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## Transcending Mimicry Through Writing the Self in V.S. Naipaul's The Mimic Men

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### Abstract

Caribbean literature reflects the situation in postcolonial societies which is a situation of becoming part of what the formerly colonized people could not become. The fragmented nature of the society due to colonialism, gives the West Indian an acute sense of exile, and the literature of this area reflects and attempts to come to terms with the consequences of colonization. One of the major Caribbean writers is Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul (1932-2018) who is a Trinidadian British writer of Indian descent. The aim of this research paper is to analyze Naipaul's novel *The Mimic Men* which explores the subject of mimicry as it depicts a colonial man's experience in a post-colonial world. Naipaul explores the power of colonial mimicry that destroys people's past and defrauds them of their identities. Singh, the protagonist, is psychologically and emotionally crippled by the postcolonial conditions in which he was born and ultimately suffers from a deep identity crisis. The paper focuses on the themes of homelessness, mimicry and writing the memoirs as a means of creating an authentic identity. The novel is analyzed within the frame of Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory on mimicry and the third space.

**Keywords:** mimicry, the third space, identity crisis, Naipaul, *The Mimic Men*

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### Abstract

Caribbean literature reflects the situation in postcolonial societies which is a situation of becoming part of what the formerly colonized people could not become. The fragmented nature of the society due to colonialism, gives the West Indian an acute sense of exile, and the literature of this area reflects and attempts to come to terms with the consequences of colonization. One of the major Caribbean writers is Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul (1932-2018) who is a Trinidadian British writer of Indian descent. The aim of this research paper is to analyze Naipaul's novel *The Mimic Men* which explores the subject of mimicry as it depicts a colonial man's experience in a post-colonial world. Naipaul explores the power of colonial mimicry that destroys people's past and defrauds them of their identities. Singh, the protagonist, is psychologically and emotionally crippled by the postcolonial conditions in which he was born and ultimately suffers from a deep identity crisis. The paper focuses on the themes of homelessness, mimicry and writing the memoirs as a means of creating an authentic identity. The novel is analyzed within the frame of Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory on mimicry and the third space.

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## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyze Naipaul's novel *The Mimic Men* within the frame of Bhabha's theory on mimicry, unhomeliness and the third space. Examples of mimicry and the protagonist's constant sense of homelessness are explained. The paper reveals his dissatisfaction with whatever he does because of mimicry which ultimately leads to inauthenticity until he finally realizes this and resorts to writing through which he moves to Bhabha's third space in which all contradictory realities are brought together. He is finally able to put order to his life and reach a better understanding of himself, hence a successful attempt at the decolonization of the mind.

Colonial narrative has evolved - its underlying effect to create a negative association with the indigenous social identity and in turn instill a sense of shame for being indigenous. This shame is further fueled by the economic and social problems found among indigenous communities in settler states. Even though these problems are the inevitable outcomes of colonization, as it undermines the culture's social, political and economic institutions, we see how the individual faced with the predicament of having "a shame-inducing social identity" will have the need to belong to "a positive social identity" (Reid & Rout 5). The culture of the colonizer is viewed as the extremely positive culture, whereas the indigenous social identity is regarded as overwhelmingly negative. This was due to the colonial ideology aiming to cast indigenous people as primitive and communal which meant that they were unable to govern themselves or utilize their land, hence, justifying invasion and colonial settlement. Accordingly, one of the many dilemmas of postcolonial societies is the identity crisis. The newly independent nations struggled to regain their identity lost by the power of colonization.

In his article, "V.S. Naipaul and the Colonial Image", Michael Angrosino, clarifies the distress of the West Indian, and he explains that even though Indians and Africans suffered from colonialism; however, they cannot be truly considered colonial; this is because after they attained independence, they were still in possession of their homelands and roots. The West Indian, on the other hand, is "a complete invention of empire;" (2). That is because they were displaced from their homeland and completely lost connection with it. The inhabitants of the islands are a multi-racial, multi-ethnic group of people who came to the islands on account of a series of labor migrations over 300 years that included black slaves, Indians, Chinese, Portuguese and Javanese, in addition to adventurers from Europe, the Middle East and Asia. Consequently, "they had no real identity because they were merely bodies filling the outposts of the grand imperial design." (Angrosino 2). As a result, after decolonization, homelands

could not be retrieved; the colonized felt that they were not only lost, but they felt that they never had a home, history or cultural heritage. In other words, the experience was traumatic as their identity was lost by the power of colonization. Frantz Fanon explains this situation in *The Wretched of the Earth*: “colonialism is not satisfied with snaring the people in its net or of draining the colonized brain of any form or substance. With a kind of perverted logic, it turns its attention to the past of the colonized people and distorts it, disfigures it, and destroys it” (149). Therefore, as indicated before, the theme of identity and its complication is the most important theme that novelists in postcolonial era depicted and expressed in their work.

