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CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN V. S. NAIPAUL'S *THE MIMIC MEN*

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Abstract

This paper demonstrates that V. S. Naipaul's autobiographical novel *The Mimic Men* posits a way of constructing an authentic and dignified identity for a post-colonial individual. This way is self-criticism, decolonization of the mind, and writing. The protagonist Ralph eventually faces and embraces his reality of being a colonized, gains mental independence by breaking the shackles of the epistemological prison he is put in, and reconstructs his fragmented personality by writing his memoirs. While Ralph constructs an independent identity through writing, Naipaul simultaneously constructs an authentic writing style. Writing transforms both Ralph and Naipaul by giving them the chance to create, and in the end they manage to make themselves a home and a whole self in the realm of writing.

Keywords: Naipaul, *The Mimic Men*, construction of identity, decolonization of the mind, authentic post-colonial identity.

Introduction

The Mimic Men, being the autobiographical memoir of a colonial exile politician-writer living as a refugee in the imperial metropolis, is, more than anything else, an embodiment of utopia and dystopia, illusion and disillusion, mystification and demystification, and authenticity and inauthenticity. Indeed, the Nobel Prize winner V. S. Naipaul himself calls it "a book about a vacuum" (Mahood 1977: 187). As all these themes are related to the sense of what is real and what is distortion of reality, this novel is a questioning of whether the world is what we are told it to be. Since such an interrogation is at the heart of *The Mimic Men*, self-examination, self-criticism, self-understanding, self-construction, and historical and spatial consciousness characterize it profoundly. This paper demonstrates that *The Mimic Men* posits a way of constructing an authentic and dignified identity for a post-colonial through decolonization of the mind and writing.

Who am I? Why am I? Where are we? What is the ultimate truth? These are some of the questions every human being asks to find meaning and order in life. In response to these, there are epistemologies, discourses, and national narratives which render some answers. In societies which have not been intruded and colonized for a long time, i.e., in societies which have a sort of order, people might be satisfied with the answers provided to them. However, in lands which have recently undergone colonization, people ask those questions much more consciously, indeed with a double consciousness, because of the alienation and schizophrenia caused by the imposition of the colonizer's truths, values, and metaphysics upon them.

Trinidad and the Caribbean: Double Alienation

Trinidad, the Caribbean island where Naipaul was born and grew up, is a place where overexploitation and colonization has been one of the bloodiest and most barbaric in history. The whole Caribbean had been designed as the backyard of the British and French Empires to produce sugar for the people in Europe. The colonization of that region had begun in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and resulted in the extermination of the indigenous natives Caribs and Arawaks and the transportation of millions of slaves from Africa in death ships through the Middle Passage (the long voyage from Africa to the West Indies). And later on, almost half a

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million mostly South Asians (Indians, Chinese, etc.) were transplanted in the region as indentured laborers in the late nineteenth century in order to continue the sugar plantation business.

The colonial experience of the Africans and Asians of the Caribbean is different from that of the other colonized peoples in the various regions of the world such as Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, Ireland, etc., in the sense that they were at least not separated from their homelands. At least, they were still in the sweet bosom of their motherlands which provided them with a history, a culture, a tradition, a familiar flora and fauna, and a familiar aura, in which they could feel themselves safe although they were also brutally colonized. But the Africans and Asians of the Caribbean were uprooted from their countries and transplanted in a totally alien land in which the only cause for their being there was the whim of the colonial masters who needed slaves to work for them.

Thus if the peoples in Africa and other regions were alienated once, the peoples unnaturally placed in the Caribbean were doubly alienated. They were a mixture of different peoples who were brought together by force just for the benefit of the European white man who only saw them as savages that deserved to be slaves. No matter who they were, where they came from, how they felt, what they believed in, what kind of a world they dreamed of, what hopes about the future they had, in the eye of the white man, they were merely savages and slaves; they were born so and this was their eternal destiny. It was in their genes. They could never become equals of Europeans, the most civilized, evolved, rational, and developed *homo sapiens*. They were created for being served and possessing, the others for serving and being possessed.

Perhaps that's why Robinson Crusoe, who had his island in the Caribbean, dreams of "get[ting] a savage into [his] possession" to make him his servant (Defoe 1995: 152). The savage he dreams of is one from the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean, and later on in the novel, his dream becomes real. The idea that any non-European he comes across is worth only to become his servant and not his friend despite the fact of his living on a lonely island for so long time a life of destitution and solitude suggests that the identities of others and themselves in the mind of Europeans were God-given essences. And interestingly, although Crusoe makes the other Europeans who come to the island his subjects, he signs contracts with them. This indicates that he sees them his equals, but with Friday, the indigenous man, he never believes that he is of the same species as his. *Robinson Crusoe*, published in 1719, is a novel which shows how deep the idea was ingrained in the minds of Europeans that other peoples were genetically and divinely different and lesser than them. It also suggests that after the obliteration of the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean, Europeans would undoubtedly find new servants to work for them. And they *did*. They brought Africans and Asians. Peoples from different lands, histories, cultures, and religions, were brought together just to serve the "sacred," "mythical," and "magical" white man.

Thus, all the Caribbean countries and Trinidad had hybrid, made-up societies, which consisted of individuals doubly uprooted, alienated, exiled, and oppressed. Of course, they were not *countries* until after World War Two. Trinidad got its independence in 1962. It was always the periphery, the margin of the metropolitan Britain, just like all the other colonized lands. But as is the case in many once-colonized countries, and in fact in the whole world, it is still under the hegemony and domination of Western neocolonialist imperialism. And again, as is the case in all the colonized countries, the colonized are made to feel that only the colonizing metropolis has the truth; whatever comes from there is real, valuable and important; it is the place where there is order, wholeness, beauty, art, and common sense; history is made there; knowledge, philosophy, wisdom, science, technology, and novelties are there; it is the home of creators, masters, rulers, patrons, and authorities; it is the center of the world, in brief. How about the other lands and peoples, then? From the colonizer's point of view, they are just the opposite of all these things. As Jamaica Kincaid relates:

When my teacher had pinned this map up on the blackboard, she said, "This is England"—and she said it with authority, seriousness, and adoration, and we all sat up. It was as if she had said, "This is Jerusalem, the place you will go to when you die but only if you have been good." We understood then—we were meant to understand then—that England was to be source of myth and the source from which we got our sense of reality, our sense of what was meaningful, our sense of what was meaningless—and much about our own lives and much about the very idea of us headed that last list. (1991: 33)

It is the colonial metropolis which gives the colonized the "sense of reality" and "meaning". Monopolization and manipulation of knowledge and truth is in the hands of the power which has control over

"the means of communication" (Aschcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1993: 38). Once one believes that reality is elsewhere, he or she loses psychological balance and hope, and becomes alienated. Trinidad and the Caribbean, more than any other geography, are the home of such people who suffer from a sense of being unreal, unimportant, unwholesome, marginal, and meaningless. They feel they are out of history. No doubt, one feels the happiest and most secure in the geography, culture, and society s/he is born into. As Gorra quotes from Isaiah Berlin, "Transplanted flowers decay in unsympathetic climates; so do human beings" (1997: 75).

