuss the second part of the novel first, i.e. the account of Ralph Singh's childhood on the formerly colonial island of Isabella. His upbringing and environment will be the ones to finally shape his adult views of the world, proving crucial for the young child in search for a world of his own. As the offspring of a poor schoolteacher (his father) and of the owners of the local Coca-Cola bottlers (his mother's family), he will choose early in life the path to follow, by rejecting his father's side of the family and rejoicing the privileges of having a famous family branch to go back to. His mother's brother, Cecil, is also his schoolmate and, even if he treats him rather harshly, Ralph does not seem to mind as long as he can still be close to those in power.

One of his first memories about school comes as a surprise: "My first memory of school is of taking an apple to the teacher. This puzzles me. We had no apples in Isabella. It must have been an orange; yet my memory insists on the apple" (Naipaul, 2001:109-10). Clinging onto a desired reality, the boy's memory starts to replace things so that he may better fit into the world he so desperately tries to create. It must have been an apple - a common fruit - that was brought to school, not something as "exotic" as an orange. Also part of this process of replacement will be the new identity he creates, the result of a sort of game he plays, placed between the old and the new, the forgotten and the desired:

> "My reaction to my incompetence and inadequacy had been not to simplify but to complicate. For instance, I gave myself a new name. We were Singhs. My father's father's name was Kripal. My father, for purpose of official identification, necessarily in that new world he adorned with his aboriginal costume, ran these names together to give himself the surname of Kripalsingh. My own name was Ranjit; and my birth certificate said I was Ranjit Kripalsingh. That gave me two names. But Deschampsneufs had five apart from his last name, all French, all short, all ordinary, but this conglomeration of the ordinary wonderfully suggested the extraordinary. I thought to complete. I broke Kripalsingh into two, correctly reviving an ancient fracture, as I felt; gave myself the further name of Ralph and signed myself R.R.K. Singh. At school I was known as Ralph Singh. The name Ralph I chose for the sake of the initial, which was also that of my real name." (Naipaul, 2001:112-3).

Living with the myth of the Deschampsneufs, a family whose name bears ancestral overtones, the child feels that he can fabricate similar roots and regards his act as a natural deed: imposture will be feared only later, given the fact that nobody seems to inquire after his real name. The security of this new identity will give him the courage to (secretly) pursue his Hindu roots, by reading books which he does not understand about the Aryans and dreaming of becoming their leader. The myth of the origins seems crucial to every child of the New World. Hok, one his colleagues, will also try to trace back his Chinese heritage. Each of the children hides in a corner of the public library, old books in hands, engulfed in a reality which he desperately tries to reclaim. The need for ancestors, for a tradition which they can call their own, is crucial to these children who are educated as mimic men of the New World. Unfortunately for Hok, he will be exposed in front of all his colleagues as having a black mother, and his first reaction is similar to Ralph's: he simply pretends not to know her. Since it is too late, he will be punished in a way that only children can manage so unremittingly: he will be simply overlooked and forgotten.

It is charming how Naipaul grasps such feelings in children. As the act of looking for an ideal world and ancestry might be interpreted as schizoid melancholy in adults, he hinds behind the faces of children, who are allowed to pursue any of their fantasies. It will be the same fantasy, but with deeper valences, that the grown-up Ralph Singh will try to live out: he will flee to the city of London. This sort of return to lost origins will no longer speak to him; it will be merely a voyage between here and there, with no final destination. Ralph Singh is,

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from this perspective, similar to V.S. Naipaul: "[a]fter the failed attempt to reconnect himself to India and the return to England, Naipaul had become like Singh an uprooted colonial, a permanent homeless exile, wedded to his writing and his desk, seemingly writing about the upheavals and turmoils of the colonial and postcolonial world, but in actuality giving order to his own life through writing" (King, 2003:73).

It is not only Hok, his Chinese-African-American colleague, who will betray Ralph's high expectations of famous origins. He will one day pay a visit to his other friend, Browne, but will be turned off by reality:

> "A genuine old-time Negro [*Browne's father*], grey-headed and pipe-smoking, was leaning out of a window and vacantly regarding the crowded street. He wore a grimy flannel vest. A flannel vest was proletarian wear – flannel the favoured material of Negroes enfeebled by illness or old age – and I wished I had not seen it on Browne's father" (Naipaul, 2001:177).