### Sir V.S. Naipaul

Sir V. S. Naipaul is a Trinidadian-British writer of Indian descent who received the Nobel prize in literature in 2001. Naipaul lived in England several years as a student and then as a professional writer. In his book *V.S. Naipaul*, Bruce King explains that Naipaul is part of a generation “that had to face the problems and confusions that resulted from the withdrawal of imperial order” (2). He is one of the significant writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Derek Walcott, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje and Salman Rushdie whose achievements can be considered as part of the worldwide political and cultural changes. He continues to explain that Naipaul, after failing to reconnect himself to India, and his return to England becomes like his protagonist Singh “an uprooted colonial, a permanent homeless exile, wedded to his writing and his desk, seemingly writing about the upheavals and turmoils of the colonial and postcolonial world, but in actuality giving order to his own life through writing” (73). Naipaul is one of the highly regarded literary figures in Britain. Angrosino gives a description of Naipaul’s relationship with his native Trinidad, by describing it as a “furious love-hate ambivalence” (1) as he is a well-known figure for intellectuals who read all his books, whereas the Trinidadians cannot forgive him for his “vow to escape Trinidad.” In addition to this, they were angered because of his harsh portrayal of the West Indian hero in his novel *The Mimic men*. However, in his article “Ralph Singh’s Journey Through Disorder in *The Mimic Men*”, Madrid explains that even though many critics have focused on the “undeniable pessimism” that informs *The Mimic Men*, Madrid believes that there is a story of redemption which occurs through the process of writing his memoirs which allows him “to arrive at a new-level of self-awareness” (143). Unlike most postcolonial novelists who focus more on groups, Naipaul focuses mainly on individuals and the importance of self-creation and advancement in life. Accordingly, his books warn of the need to plan ahead (Bruce 2).

### *The Mimic Men*

*The Mimic Men* explores the subject of mimicry and evokes a colonial man's experience in a post-colonial world. Singh is a representative of the Caribbean people as he feels that he does not have a history, a past, a character nor an authentic identity, and this leads to his deep identity crisis. Admittedly, this is by no means a new theme for the author, yet the very fact that *The Mimic Men* won the W.H. Smith Award shows how much his novel contributed to English literature, and reveals how it goes beyond the simple restatement of the problems of an isolated minority. The novel reveals that the formerly colonized people of the island are unable to establish order and govern their country even though they have gained independence. This is because of colonial education and colonization which caused the colonized to regard themselves as inferior to the colonizer in terms of culture, tradition and customs. This was due to how the Western world is presented to them as a world of order, success and achievement. Consequently, they try to identify themselves with the empire. As a result, the ex-colonials suffer from displacement, and a loss of identity. They become mimic men who imitate the colonizer's lifestyle, values, customs, traditions and opinions. The major theme of the novel is how the protagonist attempts to mimic the colonizer since he was a child hindered his ability to create an authentic identity and to assess his behavior until his early forties when he started writing his memoirs. This paper is an analysis of *The Mimic Men* within the frame of Bhabha's theory of mimicry and the third space. The paper aims to answer the following questions: how can the process of writing be considered a healing process that restores order to a chaotic existence? Can writing create an authentic identity that transcends mimicry?

### **Bhabha's Mimicry, Unhomeliness & the Third Space**

The term mimic-men is introduced in Bhabha's essay "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" in which Bhabha himself cites Naipaul's novel *The Mimic Men* as an example of a novel that effectively portrays colonial mimicry. Singh's memoirs reveal that as a result of colonialism, the formerly colonized people find it impossible to have a pure perspective of themselves, so homelessness, mimicry, and loss of identity become inevitable. It is important to highlight here that racism and stereotypes are the major reasons of the identity crisis. Bhabha comments on the word stereotypes saying "in the sense in which that word itself denies an 'original' identity or a 'singularity' to objects of difference- sexual or racial" (96). Bhabha believes that

colonial discourse is “a form of discourse crucial to the binding of a range of differences and discriminations that inform the discursive and political practices of racial and cultural hierarchization” (96). He explains that despite the “play in the colonial system which is crucial to its exercise of power, colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once a ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible” (101). It is entirely visible because the colonized imitate but with difference “mimicry articulates those disturbances of cultural, racial and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority” (Bhabha 126). This stereotyping ultimately leads to an identity crisis as is evident in Singh’s memoirs. Consequently, deconstructing or demolishing colonial stereotypes is an important step in asserting an authentic identity. The act of writing his memoirs is itself a form of mimicry as it was the habit of politicians to write their memoirs. Singh does not follow a chronological order in writing his memoirs but constantly moves backwards and forwards. This is because the confusion of his life parallels the confusion of his thoughts, “I am too much a victim of that restlessness which was to have been my subject” (Naipaul 32). It is only when he starts to write about his earlier experiences that he starts to gain control over his life.