Naipaul and His World

Naipaul's family is of Indian Brahmin origin. His grandparents had been brought to Trinidad as indentured laborers in the late nineteenth century after the pretentious abolishment of slavery in the 1840s. He is a writer who detests hybridity and "has often expressed dismay at the mixing of things" (Gourevitch 1994: 27). He seems obsessed with origins, essences, and purity. He thinks the thing done in Trinidad and in all the former colonies is violation, that is, mixture of cultures is something that destroys the purity of a culture. Although he knows that a culture can never attain purity, he puts the desire for purity in his characters' psyches, and they always suffer from an awareness that they can never go back to their origins. Apparently, Naipaul is happy with that desire in him although he knows it will never become real. The origins Naipaul longs for are not his Hindu origins, nor his Aryan ones because these identities themselves have never been pure. The origins he has in mind are of a "pure world" where everything was a *tabula rasa*; namely, when things were not fraught with values, prejudices, ideas, meanings made up by human beings; of a "pure time" (Gorra 1991: 374) when "the Nile [was] only water" (Gorra 1997: 94), when there was innocence.

Naipaul is an author who has often put harsh criticism on the post-colonial societies. For instance, his biting remarks about his homeland are notorious: "If you're from Trinidad you want to get away. You can't write if you're from the bush.... I used to spend so much time trying to analyze why the world I was born in was not real" (Phillips 2000: 43). Apparently, the inauthenticity thrust upon the margin by the center makes Naipaul feel that his country, a pure creation of Western colonialism and imperialism, is unreal and therefore inconvenient for the birth of great writers. In an interview, Naipaul says, "Africa has no future" (Phillips 2000: 43). He makes this statement right after visiting some African countries and seeing their dismaying situation after independence. He generalizes this observation for all the Third World countries and furthers his criticism: "These are people who know how to use a telephone but can neither fix nor invent one" (Said 1998: 40).

In response to his criticism, Naipaul has received a lot of bitter criticism from many critics. For instance, Edward Said has "called him a 'scavenger' among the ruins of empire," to which Naipaul has responded that "optimism is easy for those who can catch a plane home and forget what they have seen," and has said, "I do not have the tenderness more secure people can have toward bush people" (Worth 1994: 28). Also, Caryl Phillips has accused him of "inability to hold his own prejudices in check," and commented that "The reappearance of Naipaul's tendency to belittle people and places is disappointing, as is his continued sponsorship of himself as a writer whose passage towards maturity was uniquely difficult" (2000: 43). Derek Walcott, a black Caribbean writer, has produced a series of poems about a person he names V. S. Nightfall. One example would be enough to indicate the intensity of his criticism on Naipaul:

You spit on your people,
your people applaud,
your former oppressors laurel you.
The thorns biting your forehead
are contempt
disguised as concern. (Gorra 1997: 74)

Despite Naipaul's apparently cynical and stabbing comments on the post-colonial societies, he seems to have a sense of responsibility for them. In this respect, an idea that pervades Naipaul's work is his being uncompromisingly against intrusion and imposition by coercion. Evidently, any relationship shaped by coercion gives him great pain. Like the characters in his novels, he seems to be sure that he can never return to the realm of innocence, origins, and essences and that the world has never been pure because of the incessant imposition of one civilization or culture on another. On the other hand, Naipaul's predilection to live in England, the center of the empire, seems to show that he is not against cultural mixture in a natural and disinterested relationship in which there is the mutual acquiescence of cultures. Such a relationship is not based on a hierarchy and does not

cause any disruption. It is the only type of relationship that can secure justice and make one feel responsible for the Other, even to the point of feeling “responsible for [the] very responsibility” of the Other (Levinas 1994: 96). This relationship is based on what I call *the ethics of co-existence*. Indeed, Naipaul himself, in a conversation with Adrian Rowe-Evans, emphasizes the inevitability of responsibility:

One of the terrible things about being a colonial, as I have said, is that you must accept so many things as coming from a great wonderful source outside yourself and outside the people you know, outside the society you've grown up in. That can only be repaired by a sense of responsibility, which is what the colonial doesn't have. Responsibility for the other man. As a colonial, you must first seek to remove yourself from what you know, and become blessed personally, before you can become responsible for others. ... a writer should have a dialogue with his own society. (Rowe-Evans 1997: 195-6)

Evidently, Naipaul is disappointed and unhappy to see the post-colonial societies mimicking the colonialists. The corruption, nepotism, violence, fanaticism, racism, dictatorship, violation of human rights, and many other negative aspects in the Third World are depressing not only for him but also for the peoples living there. To call him a misanthrope would be exaggeration and not seeing the pain he and all the post-colonial writers feel deeply in their souls because of what colonialism and imperialism did to their sweet homelands, themselves, and their societies. What saddens him the most is the inability of the post-colonials to achieve authenticity and originality and their continuing to be mimic men with the complacency of being real.

In this respect, Naipaul is a writer preoccupied with the question of how to create an independent self. He has responded to this question by writing a lot of books. Despite his insistence on claiming to be someone without a home, a country, a state, a society, “In filling a shelf of his own, [he] has laid claim to his place in the world, has built himself a home” (Gorra 1997: 95). He has created a self at the expense of abandoning his homeland, his family, and his friends. And he has achieved to become an independent ‘individual’ as in the last phase of Hindu Brahmanical process of life, which requires living without any attachments. Similarly, the protagonist of *The Mimic Men*, Ralph Singh, describes his life as the embodiment of “...the fourfold division of life prescribed by our Aryan ancestors,” and adds, “I have been student, householder and man of affairs, recluse” (Naipaul 1967: 300).

The Mimic Men: a Narrative of Constructing an Authentic Post-colonial Identity

Ralph Singh, the forty-year-old narrator-protagonist of *The Mimic Men*, being from a formerly colonized Caribbean island which has recently taken its independence, decides to write his memoirs about his painful experience. *Pain* is the word to describe what has taken hold of his soul. From the beginning of the novel to the end, it is always with him and normally one who reads the novel would label it ‘melancholic,’ ‘gloomy,’ and ‘pessimistic.’ The experience the peoples in the Caribbean have gone through can only be a history of their persecution, oppression, extermination, enslavement, uprooting, dehumanization, humiliation, degrading, and discrimination by the European colonial powers. Ralph, as a representative of the Caribbean peoples, feels he does not have a history, a background, a past, a pedigree, a character, and authenticity on which he can base himself. He feels he does not belong to anywhere, including the Caribbean, because of his uprootedness. In short, he suffers from a deep identity crisis and a lack of a sense of belonging.

