

“Insights into the Dynamics of History: A Glow after Memory of a Postcolonial World in V.S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*”

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Abstract

*V.S. Naipaul’s longing for a great Caribbean archipelago within the scope of his novel entitled *The Mimic Men* is praiseworthy. Naipaul is a Trinidadian writer stationed in Britain. He was educated in England. His novel *The Mimic Men* (1967) is a vivid account of the different influences shaping the Caribbean community and individuals. His book invokes a personal journey cast through the character of Singh. The protagonist is the archetype of a critical criollist. The granted awards to Naipaul testify to his genius in adopting and adapting his narrative to accentuate the multi-culturality of the Caribbean. Naipaul belongs to the Black Caribbean diaspora. Yet, he has been stationed in different metropolitan centres. His literary outputs thus match his existential predicament. As a black Caribbean writer, Naipaul embodies both first and third world sensibilities. He can speak on behalf of diasporic identities. The composite of his inclusive representations of Caribbeans finds itself expressed in a nostalgic discourse for a great Caribbean archipelago. Impelled by a growing desire to delineate the features of a Caribbean identity which defies easy categorizations, this paper establishes a cultural identity for Caribbeans without imposing any restricted definition of identity. Also, this paper strives to rewrite the theory of postcolonialism in an endeavour to meet the complexity of the Caribbean archipelago and the identity of its inhabitants.*

Key Terms: Dynamics of History, Caribbean cultural identity, Caribbeans and the Island Community.

Introduction

A diasporic writer like Naipaul re-thinks the (dis)connections between post-colonialism and its (mis)representations of certain subjects, who do not fall under the postcolonial template, namely, Caribbeans. A series of thorny questions must be raised here: what kind of theory does Naipaul’s literature of reconnections take as it strives to affirm a Caribbean presence?

Does Naipaul's version of post/colonialism deconstruct both the ideological machine of imperialism and phallocentrism? According to Gikandi, the singularity of Naipaul's standpoint lies in his realization that the fragmentation, silence and repression must be confronted. Fragmentation, silence and repression must not be seen as problems to be overcome. On the contrary, they must be considered as a condition of possibility "as a license to dissimulate and to affirm difference--in which an identity is created out of chaotic colonial and postcolonial history" (Gikandi 234).

Firstly, fragmentation allows both author and characters to recover what has been repressed without resorting to what Lionnet aptly calls "the ancient symmetry and dichotomies that have governed the ground and the very condition of possibility of thought, of 'clarity,' in all Western philosophy" (*Autobiographical Voices* 6). Secondly, fragmentation enables Naipaul to make use of the previously disdained vernacular and challenge Standard English. Thirdly, it helps him undermine the authority of a given discourse through intertextual references and parodic forms that question official historical totalities. Naipaul posits his narrative as a process in which history has value "not because of its teleological claims, but because of its discontinuity, its concern with blanks, ruptures and interruptions" (*Autobiographical Voices* 6).

The Mimic Men is a text where a Caribbean community struggles to reconcile divergent affiliations inside itself thanks to an exiled intellectual named Ranjit Singh. It turns out that the Caribbean community and the native island can partially facilitate the journey towards self-consciousness. This brings to the fore the distinction between postcolonial theory and postcolonial politics. "While postcolonial theory refers to poststructuralist critique of Western epistemology, postcolonial politics refers to Marxist philosophies that embrace oppositional thinking" (Ponzanesi 4). It is worth noting that postcolonial theory and postcolonial politics clearly overlap with each other. Postcolonial theory cannot exist without postcolonial politics, and vice-versa (Ponzanesi 4). In this vein, Leela Gandhi writes that "the postcolonial critic has to work toward a synthesis of, or negotiation between, both modes of thought" (qtd. in, Ponzanesi 4). For the sake of lucidity, my focus will be on the meanings of the term post-colonialism and how it can be operational in the narrative of *The Mimic Men*.

1-Insights into the Possibility of Re-writing Postcolonialism in the Caribbean Archipelago

The term post-colonialism is a critical tool. This paper follows critic Ponzanesi in using "the term post-colonialism to interpret the intense subversive practice that has taken place in the Black diaspora" (5). This alternative practice is meant to assess the cultural and

political aftermath of colonialism. It also rethinks the modes of representation. One of the few assets of post-colonialism in its old version is its resistance to the supremacy of the First World over the so-called developing countries. To quote Spivak seems to be useful since she considers the hyphen in post-colonialism as unnecessary:

Post-coloniality as an aftermath, as an after- as a location formed in the fragile functioning of colonialism does not reinterpret either the transcendence or the reversal of postcolonialism, and it sidesteps the language of beginnings and ends. Containing a link to the experience of colonialism, but not contained by it, postcoloniality can be thought of as a form of realignment that emerges in *medias res*, critically undoing and re-drawing colonialism's contingent boundaries. (*In Other Worlds: Essay in Cultural Politics* 150)

To look at post-colonialism from a historical angle implies that it is operational at the end of colonial empires. That is why, there is an urgent need to deal with the term as an ideological concept referring to a pre-colonial phase. A corollary is that "independence itself has to be seen as the coronation of a postcolonial state of mind and not as the beginning of it" (Ponzanesi 6).