This colonial mimicry is defined by Bhabha as “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. That is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence. In order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (126). That is to say, Bhabha’s concept of mimicry suggests that the colonial discourse requires the colonized subject to be an imperfect imitation and that such imposed mimeticism eventually becomes a form of mockery that destabilizes the claim of the colonizer to an ordinary subjectivity. Bhabha explains that “mimicry repeats rather than re-presents” (125), and cites Singh’s “apostasy” in *The Mimic Men* “we pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World, one unknown corner of it, with all its reminders of the corruption that came so clearly to the new” (Naipaul 146). As explained by Asis De in *An Apology for Failure: Searching Home and Identity in V. S. Naipaul's The Mimic Men*, these phrases depict that those mimic men were “merely imitating the westernized people” and as a result, “they lacked originality, and were compelled to live in ‘one unknown corner’, in anonymity” (127). Those mimic men refuse to find themselves in such a world that lacks power and consequently, mimic the colonizer and try to assert a British identity.

According to Bhabha’s theory of mimicry, the mimic man imitates but with difference which allows him only a *partial* British identity. However, Singh wants

to belong to the metropolis and to have an authentic British identity. Nevertheless, he fails in his attempts to assimilate to the metropolitan culture and thus, experiences the in-betweenness of the mimic man who, “strips himself of his identity as colonized and finds himself denied a Western one” (Baazizi 30). Singh's mimicry only increases his sense of difference which is required by the colonizer in order to maintain the difference needed for keeping a racial superiority. Bhabha identifies Singh's mimicry as “the desire to emerge as ‘authentic’ through mimicry- through a process of writing and repetition which is the final irony of partial representation” (129). The mimic men's attempt to assert an authentic identity merely results in a partial representation of authenticity. He continues to explain that the repeating action of mimicry only leads to the impure, the artificial, the second-hand because he is alienated from the original, and this is vividly portrayed in the novel.

### Mimicry in *The Mimic Men*

First, the novel's title is indicative of the power of mimicry for Singh, and it is not only a postcolonial phenomenon but also a social necessity in order to belong to the new world of Isabella. Mimicry becomes integral in his reconstruction of identity in the newness of post-colonialism. This is clearly depicted in the novel, and begins from childhood as a result of colonial education which prepares the children to be mimic men. It is this colonial education which causes Singh along with other colonials to suffer from a constant sense of unhomeliness and displacement and resort to mimicry as a means of asserting an identity; however, it only leads to a loss of identity. This is because as explained by Bhabha, this ambivalence of mimicry “becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a “partial presence” (127), and he explains that by “partial” he means “incomplete” and “virtual”. Thus, as the colonized try to become like the colonizer by mimicry, they still remain different. Therefore, Singh is never satisfied with what he does because mimicry “conceals no presence of identity behind its mask” (Bhabha 126). Even when he is successful, he doesn't feel that he has achieved much because of mimicry which only leads to inauthenticity.

In “V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men: Disillusionment with the Metropolis, Cosmopolitanism and Colonial Education*,” WeiWei Xu maintains that “the carefully –crafted colonial education evokes cultures and values of a faraway world, creating unrealistic myths that become the focus of their unfulfilled desire and fantasy” (114). This is evident in the memoirs as Singh comments on

education at school and says that by studying English, Arithmetic, Reading, Geography and writing essays about visits to temperate- zone farms, they are prepared to be natural performers. Xu continues to explain that “for the students, the world is split into two irreconcilable realms- the purely imaginary, conceptual world of the First World and the local known, embarrassing society that acquires the sense of a taboo” (114). They therefore, “choose to withdraw into the private, but unreal sphere of school life, banishing actual everyday life. In doing so, they are further alienated and fragmented” (Xu 114). Thus, for Singh, the West is idealized, so he prefers to identify himself with the West which is a superior culture as he was educated to believe at school. This effect is clearly described in the novel, “to be born on an island like Trinidad, an obscure Third World transplantation, second-hand and barbarous, was to be born to disorder. From an early stage, almost from my first lesson at school about the weight of the King’s crown, I had sensed this” (Naipaul 118). In her article “Mimicry and Classical Allusion in V.S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*”, Emily Greenwood explains that the reference to the King’s crown in the previous quotation refers to colonial education in the colonized countries where students study the achievements of Ancient Greeks as well as the culture of Britain, “the imperial power that was both geographically absent and inaccessible, and yet everywhere present in the form of legal, economic, and cultural imperialism” (Greenwood 102).

Through colonial education, “an imperialist worldview is created to dehumanize the students as ontologically inferior” (Xu 114). Consequently, the students “live double lives in disenfranchisement and hypocritical pretension: the illusion and unrealism built by colonial education already tells them not only what they are but also what they should be” (Xu 115). This damaging effect of colonial education is clear in the novel. Since the students at school in Isabella do not learn about their own culture and history, this only leads the colonials to the hollow mimicry of the colonizer whom they regard as superior, and increases their sense of homelessness.