The novel covers the pre- and post-World War II periods, at the end of which, most of the Caribbean countries got their independence. The story is about Trinidad, but Naipaul has preferred to use the name Isabella instead. In fact, Ralph himself is a disguised copy of Naipaul because his life, as depicted in the novel, is very similar to Naipaul's. At the end of the novel, the narrator states that this memoir was written between 1964 and 1966, the early post-independence days of Trinidad, which “from soon after its seizure by the British in 1802 until four years before its independence in 1962, was a Crown Colony, the most dependent of dependencies” (Mahood 1977: 143).

Ralph begins his narrative depicting his first arrival in London for his studies, “shortly after the end of the war,” and the “boarding-house, called a private hotel, in the Kensington High Street area,” where he began to live (Naipaul 1967: 7). He is writing his memoir at this private hotel, where he has been provided with a rickety wretched table for his act of writing. We learn that he can never have a settled life and house; his destiny somehow binds him to homelessness. What he feels is emptiness, nothingness, darkness, despair, despondency, chaos, disorder, meaninglessness, insecurity, and horror! Later on, at the end of the novel we see him as an experienced and mature person who thinks his only home is his imagination and writing.

When we first experience something, we often cannot understand it entirely right away. Only after reflecting on it for a while, we understand both the experience and ourselves. Furthermore, after we share something that is disturbing us with others, we feel relieved. It is like confessions. Ralph, being overwhelmed with such sad sentiments, tries to find a stable ground or reality where he could feel safe. In fact, this is one of the most important reasons for his going to London. When he was in colonial Isabella, they were brainwashed by the nonstop imposition of the imperial center that they were nothing without the empire. They, their world, their actions, their feelings, their lifestyles, and their values were unreal. The real, essential, and eternal world was out there in the metropolis. But after he arrives in London, he sees that London, too, is marked by constant change. While escaping from the chaos and disorder of his colonial Isabella, he gets swamped in the greater disorder of London. After a lot of suffering, he comes to understand that the only way out for him is writing about his experience, memoirs and confessions. And only after that he starts to see an order in his life. His writing becomes his sweet home. Just like Naipaul, he feels writing is life, and life, writing. He achieves to create a real self, a real identity, not a mimic man, only through his writing. His writing gives him the chance to make a journey to his past, construct an order in his life, and create a history, memory, and character for himself. He is no longer the *tabula rasa* that is imposed on by the outside forces. As he reveals on the last pages of the novel:

It does not worry me now, as it worried me when I began this book, that at the age of forty I should find myself at the end of my active life. I do not now think this is even true. I no longer yearn for ideal landscapes and no longer wish to know the god of the city. This does not strike me as loss. I feel, instead, I have lived through attachment and freed myself from one cycle of events. It gives me joy to find that in so doing I have also fulfilled the fourfold division of life I prescribed by our Aryan ancestors. I have been student, householder and man of affairs, recluse. My life has never been more physically limited than it has been during these last three years. Yet I feel that in this time I have cleared the decks, as it were, and prepared myself for fresh action. It will be the action of a free man. What this action will be I cannot say....So writing, for all its initial distortion, clarifies, and even becomes a process of life. (Naipaul 1967: 300-301)

The Mimic Men can be considered an autobiographical *bildungsroman* because it narrates the life of a young man who creates a self as the culmination of his psychological, intellectual, and moral development. The way Naipaul handles his material as a *bildungsroman* is not a linear procession of events. He does not begin with Ralph's childhood; he begins with a glimpse of his student days in London, comes to the present, goes to his childhood, comes to the present, and so on. This is a circular notion of history, and the important thing is the idea, not the technical tools like plot, setting, characterization, etc. Such a style of writing is an act of subverting the petrified codes of the empire and achieving authenticity. Undoubtedly, the motive to establish difference with the imperial standards this way, using textual strategies of subversion, is characteristic of almost all post-colonial writers. In short, when Ralph constructs an independent self and identity, Naipaul simultaneously constructs an independent and authentic writing style.

Homi Bhabha—through the paraphrase of the authors of *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory*—propounds that “English literature is full of ‘mimic men’, including...Ralph Singh in Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*. These characters are not to be read in terms of colonial dependency but in terms of mockery, parody, and menace: a disruption of colonial authority” (Childs and Williams 1997: 131). Indeed, as I illustrate through textual evidence below, the protagonist of *The Mimic Men* satirizes, criticizes, and mocks both his own colonial homeland and the center of the empire.

The novel gives us a portrait of the colonized (especially Caribbean), who is stricken by schizophrenia, alienation, identity crisis, and all the other catastrophes I have mentioned earlier, on a small scale, and maybe a portrait of the marginalized in all human societies, on a larger scale. In addition, it offers a way of salvation, as Naipaul's novel *A Way in the World* suggests. I will discuss that portrait and the salvation in as much detail as I can, walking in the steps of the narrator-protagonist Ralph Sing. This will provide us with a picture of how difference and identity have been constructed in *The Mimic Men*.

At the beginning of the novel, Ralph describes his boarding-house life. Although Mr. Shylock, his Jewish landlord, is married, he has taken a mistress with whom he now and then meets in the attic of the hotel. One day, after Mr Shylock died, Ralph walks up the stairs to his room while it is snowing:

A mattress, a writing-table. Had there been more while Mr Shylock lived? Such a distinguished man, so carefully dressed; and this his room, the scene of his pleasure. I opened the drawer of

the writing-table. An identity card, fuzzy at the edges. Mr Shylock's: his neat signature. A creased photograph of a plumpish girl in a woolen skirt and a jumper. The photographer's hand had shaken, so that the photograph, like the photograph in some magazine article on great events, seemed rare, as of a person who would be photographed no more. An innocent, unarresting face, untouched by the wonder which vice and the word 'mistress' ought to have given it. She stood in a back garden. The house behind her was like its neighbours. Her familiar home: I sought to enter it in imagination, to re-create the moment—an early summer Sunday afternoon perhaps, just before lunch—when the photograph was taken. Not by Mr Shylock surely? Brother, father, sister? Here anyway it had ended, that moment, that impulse of affection, in an abandoned room among the chimneypots of what to the girl from the back garden must have seemed like a foreign country. (Naipaul 1967: 9-10)

The girl has “an innocent, unarresting face, untouched by the wonder which the vice and the word ‘mistress’ ought to have given it.” Ralph seems touched by the innocence of the girl’s face and he is disturbed by the idea of her being a “mistress” because that means impurity and violation. “Her familiar home” is something he himself lacks, and therefore, he envies her. He is so much obsessed with the idea of a home that he tries “to enter it in imagination, to re-create the moment...,” and he cannot accept that the photograph might have been taken by Mr Shylock because that would again invoke in him the sense of violation. He rather complacently prefers to assert that it was taken by a “brother, father, [or] sister,” in order not to stigmatize the girl. Apparently, at the back of his mind, there is his own sense of his colonial violation and impurity.