This is the old, stereotypical image of a Negro lying around, wearing a flannel vest, which one can encounter in old American movies (there are several other characters who build up their images of the world based on movies). Ralph would have wanted to avoid it, since it only confirms once more that the old order of things cannot be simply forgotten. Used to fabricated images of themselves, the children postpone reality until it is no longer possible to do so. When faced with the truth about themselves, they turn around and look for a new image they can cling onto.

The atmosphere in school is actually laden with racial overtones: Browne reminds one of the minstrel shows when proudly singing "Oh, I'm a happy little nigger" to the white and joyful audience; Eden is the little servant of the Deschampsneufs' boy, racially abused by a teacher while his colleagues pretend nothing happens; Deschampsneufs decides to baptize his horse with a name that reinforces the slave commerce. All this is presented as given fact, and nobody seems to mind. A colonial view of the world still prevails in one part of the island, while the other is being seduced by the privileges of postcolonialism: "We pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World, one unknown corner of it, with all its reminders of the corruption that came so quickly to the new" (Naipaul, 2001: 175).

Raised in an intellectual tradition which is not their own (i.e. the English tradition) the children will perfectly illustrate Governor's Macaulay expectations from "his" colonial subjects. They had to be "English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (Macaulay qtd. in Bhabha, 2002:87) – in other words, mimic men raised "through our English School" (Macaulay qtd. in Bhabha, 2002:87). It is Homi Bhabha who has very accurately observed that "mimicry *repeats* rather than *re-presents*" (Bhabha 2002:88), and this is what Naipaul's characters are desperately doing: lacking any solid definition of their past and of the surrounding reality, they begin repeating the models they see as already working. This is also the reason why a boy like Deschampsneufs will always be regarded as the measure of things, even if he turns out to be as mediocre as many of his colleagues: he has a tradition, and, more importantly, a colonial past he can go back to and reclaim as his own.

His household is the only one adorned with pictures of ancestors and personal histories going as far back as Stendhal. It is this kind of tradition which protects him from being a mere imitator – the others' only choice is to be "natural impersonators" (Naipaul, 2001:160) of anything desirable. It was Rob Nixon who stated that mimicry is, in Naipaul's writings, a "condition of insecurity" (1992: 131) derived from a weak sense of history and the grandiose dreams of the formerly colonial subject. It is such dreams that determine Ralph and his colleagues to turn idealized images of the past into "real" events of their present lives.

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The Flight to the Centre

Chaotic as these lives might be, the boys know one thing for sure: they need a real past of their own, a current guide in life and a future which should separate them from the mediocrity of life on a small island. With this in mind, Ralph sets out to London, although warned that his only accomplishment will be to turn back to the island with a "whitey-pokey". Aware of the fact that Isabella was just "an obscure New World transportation, second-hand and barbarous" (Naipaul, 2001:141), triggering only disorder and offering no feeling of home, he sees London as the only place which could bring solidity into his disoriented life. Yet, London will fail to save him from the obscurity he tries to evade, sending him back to the old order of the world, living in a boarding house which separates the English (living upstairs) from the immigrants (residing in the basement):

> "When I first came to London, shortly after the end of the war, I found myself after a few days in a boarding-house, called a private hotel, in the Kensington High Street area. The boarding-house was owned by Mr Shylock. He didn't live there, but the attic was reserved for him; and Lieni, the Maltese housekeeper, told me he occasionally spent a night there with a young girl. 'These English girls!' Lieni said. She herself lived in the basement with her illegitimate child. An early postwar adventure. Between attic and basement, pleasure and its penalty, we boarders lived, narrowly" (Naipaul, 2001: 7).

The place he now lives in is owned by Mr. Shylock, a man who enjoys his privileges (the attic was reserved for him) and sensual moments: the English girls, so harshly judged by the Maltese housekeeper, sometimes offer their sexual services to the wealthy man. Two worlds are, thus, kept apart: the decaying Englishmen and the hard-working immigrants. Lieni, however, resembles the English girls more than she wishes to, by having an illegitimate child "in the basement". The two worlds consequently seem to come closer, as one might mistake one for the other: from now on, borderlines are erased and anything can happen. Between the attic (the morally decayed England) and the basement (the morally decayed immigrant) live the boarders, who are somehow preparing to choose between these options or, maybe, walk the in-between line. It is this in-betweenness that will (mis)guide our character throughout the different stages of his life, to find pleasure or penalty in London or elsewhere.