Thus, Naipaul uses the term post-colonialism as a strictly historical concept following Indian critic Ahmed Aijaz. "It must also be used as a transhistorical concept addressing new global dimensions as Spivak does" (qtd. in, Ponzanesi 6). The "post," Ponzanesi explains, "must be qualified as epistemological and as chronological" (6). Most importantly, the "prefix *post* must indicate the transformations at stake in global dynamics" (6). It must be noted that postcolonial theorizing has effectively contributed to the subversion of binary thinking. However, postcolonialism can become a self-referential category. It can result in "the over theorizing of identity issues, which often leads to empty rhetoric with no clear and direct political impact and which dangerously deprives minority groups of their language of oppression and impinges upon a more activist side of postcolonial *raison d'être*" (Ponzanesi 6).

To ensure "a postcolonial *raison d'être*," Naipaul puts the accent on the local and its particularity. The main character in *The Mimic Men* is Ralph Singh. The protagonist is a true catalyst. His multiple identities help him dissolve the racial boundaries separating him from other characters. Dissolving racial boundaries is Singh's own way towards becoming a subject *encommun*. However, he retains his distinctiveness, but in a new constellation of a co-subject immersed in a web of connections and conflicts. Indeed, his search for an authentic identity is structured around intertwined quests transforming his life and the lives of those

around him. Naipaul's novel undertakes to assess the main effects of Singh on Isabella's islanders. *The Mimic Men* turns to be the fictional memoir of Ralph Singh, or more accurately, an autobiographical account of Naipaul. By inducing such reflexive irony together with jokes about writers throughout the narrative of *The Mimic Men*, Naipaul explores the status of the Caribbean writer in delineating the national and cultural characteristics of Caribbean communities.

2-A Glow After Memory: Isabella Island, an Island "Scarred by History"

The Mimic Men is Naipaul's best seller. Naipaul's novel mediates between the island of Isabella and London by means of flashbacks. *The Mimic Men* explores the impacts of the main character on the inhabitants of Isabella island. In fact, *The Mimic Men*'s incipit evokes the cremation of Mr. Shylock, the owner of the boarding house in London where Singh lives. Singh explains: "I had not been aware of death, had never seen those funeral processions which, rain or shine, had enlivened all our afternoons on the Caribbean island of Isabella" (*The Mimic Men* 1). Death bewilders Singh in his exile in London.

The choice of cremation as a setting for the novel has Caribbean overtones. Patrick Chamoiseau notes that cremation are special historical spaces. He explains that, "[they] used to be pretexts for the gathering of slaves on the plantation" (391). Naipaul, however, envisions cremation as a non-hierarchical space that provides a temporary sense of belonging (Hilkovitz 158). In other words, death's door is always opened. Singh asserts that: "let it not happen to me. Death? But that comes to all" (*The Mimic Men* 3). In his steps, O'Regan contends that in stressing difference and hybridity by bringing together different human beings around the body of Mr. Shylock, cremation acts as a:

Vector of creoleness in the community itself. Through the mental musings on the nature of their relationship with the deceased, the mourners reflect in a mature and constructive manner on the quality of their relations with one another. (O'Regan 185)

The other characters are forced to be 'in-relation' with one another at Mr. Shylock's cremation. Singh thus invites his native community to embrace hybridity (O'Regan 185).

Singh has an in-between identity, which "seems to have occurred in parentheses" (*The Mimic Men* 6). His eyes disturb Lienì, a Maltese boarder, who "could be recognized at a glance as an immigrant, Maltese, Italian, Cypriot" (*The Mimic Men* 31). More importantly, "his dark, luxuriant and very soft hair might be a source of further disturbance" (*The Mimic Men* 23). Besides, he does not disregard his origins: "I could not pretend even to myself to be part of the [London] community or to be putting down my roots" (*The Mimic Men* 6). Singh explains:

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. (...) But, I let it be known that on my island my family were the bottlers of Coca-Cola. The fact impressed less than I had expected. But, the respect with which I was treated by boys from the island-to whom the fact was significant- was a help. (*The Mimic Men* 23)

As one can easily infer, Singh's multiple origins do not hinder his cross-cultural connections with both Londoners and Caribbeans.