Eventually, with all the ambivalence in his feelings, he cannot find solace in the photograph any more. The illusion of having a home is immediately dissolved when he remembers that London, the place where he had put great expectations on, could not be a home to him:

I thought I should preserve the photograph. But I left it where I had found it. I thought: let it not happen to me. Death? But that comes to all. Well, then, let me leave more behind. Let my relics be honoured. Let me not be mocked. But even as I tried to put words to what I felt, I knew that my own journey, scarcely begun, had ended in the shipwreck which all my life I had sought to avoid. (Naipaul 1967: 10)

Why shipwreck? Because wherever he goes, even if that be the center of the so-called reality, originality, purity, and magnanimity, it is all illusion. Intimacy destroys illusion and enchantment, as Ralph reflects: “Intimacy...was violation and self-violation” (Naipaul 1967: 30).

After this graphic memoir, Ralph, explains why he has started writing this book:

A sombre beginning. It could not be otherwise. These are not the political memoirs which, at times during my political life, I saw myself composedly writing in the evening of my days. A more than autobiographical work, the exposition of the malaise of our times pointed and illuminated by personal experience and that knowledge of the possible which can come only from a closeness to power. (Naipaul 1967: 30)

His metafictional comment “A sombre beginning. It could not be otherwise,” tells us much about his illusions and disillusion. But what is the “malaise of our times”? Evidently, Ralph is referring to the post-independence post-colonial condition, and he names it malaise. Why malaise? Because the formerly colonized lands which gained independence could not make a fresh beginning. They just mimicked their colonial masters. And after all, independence was just a formality. Those countries continued to be dependent on the empire. He depicts this dependence vividly: “Industrialization, in territories like ours, seems to be a process of filling imported tubes and tins with various imported substances. Whenever we went beyond this we were likely to get into trouble” (Naipaul 1967: 258).

In this respect, Ralph comments on the degenerate politics in such countries in striking words:

I know that return to my island and to my political life is impossible. The pace of colonial events is quick, the turnover of leaders rapid. I have already been forgotten; and I know that the people who supplanted me are themselves about to be supplanted. My career is by no means unusual. It falls into the pattern. The career of the colonial politician is short and ends brutally. We lack order. Above all, we lack power, and we do not understand that we lack power. (Naipaul 1967: 10)

So there is a "pattern" that characterizes "the colonial politician." They are impotent and disorganized, but they are not aware of it. The reason why they are diseased with such complacency must be their lack of self-examination and self-criticism. They are doomed to lose, as Ralph observes, "For those who lose, and nearly everyone in the end loses, there is only one course: flight. Flight to the greater disorder, the final emptiness: London and the home counties" (Naipaul 1967: 11). He himself is also a loser who has followed the same pattern. The metropolis, which they had known as the embodiment of order and meaning, turns out to be "the greater disorder" and "the final emptiness."

Seeing that there is no so-called purity of cultures or identities even in the center of the world, that it is impossible to return to one's origins because there are no origins, and that reality is not as it is represented, he is convinced that he cannot change his non-existent past. What he has is the present vacuum, nothingness, and futility. But there is a way. He can make history out of what he has. This vacuum is after all completely his. By interpreting and writing about it, he can have a sense of belonging to a world, even if it will be in imagination. This is how Ralph constructs his identity:

My present urge is, in the inaction imposed on me, to secure the final emptiness. I have seen much snow. It never fails to enchant me, but I no longer think of it as my element. I no longer dream of ideal landscapes or seek to attach myself to them. All landscapes eventually turn to land, the gold of the imagination to the lead of the reality. I could not, like so 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. I prefer the freedom of my far-out suburban hotel, the absence of responsibility; I like the feeling of impermanence. I am surrounded by houses like those in the photograph I studied in Mr Shylock's attic, and that impulse of sentimentality embarrasses me. I scarcely see those houses now and never think of the people who live in them. I no longer seek to find beauty in the lives of the mean and the oppressed. Hate oppression; fear the oppressed. (Naipaul 1967: 13-4)

By "secur[ing] the final emptiness," which is a bare dystopia, and which is the only element he owns, he gives up all his earlier utopias such as the "ideal landscapes" of his Aryan ancestors, of whom he dreams to be the 'shipwrecked' leader, a nation, a society, a homeland, a home, and "roots." "Snow," which he considered his "element," because of its abundance on the mountains of his Aryan ancestors, is no longer his favorite. The homelessness and state of having no roots in the physical world become his very home and roots. There is no point in being immersed in the calamities brought upon the colonized peoples. Why not leave it and get potent out of the present impotence?

Through a flashback to his student years, Ralph describes how fluid a personality he had. He implies he had no character in those days:

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. In fact my income was small, and the allowance I had fixed for myself was half of this; I didn't think I could be happy spending without earning. (Naipaul 1967: 24)

He is able to wear whatever mask he wishes or whatever mask he is wished to wear. It seems "role-playing ... is a defense against disturbance" (Mahood 1977: 172). He becomes "the dandy" because it was what he found the "easiest" and "most attractive." He is a faceless "colonial," not a man "who mimic[s] but a mimic of a man" (Gorra 1997: 88). He sees himself as someone without any "guide," someone lost in an unknown place without any sense of direction. Being in position of someone who is questioning and assessing his earlier life before he began to write this book, he makes an insightful observation about himself and all human beings: "We become what we see of ourselves in the eyes of others" (Naipaul 1967: 25). Indeed, this is very true because we human beings are social beings. We get meaningful when we pay attention to the Other. It is the human face that makes us get involved with the Other and try to become someone the Other's face will approve. We cannot remain silent in the presence of the Other: "It is necessary to speak of something, of the rain and fine weather, no matter what, but to speak, to respond to him and already to answer for him" (Levinas 1994: 88). However, this kind of relationship is based on a mutual preservation of the dignity of both the interlocutors. However, at that time of his life, Ralph considers himself as someone who has no sense of dignity.

Having no principles and no self-esteem, being ashamed of one's innate identity, and idealization and idolization of places other than one's home makes one a mimic man lost in the darkness of uncertainties. What you can by no means change or construct and reconstruct about yourself is your essential or innate identity. Such elements as sex, parents, hair color, eye color, skin color, place of birth, time of birth, etc., are what constitute this identity over which we have no control. Denial or degradation of this identity does not mean anything, and the result is destruction. Ralph, like Naipaul, is a Hindu who has tried to deny this natural identity, and he has found himself in an abyss. On the other hand, we have identities that are shaped by means of our relation to others. These identities can never be essences; they are just stories which make us feel at home in the world. National, cultural, political, economic identities and the like are all man-made constructions that have never been pure.