It is the very same Mr. Shylock, the first real person Ralph Singh gets in contact with in England, that he decides to copy, as he admires his way of dress and behaviour. From the very first page, the act of imitating someone's gestures is rendered as natural: "He had the habit of stroking the lobe of his ear and inclining his head to listen. I thought the gesture was attractive; I copied it" (Naipaul, 2001:7). Due to this new world he inhabits, Ralph decides to create a new and more appealing side of himself, choosing to play "the dandy, the extravagant colonial" (Naipaul, 2001:24), roaming on the corridors of the British Council, not in search of culture, but of foreign girls he could seduce for the night.

His declared purpose of coming to London in order to "find the beginning of order" (Naipaul, 2001:22), to be taken in by the great civilization and assimilated into the mainstream, is far away from reality. Society decides to play a trick on the hopeful immigrant, strips him of all his identities and turns him into a simple colonial subject devoid of all past privileges. Like Naipaul himself, Ralph will be greatly disappointed in the city, which should have offered all that his colonial island life has kept hidden. Even if he looks for order in the metropolis, either he fails to find it or the city fails to offer it. It is this very city which enables him to create a new fictitious identity, according to the needs of the moment:

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"In London I had no guide. There was no one to link my present with my past, no one to note my consistencies or inconsistencies. It was up to me to choose my character, and I chose the character that was easiest and most attractive. I was the dandy, the extravagant colonial, indifferent to scholarship." (Naipaul, 2001:24).

The postcolonial subject takes advantage of his chameleonic sides and shapes up his identities like an inexperienced actor on a stage. In his attempts to find a new personality, he allows Lieni to embroider stories of various kinds: thus, he will be transformed into a charming dandy, of great wealth, seducing women in the most unconventional circumstances, while he is rather shy, fails sexual contact and is in need for money. But "[w]e become what we see of ourselves in the eyes of others." (Naipaul, 2001:25). The foreign city fails in its role as definer of identities, causing the opposite: people lose their essence and become mere "flat postures" (Naipaul, 2001:32). But the great city and the individual are connected through a key-element - language:

"Language is so important. Up to this time my relationships had been with women who knew little English and of whose language I frequently knew nothing. These affairs had been conducted in a type of pidgin; they were a strain; I could never assess the degree of complication we had arrived at after the sexual simplicities. Once this had been glamorous and had suited me; now it was *like entering an imperfect world*, some grotesque tunnel of love, where, as in a dream, at a critical moment one is denied the use of arms and legs and longs to cry out." (Naipaul, 2001:53, emphasis added)

Language proves to be vital to social relationships; communication cannot occur in translation, because something will always get lost and this could be fatal for personal relationships. This is perhaps one of the reasons why Ralph Singh will marry a white woman, Sandra, an exotic character herself, who paints her breasts and thus turns into a different kind of mimic, taking up traditions which are not her own. By this act of inter-racial marriage, Ralph Singh does not want to become white (see Frantz Fanon, 1967:47); due to his education, he already is. The issue is no longer that of conquering the white world he feels so distant from his own identity. This is one crucial difference between the colonial and the postcolonial individual: one no longer needs to fight for recognition, not in the desperate grasp of the colonized.

