

THE MIMIC MEN: IN SEARCH OF IMAGINED IDENTITIES

Oameni mimetici: în căutarea identităților imaginare

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Abstract: The article aims to identify the ways of constructing migrant identities within the postcolonial context of V. S. Naipaul's The Mimic Men. In the fragmented and chaotic postcolonial world the characters feel estranged from the world around them and experience a crisis of identity which leaves them hollowed and unable to reinvent themselves.

Keywords: postcolonialism, identity, displacement, hybridity, mimicry

V.S. Naipaul's novels are emblematic for the ages of pos-colonialism and post-modernity by the diversity of the intercultural images, discourses and dialogues that they approach. The endeavor that Naipaul embarks upon is the identification of an ideal space for anchoring the identity of the postcolonial, postmodern spirit. This perpetual and never-ending search is like a dream whose purpose is never completely reached and whose direction is permanently changed in an eternal search.

Displacement, the source of this permanent search, is a general human experience that takes different forms in Naipaul's writings: the migration to the metropolis that brings along geographical, historic and cultural dislocation; the experience of the exile that results in alienation from the social and cultural environment; the cultural mimetic experience which produces that hybrid space to which Homi Bhabha refers to, a *Third Space*¹, which is neither the *Self*, nor the *Other*, and which leads to estrangement from one's own identity, but which proposes new ways for defining it.

Homi Bhabha's 'hybrid displacing space' incorporates both the indigenous and the colonized cultures, and challenges the authority and the authenticity of the imposed imperial culture.² This third space "enables other positions to emerge...displaces the histories that

¹ Homi Bhabha, "Postcolonial Criticism", pp. 57-58 in S. Greenblatt & G. Gunn (Eds.), Redrawing the boundaries: The transformation of English and American literary studies, Modern Language Association, New York, 1992

² Ibid

constitute it and sets up new structures of authority.”³ Robert Young argues that hybridity, “can never *be* third because as a monstrous inversion, a mis-created perversion of its progenitors, it exhausts the differences between them.”⁴ Consequently, this intermediary space between cultures becomes problematized, a fact that can explain Naipaul’s vision regarding hybridity: both as a negative consequence of the experience of colonialism, and as a positive one by its protean character of generating new identities within a new cultural space that accommodates alterity and otherness.

The perpetual movement between the origin culture and that of adoption interrogates the meaning of the notion of *home*, which becomes ambiguous. The way the individual refers to the new space is through a perpetual dual movement that accommodates both alienation, the feeling of not-belonging in a space that is negatively perceived and ascribes him a marginal identity, as well as his placement in an ideal space of becoming, usually associated with the centre, the metropolis. Naipaul resorts to this dual dialectic – utopia-dystopia- both in the description of space, of postcolonial identity, as well as of social and political elements (in *The Mimic Men* we have this perpetual oscillation between utopian and dystopian representation of the fictitious island called Isabella and of the metropolis- London- where the main character retreats in his attempt to recover his identity). The result is a hybrid space that Foucault defined as *heterotopias*⁵. This bicultural space imposes a dialogic pattern where cultures mirror each other in a non-hegemonic relation.

Naipaul’s vision as regards the colonial and postcolonial experience stems from his own life: he descends from the ethnical group of Indians living in Trinidad, whose ancestors left India to make money and return home, but who ended up by staying there. *Home* is the central space for defining identity and its absence generates the individuals’ displacement and alienation. This is reflected in Naipaul’s writings where home is represented as a crippled existence (Crippleville is the symbolic name given to the residential area that Ralph Singh- the main character of *The Mimic Men*- organized on the island of Isabella), thus suggesting the hollowness of its dwellers. Naipaul actually regards colonialism as an alteration of the culture and self-consciousness of the

³ Rutherford Jonathan, *The Third Space*, “Interview with Homi Bhabha”, in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, p.211

⁴ Robert Young, *Colonial Desire, Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, Routledge, London&New York, 1995, p.23

⁵ Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces* (1967), *Heterotopias*, <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault>

colonized that are presented as victims of social, historic and geographic displacements, which have led to the racial, ethnic, religious and cultural amalgam in the West Indies.

In addition to this, the effects of colonialism are complicated by taking the characters from their origin space and placing them within the central space of the metropolis where they undergo the cultural mimetic experience. As Homi Bhabha shows, this mimetic experience replaces the reality with the desire of identifying with the other and the result is the falsification of self-representation. The fascination with the Western world in *The Mimic Men* is a false mirage which, on the other hand, offers a possible space of identification at the limit between two cultures: that of origin and that of adoption. Thus, the main character in *The Mimic Men*, Ralph Singh, an Indian coming from a fictitious island, Isabella, retreats to a London suburb and starts to write his memories in an effort to structure his chaotic existence. He is faced with his lifetime oscillation between the elements of the colonial binary which are challenged as he realizes that they are only projections of his desire to identify with heroic characters of a mythic India, and on the other side of the divide- his desire to become a real English gentleman. After having failed his marriage with a white woman and his political career on his native island (faced with the challenges of self-governing), Ralph seems to be hallowed of his self-projected identity and actually lives the disillusion and loneliness of postcolonial displaced identities.