Ralph's striking remarks below describe his devastated psychology at the crossroads:

Coming to London, the great city, seeking order, seeking the flowering, the extension of myself that ought to have come in a city of such miraculous light, I had tried to hasten a process which had seemed elusive. I had tried to give myself a personality. It was something I had tried more than once before, and waited for the response in the eyes of others. But now I no longer knew what I was; ambition became confused, then faded; and I found myself longing for the certainties of my life on the island of Isabella, certainties which I had once dismissed as shipwreck. Shipwreck: I have used this word before. With my island background, it was the word that always came to me. And this was what I felt I had encountered again in the great city: this feeling of being adrift, a cell of perception, little more, that might be altered, if only fleetingly, by any encounter. (Naipaul 1967: 32)

He feels totally lost. He confesses that, because of his disrupted Hindu background, he always felt shipwrecked in Isabella, an alien territory he could never feel his. But in London, too, he feels shipwrecked and even much more wretched. His great disillusionment with London seems to ingrain in him the idea that he can eventually discover his real self and be reconciled with Isabella. This feeling is a turning point in his restless soul. It seems, for understanding to occur, trauma is indispensable. And panic, too. But:

Not the panic of being lost or lonely; the panic of ceasing to feel myself as a whole person. The threat of other people's lives, the remembered private landscapes, the relationships, the order which was not mine. I had longed for largeness. How, in the city, could largeness come to me? How could I fashion order out of all these unrelated adventures and encounters, myself never the same, never even the thread on which these things were hung? They came endlessly out of the darkness, and they couldn't be placed or fixed. And always at the end of the evening the book-shaped room, the tall window, myself sitting towards the light or towards the mirror. The signs were all there. The crash was coming.... (Naipaul 1967: 33)

The "crash" is the trauma and it is good. For someone having such deep identity crises, it is inevitable to come to grips with reality. Why does he "always at the end of the evening" sit "towards the light or towards the mirror?" In order to understand oneself, an instrument, a parameter, a measure is necessary. Or something by which one can discern oneself. Evidently, Ralph is still trying to understand himself and the light and mirror are symbols indicating that he has turned to himself. He seems to have realized that before understanding anything else, one must understand oneself; that before trying to find order outside, one must find order in oneself; that before searching for reality outside, one must value one's own reality.

Ralph's restlessness continues: "From room to room I moved, from district to district, going ever farther out of the heart of the city. Those houses! That impression of temporary, fragile redness, of habitations set superficially on trampled fields!" (Naipaul 1967: 35) He cannot find peace anywhere. Houses still depress him. But at the end, he finds out that indeed he had an order in Isabella before coming to London. He faces his reality and confesses:

With Liení and Mr Shylock's boarding-house one type of order had gone for good. And when order goes it goes. I was not marked. No celestial camera tracked my movements. I abolished landscapes from my mind.... 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. There was the degree; and then I

wished to go back as whole as I had come. It was two years before I felt strong enough. And then I did not leave alone. (Naipaul 1967: 36)

He decolonizes, decontaminates, and disinfects his "mind." He accepts his reality. He wants to "escape" from the larger disorder which has fragmented his personality that was whole in Isabella. Paradoxically, he thinks of escaping to the place where he had escaped from. He previously had felt that he was "marked" because he was a descendant of Aryans. But that does not mean anything because at the contemporary age he is just a colored colonized. Nobody cares about what ancestry he came from. Fortunately, he comes down to earth and accepts his reality.

As I mentioned earlier, Naipaul is a writer who detests any kind of relationship based on the imposition of a so-called superior culture upon a so-called inferior one. Ralph, like Naipaul, is intransigently against such an unjust contact in which one interlocutor unnaturally and coercively makes the other accept his or her own values. Without the acquiescence or willingness of both the parties, the contact they would have would be just violation. In such a relationship, colonization, subordination, domination, degradation, and dehumanization of the Other is the easiest thing to do. Such a relationship creates victimizer versus victim, dominator versus dominated, subordinator versus subordinated, superior versus inferior, and so on. And even one who has the slightest idea about the human nature and soul knows that the greatest evil for the human soul is to be imposed upon without one's willingness, without the initiative of one's own willpower. This is simply the cause of the greatest pain a human being can experience. This pain is much deeper than the pain of physical torture. And Ralph, with these things in mind, admits that in a period of his life—a period he prefers to put "in parenthesis"—he had dreamed of writing about the horrible experience of the wretched of the earth.¹ In other words, like a responsible historian, he had dreamed of writing about the extremely painful experiences and suffering of the colonized caused by the European colonization and imperialism from the beginning to the present day. However, he feels he could not do that. He explains the reason below:

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 who could achieve fulfilment only within the security of their own societies and the landscapes hymned by their ancestors, it was my hope to give partial expression to the restlessness which this great upheaval has brought about. The empires of our time were short-lived, but they have altered the world for ever; their passing away is their least significant feature. It was my hope to sketch a subject which, fifty years hence, a great historian might pursue. For there is no such thing as history nowadays; there are only manifestos and antiquarian research; and on the subject of empire there is only the pamphleteering of churls. But this work will not now be written by me; I am too much a victim of that restlessness which was to have been my subject. (Naipaul 1967: 38-9)

Ralph thinks that people who write the history of colonialism and imperialism are mostly interested in trivialities like collecting and accumulating antique artifacts in museums and art galleries. By not paying attention to the reality of colonization and imperialism which have changed the world drastically by causing "the overthrow in three continents of established social organizations, the unnatural bringing together of peoples who could achieve fulfilment only within the security of their own societies and the landscapes hymned by their ancestors," one cannot understand the "restlessness" they have created. Without trying to understand the past, we cannot understand the present and ourselves. "The empires of our time were short-lived, but they have altered the world for ever; their passing away is their least significant feature," says Ralph. Physically and militarily, the European colonialist empires all withdrew from most of the territories they had once occupied, but they did not give up their interests in those lands. They had made the colonized peoples heavily dependent on themselves. They had disrupted their sense of reality, their dignity, their natural pace of development, and their idea of who they were. The colonized peoples were forced to believe that they were essentially and divinely created as slaves, servants, and lesser creatures; that their cause of being was to serve the white man who was ontologically the most perfect species on earth; that since the differences between them and the Europeans were God-given, any attempt to change that situation was futile and irrational.

¹ The phrase "the wretched of the earth" is the title of Franz Fanon's famous book he published in 1961.