In *The Mimic Men*, Naipaul explores the role of the writer in saving his/her community from provincial mediocrity. It is clear that Singh has disturbed Isabella island in the same way Europe has disturbed the Caribbean. The book, which serves as the only concrete document about Singh's history, is meant to have opened endings. This is deliberate to better convey the idea that Caribbean history in different Caribbean islands "is still writing itself, still making itself, still largely undocumented" (Powell, qtd. in Newson & Leek 194). Singh, for example, debunks the notion of official history by means of "manifestos and antiquarian research" (*The Mimic Men* 35). The writing of a book and a diary stand as metaphors for the re-building of fragmented history in the Caribbean archipelago. The book is also a metaphor for creating a free space that can house the history and culture of different creoles, and can create a creolized identity politics on Caribbean islands. This is Singh's way to incorporate his loss of a permanent notion of home. The end of the novel reflects on the absence of a conclusive Caribbean history and alerts readers to the fact that Singh's story is simply an ongoing dialogue about the documentation of creole unbound identities, histories and cultures throughout the Caribbean archipelago. There are still so many stories to be told about Creoles. There is still so much unfinished history to be unearthed about the Caribbean archipelago. That is why, Naipaul leaves room for other storytellers and other versions of history.

More significantly, Singh does not search for serenity. For Singh, disorder and complicated relationships are more immediate and more reassuring. He asserts that "only the panic of ceasing to feel myself as a whole person, the threat of other people's lives, the remembered private landscapes and the relationships" (*The Mimic Men* 33) matter. Singh yearns to escape from his native island. Yet, the memory of Isabella and its locals haunt him and prevent him from escaping: "the pale blue sky, green hills, brightly coloured houses, coconut trees and green sea. (*The Mimic Men* 33). His marriage with Sandra is meant "to offer comfort and status to a woman who was denied these things in her country" (*The Mimic Men* 44). More importantly, once he returns to Isabella, he gives solace to different women by

taking them to bed. He has made love with “a number of women of various races (...) what had been an occasional extravagance became, as before, an addiction, but now guiltless and clinical” (*The Mimic Men* 73). However, physical love is a kind of art for Singh. It is neither vice nor mystery.

As one can easily infer, the characters in *The Mimic Men* hate the common. The protagonist strives to meet diverse people, to live among a heterogeneous community composed of métis, hybrids of Black and White, Chinese, Indians, Europeans, Africans, Maltese and Antilleans. According to critic Scharfman, “they come from everywhere and nowhere; they criss-cross continents, making a mockery of national identity, defying stereotypes about race, class and sexuality” (457). Scharfman asserts that “they force us into that uncomfortable place of indeterminacy where we must suspend judgment, the most facile of our defenses” (457). Furthermore, Scharfman explains that Naipaul’s characters consciously and sometimes unconsciously “enact the wisdom of the proverb informing the reader that life can only be understood backwards, but must always be lived forwards” (457).

Above all, Singh’s encounters with the inhabitants of Isabella island can be assimilated to the Caribbean islands’ ambiguous encounters with the elsewhere. Critic Wynter explains that “Caribbean identity is a rich, tormented blend of Elsewheres- African, European, East Indian and American” (43). Subsequently, Singh has transatlantic origins: an origin that connects him to different regions, worlds and cultures on the two sides of the Atlantic. Origins are, therefore, shared. The outcome can only be the inextricable link between distant origins. In this respect, Singh asserts: “we were a melodramatic race” (*The Mimic Men* 59), or more accurately, “an intermediate race, the genes passive, capable of disappearing in two generations into any of the three races of men” (*The Mimic Men* 59). As such, the novel fosters the encounter between the islanders and the “Elsewhere” through its characters’ diverse regional affiliations and rhizomatic identities.

3- On Healing the Scars of History in the Caribbean Archipelago

The Mimic Men can be regarded as a representation of cross-poetic histories and identities in the Caribbean society. In this regard, Ralph Singh, the protagonist in *The Mimic Men* conjures that: “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 the other” (8). Particular emphasis is placed on transformation and the fertility of cultural diversity within the scope of the narrative. I will scrutinize the extent to which Naipaul postulates cultural and linguistic transformation as having shaped histories and

individual/collective identities in the Anglophone Caribbean. The following part will be informed by Derek Walcott's and Wilson Harris's theoretical formulations.