London will fail to provide a new home for the new immigrant: we read nothing about cultural revelations, his education or his English friends. The city has no face for the immigrant, no details are provided to make it visible. His only friends are immigrants like himself, sad faces in a gloomy atmosphere, overburdened by daily life. Promiscuity will define his life in the great city, lurking behind the faces of foreign girls or mediocre prostitutes. Only when facing this kind of life is he aware of the fact that "I could not, like many of my fellow exiles, live in a suburban semi-detached house; I could not pretend even to myself to be part of a community or to be putting down roots." (Naipaul, 2001:13). His dream of finding in London both the order of things and a new place to call home will eventually be shattered, so that he cannot but go back to the island, together with the newly-acquired wife. It is this new person that Ralph's mother sees for the first time at the airport:

"[W]e are a melodramatic race and do not let pass occasions for public display. Picture, then, Sandra in her carefully chosen disembarkation outfit coming face to face with a conventionally attired Hindu widow. Picture her mistaking the raised arms and the first wail for a ritual of welcome and, out of a determination to meet strange and ancient customs half-way, concealing whatever surprise and bewilderment she might have felt; then, with the wail broken only to be heightened, the gestures of distress converted explicitly into gestures of rejection, realizing the nature of her reception, hesitating in her already tentative approach to the frenzied figure of my

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mother, and finally standing still, the centre now of a scene which was beginning to draw a fair audience of dockworkers roused from their languor, passengers, visitors, officials, the crews of ships of various nations." (Naipaul, 2001:62).

The Lure of Colonial Life on an Island

The encounter between two different civilizations and the misinterpretation of cultural codes are humorously captured in one breathtaking sentence. An English wife is not exactly what Ralph's mother was expecting, and she does not hesitate to show it. The arrival to the island coincides, however, with a new discovery: everything around has been modernized, while the old "haphazard, disordered and mixed society" (Naipaul, 2001:66) seems to be only a bad dream. Yet, even if a new context is to be provided for this new beginning, the marriage to Sandra will fail. Bruce King recognizes in her a sort of pattern, failing, like any individual might, in her attempts to become a "person of the world":

"Rejecting her family, she aspires to fame in London, fails her university examinations and with no hope for the future attaches herself to Singh and finds herself adrift and without purpose on Isabella, where everything and everyone seem third rate to her. She is herself a forerunner of Linda, Bobby and Jane, expatriates in Naipaul's novels who were unsuccessful in their own country." (King, 2003:73).

Expatriates do not need to be hybrids in search of their identity and Sandra does enjoy the "privilege of the expatriates" (as Robert Nixon would put it, cf. 1992:22-24). She leaves when she actually chooses to, the image reminding Ralph of the *Casablanca* sadness. Ralph will give the marriage a last try, building a Roman house. The welcome-party proves to be a failure, everything smashed up by the drunken guests, an image reminding of the Jazz Age and F. Scott Fitzgerald: the same decaying yet glamorous atmosphere, the same individuals drifting in search of some sort of achievement. Ralph blames it on the rented house they live in, which cannot provide the feeling of home. Still, none of the houses he inhabits can grant him that feeling: as a child he fears (even has nightmares!) for no real reason that the house he lives in will fall apart due to rain. After a storm, he rushes home, convinced that the house could no longer be standing. Nor has the first house he inhabits in London a better destiny: it will be turned into a whorehouse, a place where anonymous people hiding from their real identities parade. Ralph's feeling of displacement will trigger the impossibility of peopling a place. The individual's inner insecurity will shatter the real walls of a personal shelter, so that he is forced to start anew every time.

After an instable London life and a chaotic marriage, Ralph Singh attempts a political career together with his former colleague Browne, at the *Socialist* newspaper. This is Ralph's last form of rebellion. He is, however, forgetful of the fact that his father had already attempted to play the role of the spiritual leader, taking on the name of Gurudeva and turning into an odd mixture between Che Guevara and Mahatma Gandhi. Like everything in his life so far, politics will also prove to be a failure. We are not provided with details about the party, only with disparaged events finally triggering his expulsion from the island. He will be on the road again, heading once more towards England and towards a home he cannot call his own. Like previously, he will choose to live in a remote hotel, hiding behind the anonymity it can confer and behind the book he is struggling to write. The continuous search for a place of his own will come to a momentary end: no matter where he goes, he cannot recover his roots. For Ralph Singh, a place has little to do with spatial location (see also Bill Ashcroft, 2001:13-14); it rather has to do with family, community – a shared culture he is unable to find.