These empires usurped and carried away the resources and riches of the colonized peoples to their imperial centers, and because of this, in the post-independence period, the colonized countries could never achieve economic self-sufficiency. On top of this, their social organizations, culture, language, religion, customs, and lifestyles were all substantially eroded and replaced by those of the European empires. It was the most destructive kind of unnatural manipulation and social engineering on human beings, and it caused deep wounds in the souls and minds of the colonized. When the colonizers abandoned the colonized lands, they left a class of mimic men—elites—who were educated in their schools and who willingly embraced all the values and culture of the West. They were the ones who would rule their countries in the name of the West. And this took place in reality; that's why even today almost all the world is under the hegemony and economic, political, and intellectual domination of the West. And again that's why the "passing away" of these empires "is their least significant feature."

Thus the reason why Ralph feels he cannot write about the horrible experiences of the colonized is the ineradicable pain in his soul. He cannot write about it because he is "too much a victim of that restlessness." But, although Ralph is the protagonist, this book is an account of that restlessness which has created that sense of chaos and disorder in the psyches of all the colonized. And the motive behind such an endeavor is important to note. It is, as I said before, to construct a new self, a new identity out of that chaos and disorder.

Ralph asserts that a section of his life, i.e., that of his political and matrimonial life, is a period he considers in parenthesis and that he would suppress it as much as he could do, but he cannot because this is also something that belongs only to him and every bit of experience is significant in the construction of a personality and identity. For instance, he tells us that his wife Sandra hates common people although she herself is a commoner (Naipaul 1967: 53). She represents almost all the colonizers who settled in colonies because they were mostly middle-class people like her. In the pyramidal structure of relationships at the heart of colonialism and imperialism, the colonized is at the bottom; on a higher level, we have the settler-colonizer; one level above, the ruler-colonizer; still above, the business classes in the metropolis; and at the top, the aristocrats and the royal family in the metropolis. Thus, although she is just a person of the commonest sort, she carries in herself a seed of imperial habits and discourse of othering, degrading, categorizing, and defining others.

After Ralph's return to and settlement in Isabella with his wife, we see those habits and discourse in practice against everybody non-British. Ralph illustrates this as follows:

The gift of the phrase: she relied on this more and more, letting simple words harden into settled judgements and attitudes. She used the gift to render grotesque the girls whose company she had once sought and whose way of life had delighted her. She turned them into a kind of comic chorus, evolving for each a pejorative racial description. A bulky girl from Amsterdam, married to a man from Surinam who had migrated to Isabella, became a 'subkraut'; the Latvian became, rather tellingly, the 'sub-Asiatic'. I accepted these phrases; and in our household, which had of course its own racial contradictions, I might hear myself saying quite naturally, 'Shall we have the subkraut over to *genever* on Sunday morning?' Or: 'It looks as though the Lapp has forgiven you. She wants you to go to a party she is giving for a bearded fellow-countryman. He is over here collecting voodoo songs to play on the Swedish radio.' (Naipaul 1967: 78)

The petrified racist discourse allows her to categorize different nationalities as she likes. She has "the gift of the phrase," which helps her a lot in judging and labeling people as if the power to define things is something only she possesses. The gift of the phrase seems to be the English language which was codified in accordance with the priorities and privileges of the colonizers and imperialists. After all, languages are also man-made constructions. They are cultural accumulations of the experience and history of the people speaking it. Considered as such, language can become a prison of the mind fortified by prejudices, falsifications, and misrepresentations which make reality something else than itself and which do not allow the speaker get out of this prison. The speaker is obliged to express whatever the prison of language dictates him to utter and the worst thing is that the speaker is not aware of this. A deadening complacency has captivated him or her through language. Another important element that strengthens the throne of language is the society that speaks it because every individual is more or less bound up by the values, images, cultural constructions, significations, and representations valid in the society s/he lives in. A proof of this can be found in these words of Ralph about Sandra: "With every new encounter, every new friend, she fashioned a matching myth of racial niceness. She was never content with the individual as individual; she wished to go beyond...." (Naipaul 1967: 81). As it can be grasped from these

words, the reason why she cannot accept people as they are is the epistemology and discourse imposed on her in the metropolis.

Ralph, in *Isabella*, after he has made a fortune out of estate business, decides to build a big house for himself and his wife. He examines some catalogs of houses to find an appropriate one, and he chooses a Roman house, and he names his house the Roman House. After the construction of the house, they begin to live there. One day,

The men were landscaping. In the afternoon the foreman told me that they had run into the stump and roots of a giant tree; three charges of dynamite had been necessary to get rid of it. He showed me the crater: a monstrous wound in the red earth. A giant tree, old perhaps when Columbus came: I would have liked to have seen it, I would have liked to have preserved it. I kept a piece of the wood on my desk, for the interest, as a reminder of violation, as a talisman. (Naipaul 1967: 72-3)

Ralph's obsession with past, origins, and purity reappears here. As Columbus symbolizes the beginning of intrusion and violation, things existing before he came are still charming for him. He keeps "a piece of the wood on [his] desk" because it is something that symbolizes purity. The word "violation" here is ambiguous. Does it mean the violation done by Columbus and colonizers, or the violation done by the workers "landscaping," or both of them? Such an ambiguity also offers that Ralph might have doubts about the purity of the wood because the word "talisman," which means "an object ... that is believed to have magic powers,"² implies mockery. It is as if he does not believe that there was purity even before Columbus.

While Ralph, his wife, and their friends are enjoying themselves in a party around the swimming pool in the Roman House, their friends suddenly begin to throw a ball to each other and break glasses, plates, and everything around. Ralph gets into "a deep, blind, damaging anger," and "shout[s], scream[s]" and strikes whatever and whoever he finds on his way to outside. He gets in his car and drives away insanely until he comes "to the ruins of the famous old slave plantation" (Naipaul 1967: 88). Feelings fraught with a great density make him melancholic. Storms explode in his soul:

And, oh, I wanted to cry. The damage to the new house: not that. It was not the rage we feel when something new receives a scratch or dent and we feel that it is all destroyed. I had assessed the damage as superficial; in a morning the workmen could mend it. Not that, not that. I just wished to cry. I leaned over the steering wheel and tried to cry, but I couldn't. The pain remained, unreleased, the nameless pain from which one feels there can be no way out, and one knows that despair is absolute.