The fictitious island of Isabella serves as a background to the story narrated by Ralph Singh. This is a newly independent country in the Caribbean whose people face the challenges of self-governing. As the colonial experience left them with the feeling that they belong to an inferior culture, they try to identify themselves with the empire. However, as they are different from the master in cultural, traditional, racial, and religious backgrounds, they can never successfully associate themselves with the colonizer. They suffer from dislocation, placelessness, fragmentation, and loss of identity. The result is that they become mimic men who imitate and reflect the colonizer's life style, values, and views. Moreover, even though they have won their independence, the postcolonial society fails to offer them a sense of national unity and identity.

Singh, the narrator of *The Mimic Men* embarks upon the endeavor to re-evaluate his life in a hotel room in a London suburb, in the hope of achieving order, as the place in which he was born is associated with chaos: "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).

He does not follow any chronological order (ironically he is in search of 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. The act of writing is also a healing experience as, by the expression and presentation of the events, Singh can reduce the pain of being a displaced colonial man. Only on the level of the text can he take control of the fragments of his past and shape them into a spiritual and psychological autobiography. From the very beginning we are informed that Singh suffers from “genetic” dislocation, which refers to the condition of the East Indians in the Caribbean (he belongs to this minority) who crossed the *kala pani*, black water, and thus, lost their Indianness.

Singh also underwent a similar educational process. 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.”⁶

In the case of Isabella’s inhabitants, this mimicry is further complicated by the experience of “ethnic displacement” which refers to Singh’s status as an Indian in Isabella. As a reaction to this, Singh idealizes his past and wants to reconstruct history to establish his identity. However, he realizes that such a task is impossible and, therefore, he becomes disillusioned. In his attempt to reconstruct the past, Singh is dreaming of India, the land 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*

⁶ Selwyn R. Cudjoe, "V. S. Naipaul: A Materialist Reading". Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988, p.100)

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). On the other hand, he is unable to understand the culture of his origin, Hinduism: he cannot understand the meaning of the act of sacrificing the race horse by his father, an act that was meant to bring about prosperity and fertility. Thus the ideal past gets into contrast with the noble and ideal realm of his imagination. Hindu rituals have lost their meaning in *Isabella* as the people have lost their connection with India, its culture, customs and traditions.

Having failed his cultural identification with his people on the island of *Isabella*, Singh gets involved in the political life. He refers to his political activity as a "drama" and examines its effects on himself and does not concentrate on his people. His 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). However, he fails as a politician as he becomes aware of the meaninglessness of his role as a colonial politician. When nationalization of the sugar estate is proposed as a means of solving the economic problems and bringing peace to the people, Singh is sent to England to carry out the negotiations, but he fails to persuade the English to help his government and is also humiliated by one of the English ministers in the meeting. Thus the representatives of the imperial power impose their superiority on Singh and by refusing to consider Singh as a political figure, they in fact push him to an inferior status, and finally to a sense of political dislocation and failure.

The final remedy that is left to Singh is the migration to the metropolis. He goes to London but he soon realizes that the city does not promise anything to an East Indian colonial subject as he can never identify himself with it. In London, Singh becomes aware of the fact 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.”⁷

Thus his migration to the metropolis brings about his geographical, historic and cultural dislocation, the experience of the exile results in his alienation from the social and cultural environment, and the cultural mimetic experience places him in a hybrid space. If we follow Home Bhabha’s theory of mimicry, the mimic men, ‘poor imitations’ of the Self are nothing but reminders of the former inappropriate colonial subjects whose ambivalence and hybridity challenged and subverted the colonial discourse. Bhabha speaks about a ‘hybrid displacing space’ that incorporates both the indigenous and the colonized cultures, which, as he suggests, challenges the authority and the authenticity of the imposed imperial culture.⁸ Thus, Naipaul’s discourse does not follow the pattern of the colonial discourse, as claimed by E. Said who argues that Naipaul “allowed himself quite consciously to be turned into a witness for the Western prosecution”, promoting what Said classifies as “colonial mythologies about wogs and darkies.”⁹ Naipaul signaling of the hollowness of these characters and their inappropriateness as mere reproductions, imitations of the Self, is a re-writing of the colonial history and its effects on the indigenous people.

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⁷ Louis Simpson, “Disorder and Escape in the Fiction of V. S. Naipaul”, “Hudson Review ” 37:4, 1984, p. 574

⁸ Homi Bhabha, “Postcolonial Criticism”, pp. 57-58 in S. Greenblatt & G. Gunn (Eds.), *Redrawing the boundaries: The transformation of English and American literary studies*, Modern Language Association, New York, 1992

⁹ Edward W. Said (1 March 2002). "Edward Said on Naipaul"

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