Ralph Singh's personal history reduces him to the rather stereotypical postcolonial image: born in the wrong place, taking up traditions other than his own, tracing back a past which should offer him some sort of consolation and playing with different versions of the

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self. Because of his inability to relate to his past, he cannot find his place no matter where he lives. London fails to provide the feeling of order he is desperately looking for, causing yet another rift in an already torn individual. Thus, he will complete the gallery of Naipaul's characters: early postcolonials defined by their strange choice in favour of displacement after a short search for wholeness. Frustrated by his designated place in life, Ralph Singh will hide behind the tempting act of writing, with totally unclear outcomes, however. He will probably fail in this attempt as well, as he lacks the determination the postcolonial world requires. Freshly unglued from colonial life, he is not ready to enjoy the privileges of postcolnialism, since he refuses to perceive multiculturalism as a real solution. To Ralph Singh, clear definitions of the self are the only viable variants in a world dominated by shifting identities.

This will also be the case of Santosh, the main character in the short story *One out of Many* (included in the volume *In a Free State*). This is the apparently simple story of an Indian servant who, although enjoying a good social position in India as a domestic, decides to follow his employer to the United States of America. The differences become visible as soon as he embarks on the plane:

> "When we settled down I looked around for people like myself, but I could see no one among the Indians or the foreigners who looked like a domestic. Worse, they were all dressed as though they were going to a wedding and, brother, I soon saw it wasn't they who were conspicuous. I was in my ordinary Bombay clothes, the loose long-tailed shirt, the wide-waisted pants held up with a piece of string. Perfectly respectable domestic's wear, neither dirty nor clean, and in Bombay no one would have looked. But now on the plane I felt heads turning whenever I stood up." (Naipaul, 2002:18).

The Strangeness of the Big City

Santosh decides to behave naturally. To him, it is the others who look inappropriate, with their fine clothes they would otherwise have worn only on special occasions. Yet, leaving one's country seems special occasion enough, as he is the only one who takes pride in his poverty. In this new world, he has no notion of the things surrounding him: he asks for champagne thinking that it is a type of juice, chews *betel* until he sees that he cannot spit it anywhere, spreads around his bundles in order to make a cozy bed for himself – all this in front of an outraged stewardess. He sees nothing wrong with his behavior, as this has always been his way and he has never fallen out of pattern. Now this new, strange world has come along, imposing a new code of behavior which he perceives as unnatural. What the character does not realize is that he has been taken out of his familiar context and sent into the new world by his own will.

However, the new world does not seem to be the postcolonial dream; it is not the "voyage in" that Edward Said speaks about in *Culture and Imperialism* (see Said, 1994:295), but rather an untranslatable chaos:

> "For the people of Washington it was late afternoon or early evening. I couldn't say which. The time and the light didn't match, as they did in Bombay. Of that drive I remember green fields, wide roads, many motor cars traveling fast, making a steady hiss, hiss, which wasn't at all like our Bombay traffic noise. I remember big buildings and wide parks; many bazaar areas; then smaller houses without fences and with gardens like bush, with the hubshi standing about or sitting down, more usually sitting down, everywhere. Especially I remember the hubshi. I had heard about them in stories and had seen one or two in Bombay. But I had never dreamt that this wild race existed in such numbers in Washington and were permitted to roam so freely. O father, what was this place I had come to?" (Naipaul, 2002:21).

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The former servant does not even have the right words to describe this fresh and strange reality: American stores are defined as *bazaars*, the traffic sounds differently due to its speed, while hippies are seen as an alien race (and, later on, Indian mystics) which should be legally controlled. He cannot do anything but ask for help; as it cannot be provided, he takes up (or rather refuses to give up) his Indian habits, sleeping on the floor in front of the room. He does not stop wondering, filtering everything through his naïve eyes: all the people on the streets wear shoes, everyone is dressed up as if no one rememberes how to behave naturally anymore, and their language is a "sort of gibberish" (Naipaul, 2002:25).

Santosh does not stop for a moment to question his own views, because they are his own. They were natural in India, the place he comes from. The assumption is right and he knows that he must be right, since it is the only perception of life he and his world have. It sounds very logical: if you dress nicely, it must be a special event. He will roam through the streets of Washington, trying to understand and process what he sees, but ends up spending all his money in one day, forgetting that it were not *rupees* he was giving out. And because this new world cannot, in any way, relate to him, he stays most of the time in doors, smokes his Indian grass and watches commercials. All that becomes his single means of communication with the outside world, and will also trigger a Narcissistic response: Santosh starts looking at himself in the mirror, even goes out and buys a new suit which he will never wear, keeping it in its box, perhaps waiting for the proper occasion.