Weeping because he had no more worlds to conquer. I can enter into those tears of Alexander. They were real tears, but they came from a deeper cause. They are the tears of children outside a hut at sunset, the fields growing dark; they are the tears of men in the middle of great achievement, men who are made weary by a sense of futility, who long to be the first men in the world, who long to do penance for the entire race, because they feel the lack of sympathy between man and the earth he walks on and know that, whatever they might do, this gap will remain. They are the tears of men at the end of their line, who foresee their extinction. But the mood passes. Alexander goes back to his generals, indulgent towards the sensibility they will misinterpret; the child goes inside the hut and the big world is reduced to a small warm sphere. So now, over the wheel of my motorcar, I returned to myself, anger, despair vanished, only a sense of outrage and shame remaining, and the knowledge that this slave plantation was a favourite spot for courting couples as well as rapists and others seeking social revenge. I drove back to the main road, switched on the car radio, and slowly now, driving to music, to cheap old songs, the tears rolled down, quite pleasurably. (Naipaul 1967: 89)

Having a house is not for Ralph because it signifies putting down roots on earth and since the earth has never been pure, this is something he can never do. As I argued before, he feels he can make himself a home in his imagination through writing. He can create a history of himself through writing only because writing itself is his pure belonging and he himself is his writing's pure belonging. But at this phase of his life, the idea of a pure

²<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/talisman>. Access date: 25 May 2015.

time and world still reverberates in his mind. The same old pain circulates through his veins. He is still nothing. He wants to cry, but since even his tears are not real, he cannot. He "can enter into those tears of Alexander" because "they were real tears." He again idealizes and idolizes men "who long to be the first men in the world," the pioneers, the avant-gardes, the originators; but it is the same old story, the same old illusion. "Whatever they might do," the unfriendliness "between man and the earth he walks on...will remain." There is nothing physical on earth that deserves to be made into a transcendental thing. "The world is what it is" (Gourevitch 1994: 27). The trauma ends, "anger, despair vanish," and catharsis follows. "The tears roll down, quite pleasurably." He is freed from all the illusions, enchantments, dependencies, idealizations, idolizations, and essentialisms.

Ralph's account of his childhood is full of implications about the kind of personality a child in Isabella might have:

...childhood was for me a period of incompetence, bewilderment, solitude and shameful fantasies. It was a period of burdensome secrets...and I longed for nothing so much as to walk in the clear air of adulthood and responsibility, where everything was comprehensible and I myself was as open as a book. I hated my secrets. A complying memory has obliterated many of them and edited my childhood down to a brief cinematic blur. Even this is quite sufficiently painful.

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. (Naipaul 1967: 109-10)

On an island, which was the Garden of Eden for Europeans, but inferno for the Africans, Indians, Chinese and other Asians transplanted there and put under constant humiliation, Ralph and the other children of the colonized have many secrets. Naipaul very cunningly puts the word "apple" in Ralph's mouth here to invoke that life in Isabella was a paradise for Europeans but a hell for non-Europeans. A French settler, Mrs. Deschampsneufs' remarks prove this: "...I'm French. But I don't think anyone from Isabella can get on with those people. We are different. This place is a paradise, boy" (Naipaul 1967: 203). This is why Ralph's "memory insists on the apple," although they do not "have apples on Isabella." Another interpretation here might be that since apples exist in Britain, and since reality also resides there, the oranges of Isabella have to be apples. This effaced sense of dignity in his identity shows the degree of his inferiority complex.

As Ralph continues to relate his childhood, we learn that his real name is not Ralph; it is Ranjit Kripalsingh, the word "Kripal" suggesting the idea of being *crippled* (Naipaul 1967: 112). He changes this name into Ralph Singh and signs himself "R. R. K. Singh" in the name of mimicking Deschampsneufs, the son of a famous ex-slave-owner French family on Isabella, who "had five [names] apart from his last name" (Naipaul 1967: 112-3). And when Ralph's secret is disclosed, he simply tells a well-polished lie. Obviously, this portrait is of a boy who is ashamed of his real "inferior" identity which he never wants to reveal. In a place where relationships are based on oppositional binaries such as superior versus inferior, civilized versus primitive, dominator versus dominated, rational versus irrational, etc., people signified by the pejorative side of the binary are doomed to humiliation, inferiority, and, of course, secrets. This negative signification becomes their very identity; i.e., whatever the powerful is, the weaker is not.

Ralph and the 'lucky' children of some 'lucky' families, who could study at Isabella Imperial College, are educated by teachers from the imperial center. Just like their teachers, all other stuff like books, tests, and maps are all sent from the 'real world.' It seems they are the prospective rulers of their countries. Indeed, Ralph and one of his friends, Browne, become politicians in their adulthood and when their party wins the elections they hold the highest posts in the government. Thus they are educated to help the white man with the 'heavy burden' on his shoulders.

Ralph seems never to have digested the idea that there could be a hybrid society in Isabella, even in his childhood. The sense of violation and intrusion never leaves his soul. The peoples unnaturally brought together on a colonial island can never become a *people* according to Ralph. When on a rainy day he and his grandfather have an excursion in the country, they see "people everywhere semi-naked, working barefooted in the mud which discoloured their bodies and faces and their working rags" and when the old man utters the phrase "My people," Ralph gets furious (Naipaul 1967: 118). He cannot stand that phrase because like Naipaul he does not believe that an unnatural creation of *apeople* is possible. Such a thing is double violation in his view.

Throughout the novel, Ralph continues to describe different aspects of Isabella from a critical perspective. For instance, on a weekend family trip through Isabella in his father's old car, he cannot avoid remembering the island's bloody colonial history:

We drove through Carib areas where the people were more Negro than Carib. Ex-slaves, fleeing the plantations, had settled here and inter-married with the very people who, in the days of slavery their great tormentors, expert trackers of forest runaways, had by this intermarriage become their depressed serfs. Now the Caribs had been absorbed and had simply ceased to be. We were not far from the city - the little shops stocked familiar goods and carried familiar advertisements - but it was like being in an area of legend. The scale was small in time, numbers and area; and here, just for a moment, the rise and fall and extinction of peoples, a concept so big and alarming, was concrete and close. Slaves and runaways, hunters and hunted, rulers and ruled: they had, no romance for me. Their message was only that nothing was secure. We drove through abandoned, blighted cocoa estates and my father showed us the beauty of cocoa trees. We came out into the Indian areas, the flat lands where rice and sugarcane grew. My father spoke of the voyage, so recent but already in our strange hemisphere so remote, which the fathers and indeed some of the people we saw had made from another continent, to complete our own little bastard world. (Naipaul 1967: 146)

While driving through "Carib areas" and watching around, he reflects on "the rise and fall and extinction of peoples, a concept so big and alarming" and cannot feel "secure" and at home. Theirs is a "little bastard world" shaped by bloody colonialism.

According to Ralph, such a horrible place as Isabella is out of history and far from the real world. The people of the island are "starved of large events" (Naipaul 1967: 154). That's why when his father starts an ascetic movement by withdrawing to a forest in the mountains with a band of dockworkers who were on strike at the time, this creates some drama on the island. Many people from the lower classes and workers support his father, and many protests, demonstrations, and burnings occur, but the people of the Isabella "secretly longed for the riots and burnings to continue" (Naipaul 1967: 154). These "riots and burnings" give them a feeling that they might also take their place on the scene of history and have an idiosyncratic authentic culture. And "...culture is a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society's reservoir of the best that has been known and thought, as Matthew Arnold put it in the 1860s" (Said 1993: xiii). As they have not had that "reservoir of the best" so far, Ralph's "lunatic" father's movement (Naipaul 1967: 154), which suggests a character and authenticity, becomes a nominee to be culture.