Harris (1981) contrasts Naipaul's notion of transformation with 'the documentary stasis of imperialism' (28). For Walcott (1974), the transformation of different cultures in the Caribbean is "a dynamic process of constant renewal" (3). Walcott perceives Caribbean history as a process (6). Likewise, Harris considers the development of Caribbean cultures and societies to be creative (28). In Naipaul's narrative, Ralph Singh claims that his "first instinct was towards the writing of history (*The Mimic Men* 81) and adds that "it was the shock of the first historian's vision (...), a vision of disorder that was beyond any one man to control yet which, I felt, if I could pin it down, it might bring me calm" (*The Mimic Men* 81). As one can easily infer, both sets of ideas constitute imaginative responses to history in the Caribbean. (Bruning 120). This will bridge the rift between different interpretations and representations of the different facets of the Caribbean archipelago.

Naipaul represents local Caribbean histories from the perspective of ordinary individuals. V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* is the story of Ranjit Kripalsingh, who changes his name to Ralph Singh. In this regard, he says: "Ranjit is my secret name (...) It is a custom among Hindus of certain castes. This secret name is my real name, but it ought not to be used in public" (*The Mimic Men* 94). In another occasion, he asserts that "I was a man apart, disentangled from the camouflage of people" (*The Mimic Men* 116). The novel is divided into three parts. Naipaul begins "in *medias res*, flashes back in the second part to an earlier period in the history of the island of Isabella and takes up in the third part at the point where the first part stopped" (Boxill 12). The story is told in the first person by "a self-searching and self-accusing individual, who is keenly aware of the shortcomings of the society he is describing and of his own complicity in helping create or perpetuate these shortcomings" (Boxill 12). In *The Mimic Men*, Naipaul is primarily interested in the development of Singh's personality as he wrestles with the ills of his society to choose at last mimicry (Christopher 8).

Singh strives to escape the horrors of the post-modern world. Singh yearns for "the final emptiness" (*The Mimic Men* 10). Escape, however, brings only momentary release. Nomadism in Naipaul's novel introduces drama into the lives of the islanders. In so doing, it helps sharpen his "perceptions of the world" (*The Mimic Men* 214). Singh drives furiously away from the destructive party at the Roman house to the ruins of an old slave plantation to connect with his West Indian past. "Naipaul's probing of West Indian history and the inability of his character to connect with the West Indian landscape make it necessary for him to evoke vegetation and the island's surroundings as a necessary motif" (Boxill 14). Singh believes that

the colorful tropical world around him is natural. But, it has been used by foreigners “for their amusement” (Boxill 14):

He told me about the coconut, which fringed our beaches, about the sugarcane, the bamboo and mango. He told me about our flowers, whose colours we saw afresh in the postcards which were beginning to appear in our shops. The war was bringing us visitors, who saw more clearly than we did; we learned to see with them, and we were seeing only like visitors. In the heart of the city he showed me a clump of old fruit trees: the site of a slave provision ground. From this point look above the roofs of the city, and imagine! Our landscape was as manufactured as that of any great French or English park. But we walked in a garden of hell, among trees, some still without popular names, whose seeds had sometimes been brought to our island in the intestines of slaves. (*The Mimic Men* 146-7)

Subsequently, Singh does not look at his birthplace with the eyes of a local. Naipaul's preference for blurring his characters' perceptions is thus noticeable. This duality between embracing a new era in the history of the islands and retaining old traditions indicates, in theoretical terms, the interrelation between the notions of creoleness and exoticism (Bruning 135).

Convinced that the history of the Caribbean is a chequered one, Naipaul refuses to glamorize, and thus to ascribe virtue to slavery and colonialism. Subsequently, the author attempts to offer real solutions to deal with what Boxill chooses to call ‘bastard worlds’ (17). Singh yearns for order. In *The Mimic Men*, the readers are first introduced to Singh “as a foreign student in London living in a household of displaced persons on the brink of London's city” (Boxill 17). Then, he gets back to Isabella to impose order on his life. Singh also performs other roles, namely, “the Aryan Chieftain of his schoolboy fantasy, the husband who relies too heavily on the strength of his wife, the successful businessman, the politician who revels in the game and glamor of politics and the recluse” (Boxill 17). Singh adopts and adapts these roles in various attempts at controlling and ordering the chaos in his life (Boxill 17). Subsequently, he learns to distinguish between “the lead of reality” and “the gold of the imagination” (*The Mimic Men* 10).

Conclusion

In brief, the story in *The Mimic Men* is most certainly unconventional. It is open-ended, polyphonic and equivocal. It forces the reader to participate in the re-construction of Caribbean history, and in the construction of an identity that looks back to past memories to

reshape the present and re-fashion the future. The narrative is about the crossing of divided selves through the motifs of death and rebirths. Singh in *The Mimic Men* makes small, but confident steps toward a more flexible and integrated self.

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