There will, however, be no proper occasion, since his world is rather limited: he refuses to leave the house, to look at the people surrounding him or to speak their language. There are no clear images of Washington, because this is "the immigrants view of the capital of the world, the view of a man from another, enclosed culture." (Hamilton qtd. in Jussawalla, 1997:19). Both Santosh and Ralph Singh refuse the reality of the city; it is not their aim to be assimilated. They willingly choose to keep their individuality, as opposed to the gains of postcolonialism. Multiculturalism is not an option, since it levels and uniformizes. This is the main aspect they want to avoid, even if it involves building a reality of their own.

Recreating Home

Santosh will soon leave his old master, as he meets an Indian who has opened up a restaurant: they become friends and he will stay to work for better money. Yet, he will make another "Indian" mistake: he will name his new friend, out of an old habit, *sahib*. In the new context of the American world, this proves to be the wrong word. Both men are, however, trapped in the "old ways": Priya answers back. This proves that, though the cultural context in which one lives changes, memory follows its own course and old habits do come to light: if one works for a man, one calls him *sahib* – this is the Indian way and the confused American culture has no influence upon these proud men. Even if his new life is better (he enjoys a whole room to himself, not just a cupboard!), he still hides - this time from his old employee. Santosh's life in America basically comes down to hiding, either from persons or from the new ways he refuses to embrace. Novelty proves to be too much. Discussions about the green card are too pragmatical for his taste, even if, in the end, he will make this compromise and marry the maid he knows. Nevertheless, this will not change his way of living:

> "Its smells are strange, everything in it is strange. But my strength in this house is that I am a stranger. I have closed my mind and heart to the English language, to newspapers and radio and television, to the pictures of hubshi runners and boxers and musicians on the wall. I do not want to understand or learn any more. I am a simple man who decided to act and see for himself, and it is as though I have had several lives." (Naipaul, 2002:53).

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The Indian servant has become free but "in terms of his inner self trapped and debased" (King, 2003:93), since freedom "assumes a consensus of values and therefore of culture" (King, 2003:94). It is this consensus that he cannot acknowledge. Even if, for most immigrants, Santosh's new life would translate as postcolonial heaven, to him it is one more burden that he refuses to carry. He had no expectations when he first came to Washington. As his life there unfolds, one realizes that what he had hoped to find was home and a reality to come with it. It is not that he cannot adapt – he learns English well, meets people who like him and even starts to dress accordingly –, but he refuses to become yet another postcolonial in this confusing world. His old values, no matter how few, are necessary for him to go on, even if this implies a solitary life.

Drifting through Postcolonialism

Ralph Singh and Santosh portray two different attitudes towards the encounter with the new world: as a child, Ralph was educated in an English manner, so that his dreams can be but of Englishness and England. His encounter with the new reality does not involve encountering and accommodating difference, because this world has always been perceived as familiar. Although the metropolitan city fails to fulfill his dreams, this only happens because his dreams are vaguely shaped. In Santosh's case, we have an uneducated Indian, unprepared for newness and thus unable to deal with it. It is not an issue of trying to adapt, because nothing in his code of culture proves to be wrong. The metropolis, vaguely pictured as a better place, will prove horrendous, an immense mixture of everything, where races are mistaken for each other. On the pavement, the blacks who were protesting in Washington write "Soul Brother": "I understand the words; but I feel, brother to what or to whom?" (Naipaul, 2002:53). The individual has lost any significance or value and has turned into a consumer. Thus, Santosh cannot even become the desired hybrid: he lacks the notions and codes of any culture but his own and, in the end, refuses any attempt at understanding what is different and retires into silence.

The refusal to adapt is the final statement these characters make in the postcolonial confusion. Ralph Singh and Santosh are both colonial subjects lost in the postcolonial reality, who cannot recreate the idea of home or adjust to the hybrid facets of the new surroundings. They will drift towards the centre, but will refuse its gifts, clinging to old definitions of the self. It is these drawer-like definitions they will seek to avoid until the very end.

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