Feeling and making ourselves different is something we have in our nature. In the multiracial and multicultural societies of the Caribbean, this natural sentiment becomes more visible. For instance, Ralph cannot feel as the children of the other communities on the island do. As he describes his relations with his black friend, Browne, and his French friend, Deschampsneufs, we see how he feels differently:

I wasn't sure what Browne required of me. Did he require my sympathy and anger? He insisted on the past and humiliation, but he appeared oddly indifferent to my response. And I didn't know what to say. Sympathy wasn't what I felt. It was more the nausea that came to me when I thought of what had overtaken our family. And just as I entered Deschampsneufs's privacy unwillingly, so I feared to hear more of Browne's interior life. It was not my past. It was not my personality. I lacked the equipment the Browne's carried, that innocence which, with the side of himself he now presented to me, he was trying to suppress. (Naipaul 1967: 173)

Ralph does not want to get involved in the black boy or the French boy's past because his own traumatic past is more than enough for him. And since their "histories" are "intertwined" due to colonialism, as the title of Said's first chapter in *Culture and Imperialism* puts forth, their pain is more or less similar, but it is too much for Ralph (1993: 3). What is more, he feels he, together with his Hindu community, is someone brought to Isabella much later; therefore, he feels himself an intruder who could not and should not engage with the old order between the slave and the master. However, the place where he and his community were brought from was also a colony as is well known.

Now as a refugee-immigrant-politician-writer living in the center of the empire, Ralph, like any other post-colonial writer, feels himself at borders, a position which secures him a vision of belonging to two, three, or more worlds. As we all know, post-colonial writers living in diasporas in metropolitan centers are critical

insiders who impose upon the center from within. Ralph has been exiled to London after a great political failure, which is the normal pattern in the newly independent post-colonial territories because of their inability to create an idiosyncratic and original system of self-government and social, economic, cultural, and educational structures. Now in his mediocre suburban hotel room, he is writing his memoirs, and as Ralph writes, he metamorphoses. His perception of himself, his experience, the world, and people change gradually. He gradually culminates in seeing things through a critical filter. The happenings in his life that he had discarded as unimportant all regain importance and take their honorable place in his narrative. As he asserts:

As I write, my own view of my actions alters. I have said that my marriage and the political career which succeeded it and seemed to flow from it, all that active part of my life, occurred in a sort of parenthesis. I used to feel they were aberrations, whimsical, arbitrary acts which in some way got out of control. But now, with a feeling of waste and regret for opportunities missed, I begin to question this. I doubt whether any action, above a certain level, is ever wholly arbitrary or whimsical or dishonest. I question now whether the personality is manufactured by the vision of others. The personality hangs together. It is one and indivisible. (Naipaul 1967: 219)

His last two sentences are enough to explain how big a transformation is taking place in his personality. He changes from someone who had a lot of secrets to a person who questions all that went past in his life, and finally, to an individual who can make decisions, deductions, and judgments by himself. A metamorphosis from a non-self, possessed by the identities imposed on it, to a self, possessing its own identities.

Writing, as I emphasized before, is the tool that helps Ralph find meaning and order in his restlessness and disorder. In order to appreciate the great development in Ralph, I find it inevitable to listen to his final thoughts:

Fourteen months have passed since, in a room made over-dry by the electric fire, I recreated that climb up the dark stairs to Mr Shylock's attic to look through a snowfall at the whitening roofs of Kensington. By this re-creation the event became historical and manageable; it was given its place; it will no longer disturb me. And this became my aim: from the central fact of this setting, my presence in this city which I have known as student, politician and now as refugee-immigrant, to impose order on my own history, to abolish that disturbance which is what a narrative in sequence might have led me to. (Naipaul 1967: 292)

In the last sentence of this quote, Ralph reveals that his purpose in writing his life story was "to impose order on [his] own history, to abolish that disturbance which is what a narrative in sequence might have led [him] to." He makes it clear that he has created his own way of viewing and recording history, namely, a circular notion of history against the conventional Western linear notion of history. This means, besides creating a new dignified self, he has also subverted a big theory of colonialism and imperialism. As we all know, this theory of linear history has created such prejudiced and deterministic categorizations as civilized, independent, developed, and evolved versus primitive, dependent, backward, and semi-evolved.

In addition, Ralph is aware that writing has become life, memory, history, home, roots, and identity to him:

It never occurred to me that the writing of this book might have become an end in itself, that the recording of a life might become an extension of that life.... I know every line on the wallpaper above my table. I have seen no deterioration, but there is talk of redecorating. And the table itself: when I first sat at it I thought it rough and too narrow. The dark surface was stained and scratched, the indentations filled with grit and dirt; the drawer didn't pull out, the legs had been cut down. It wasn't part of the standard hotel furniture. It had been provided specially; it was a junkshop article, belonging to no one, without a function. Now it feels rehabilitated and clean; it is familiar and comfortable; even the scratches have acquired a shine. This is the gift of minute observation which has come to me with the writing of this book, one order, of which I form part, answering the other, which I create. And with this gift has come another, which I least expected: a continuous, quiet enjoyment of the passing of time. (Naipaul 1967: 293)

As the quote indicates, it is writing that has reconciled him to his past and made him connected to his future because it has given him the chance to "create." Thus, it is through writing that past, present, and future all become one. Moreover, since the world is created through language, "there is no centre of reality just as there is no pre-given unmediated reality" (Aschcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1993: 91). Reality does not belong to anybody;

everybody can reproduce reality through language. Thus the border between center and margin is deconstructed; equivalence ensues. Such a perspective disseminates throughout the novel and it is a leitmotif of almost all post-colonial texts.

Conclusion

To conclude, *The Mimic Men* is the story of a post-colonial's self-construction through a critical way of looking upon oneself and the world. This makes one face his reality, make meaning out of it, and have an integrated personality. Questioning is the beginning of thinking and discerning reality; it is the only way to be able to break the shackles of the epistemological prison which incessantly tries to imprison our minds. The acute change and improvement in Ralph's perception of himself and the world, that is, his perspicacity in discerning and assessing the calamities of the "epistemic violence" (Aschcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1993: 91) inflicted on his mind, soul and identity, and his clear-sighted perception of the way to gain mental freedom and independence through self-criticism, decolonization of the mind, and writing are a way in the world. This way in the world, in Ralph and Naipaul's idea, is a model of constructing an authentic and dignified identity.

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