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Political Reality in V.S.Naipaul's the Mimic Men: A Critical Study

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Abstract:

The Mimic Men Naipaul concerns himself with the political reality of Trinidad just before and after independence. This novel examines different aspects of the reaction to political independence of the individual and the group. Each novel dramatizes a particular feature of Trinidad's inability to go back to colonial security or to generate a national identity thus emphasizing its political insignificance. In The Mimic Men the autobiographical account gives the protagonist both a historical as well as an existential context and this redeems the previous static reality as a study of the relationship between political power and human nothingness, oppressor and oppressed, colonizer and colonized

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In *The Mimic Men* Ralph, the rejected politician of Isabella migrates to England. But he discovers that his colonial fantasy of arrival in which he imagines he will feel more like a real person, is illusory and instead his arrival exacerbates his pre-existing sense of shipwreck and exile. Ralph's fantasy and reality is located in the solidity of English identity and English tradition is constantly subverted by the exposure of his otherness and that of the other immigrants and by the fragmented identities of the English characters themselves. The tension visible in the text between colonial desire and reality exposes the limits of colonial desires for both the colonized and colonizer. It takes Ralph the outsider to suggest both points of view. The text suggests that the colonial desire does not only refer to the colonized. It implies that the English themselves are mimic men and women who initiate certain 'Englishness'. The only way in which to achieve stability and wholeness is by keeping the cultures of the colonizer and colonized intact. Through Ralph's narrative of exile and difference, the novel contains an 'awareness that the epistemological "limits" of ethnocentric ideas are also the boundaries of a range of other dissonant... histories and voice, (Bhabha, 4-5) .Ralph's mimicry of the coloniser's culture draws attention to his difference. This is because one never arrives at the desired location or transformation because of one's excess. Bhabha, referring to this idea of excess in his notion of mimicry, proposes that even while one is making duplication, that duplication will be more than the double which suggests its limits. Naipaul in *The Mimic Men* evokes this notion of excess, suggesting that it questions authority through its lack of a fixed centre, solidity and authenticity.

The polarization of awareness along a continuous of consciousness which ranged from simplicity to sophistication dramatizes the emergence and existence of the third world protagonists:

We began in bluff. We continued in bluff, but there was a difference. We began in innocence, believing in the virtue of the smell of sweat. We continued with knowledge, of poverty and power. The colonial politician is an easy object of satire.... It is that his situation satirizes itself, turns satire inside out, and takes satire to a point where it touches pathos if not tragedy. Out of his immense violation words come easily to him, too easily....The support he has attracted, not ideal but bitterness to bitterness, he betrays and mangles: emancipation is not possible for all. (*The Mimic Men*; 208)

Combining a scientific humanist outlook with a romantic existential sensibility, the narrator identifies with these protagonists in their moment of failure. He presents it as a historical time-bound situation thus minimizing the inherent element of absurdity. Their personal loss measured against their mimicked concepts of success explains Trinidad's continuing colonialism, dependence and unimportance. Independence instead of making it a responsible member of the world community has brought it the tourist bloom.

Initially, Ralph idealises England as 'the promised land' which will provide him with the order, solidity and protection which he so desperately seeks and so vehemently believes Isabella is not able to provide. While he perceives Isabella to be a third-rate place, London, is a place excitement, romance, magic and greater subtleties. Ralph's colonial education entraps him in a narrative in which England is projected as an object of desire but he also realizes that he had been seduced by this colonial fantasy.

George Orwell's novel 1984 throws some useful light on the historical and political nature of *The Mimic Men's* dark vision. The Colonial world that Naipaul depicts in *The Mimic Men* has parallel with the world Orwell imagines. Both books deal with being subjected to oppressive forms of power which dehumanize the self. Ralph experiences a sense of defilement in the metropolitan centre, primarily through his sexual experiences and they seem connected to that primary experience of violation that is colonialism. The marking of colonialism as the source of violation is unmistakable in *The Mimic Men*.

Homelessness is conveyed in *The Mimic Men* through the series of temporary homes that Ralph occupies: Shylock's boarding house, the expatriate-bourgeois house in Isabella, the London hotel room in which he writes his memoirs. Ralph and Sandra are unable to give their home in Isabella a sense of permanence. He reflects: 'It had never seemed important to us to have a house of our own. I had no feelings for the house as home, as personal creation' (71). The transition from *The House of Mr. Biswas* in which Biswas' dream was to build his own home to Ralph's state of mind in *The Mimic Men*, suggests a depending sense of exile in the author's imagination. Before Ralph finds the London hotel which he stays in for fourteen months, he is threatened with homelessness. He narrates, 'I travelled from small town to small town, seeking shelter with my sixty-six pounds of luggage, always aware in the afternoon of my imminent homelessness' (249). His situation recalls Edward Said's comment: 'The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional' (*Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, 365). The culture of homelessness focuses on the journey more than fixed point of destination. Ralph gives priority to his period of exile in London over his days as a colonial politician and an expatriate in Isabella; 'this present residence in London, which I suppose can be called exile, has turned out to be the most fruitful' (248). By the end of the novel, Ralph suggests that the detachment that exile affords, leads him to a higher state of consciousness: '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' (250).

'Exile is a site of alienation and reconnection (Paquet, *The Pleasures of Exile*, ix). This ambivalence of exile is visible in *The Mimic Men*. On the one hand, there is Ralph's feeling of temporariness on the island, and on the other, there is his undeniable rootedness to the island. This dual sense has resulted from an accident of history. Vivek Dhareshwar sees Ralph as failing 'to take up the challenge for self-fashioning, which would involve' re-conceptualizing and re-negotiating his relationship to the island' (V.S.Naipaul *The Mimic Men, Criticism*, 80). Dhareshwar seems to be arguing that Ralph fails to see the island and his relationship to island in a new way. But it seems that Ralph does undergo a journey in which his questioning for order in the metropolitan centre and his failure to find it, draws him back to the beginning of his own history. In a London hotel, he begins the task of re-imagining his own history of 'disorder'. As Mahood articulates: "Ralph Singh can become a historian rather than one who plays at being a historian" (*The Colonial Encounter*, 165).

A close analysis reveals that the contradictions that make up *The Mimic Men* lend themselves to a greater understanding of the kind of postcolonialism that is not governed by the celebration of interconnections, discontinuities and hybridity. Rather, *The Mimic Men* foregrounds the loss inherent in such fragmented realities. The main conflict in the text is on the one hand, the polemics of self and other, fragmentary and originary identity, and on the other hand, the destabilizing of such binaries.

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