A clear example of this mimicry and the effect of colonial education is evident as Singh writes his memoirs, he recounts an instance of misremembering: “My first memory of school is of taking an apple to the teacher. This puzzles me. We had no apples on Isabella. It must have been an orange; yet my memory insists on the apple. The editing is clearly at fault, but the edited version is all I have” (Naipaul 90). This indicates that, as Dexu Zhang explains in his article “Representational Ethics: *The Mimic Men* and the Mimic Men,” “colonial mimicry takes the form of an internalized mentality that



tampers with and falsifies his memory of the past. Singh's account of his early school days reveals an ideological force at work that obliterates and edits his memory of the past" (30). He thus reflects his nature as a prototype colonial character who is estranged from the biased and pluralistic society he has inhaled most of his breath from and in. Furthermore, this instance of distorted memory reflects the power of colonial education on the colonials; as a young boy at school, Singh either read a book or wrote an essay about taking an apple to the teacher which is a metropolitan practice. That is to say, that taking an apple to a teacher is a Western custom as they did not have apples in Isabella, so this indicates that his memory is at fault here. This example of distorted memory, the "editing" as described by Singh and its persistence is a testimony to the school as one of "the apparatuses of colonial power, is a site of subjectification" (Dhareshwar 75). We see throughout the novel how the narrative describes this process of subjectification from the viewpoint of a subject (Singh) whose identity is produced by "the kind of asymmetrical power implied in the substitution of the "apple" for the "orange"- the "metropolitan" object/practice for the colonial one" (Dhareshwar 75). Consequently, even as he writes his memoirs, Singh is influenced by mimicry. Naipaul here highlights that the colonial educational system alienates the children from their environment. This is because it does not help the children to identify their own situation but usually "superimposes upon schoolboys' imagination yet another dream of a different society and landscape" (Asis De 115).

Consequently, when Singh looks back to his childhood as he writes his memoirs, he attempts to identify how he became a mimic man which is a natural habit of children. However, as Asis De explains, "in an embryonic form, Naipaul's prose projects a picture of the maladies and evil tendencies associated with children's mimicry. He satirizes their eagerness to escape from the reality of their situation in a post-colonial setting, through their ridiculous attempt to conceal original names given by their parents" (124). An example of this in the novel is when Singh decides to change his name as a step to giving himself a new identity. His name Kripalsingh "is iconic as Singh is a person who is psychologically and emotionally "crippled" by the post-colonial conditions in which he was born" as explained by Helen Pyne-Timothy in her article "V.S. Naipaul and Politics: His view of Third World Societies In Africa and the Caribbean." He finds his social environment unstable since even his father who is a teacher and belongs to the middle class is socially insecure. This is because he is constantly unhappy since his wife, by marrying him, becomes a poor relation of a wealthy family. It is his father's sense of insecurity and distress

which is passed on to him as he feels ashamed of his father's incompetence and abandonment of his family. Another reason for Singh's distress is his Indianness in the new world as he attempts to Anglicize himself and at the same time he dreams of an idealized Indian past to which he will return. He changes his public name from "Ranjit Kripalsingh" to "Ralph Singh" at school thus, he selects a western Christian first name and a last name that would identify him as belonging to a warrior caste as explained by Atreyee Phukan in the article "Landscapes of Sea and Snow: V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*." Singh explains to his teacher that "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" (Naipaul 94). He states that Ralph is his "calling name" which is "unimportant and could be taken in vain by anyone" (94). Singh's change of name reveals "a child's struggle to eradicate his past, to change his destiny as well as his identity" (Asis De 128). This is evident when he expresses his disapproval of a low background, "to be descended from generations of idlers and failures, an unbroken line of the unimaginative, unenterprising and oppressed, had always seemed to me to be a cause for deep, silent shame" (Naipaul 83). For this reason, even though he exploits his connection to his father to be a politician, he still prefers to lay claim to his mother's family who owns the Bella-Bella Bottling works who are the local bottlers of Coca Cola. This indicates that Singh fails to deny "the colonial temptation to attach his identity to the dominant capitalist group and to mimic the behavior of its members" (Asis De 125).

Moreover, another example of mimicry in the novel is the use of the English language, which is one of the significant tools with which the colonizers were able to display their powers. This is because, besides imitating customs and traditions, the colonized people found themselves obliged to mimic the language of the colonizer. This is evident in the novel as the language of Isabella, which symbolizes the formerly colonized island of Trinidad, is not used anymore by the residents of the island. Throughout the novel, Singh speaks only English and writes his memoirs in English with the exception of a few Isabellan words such as "Asvamedha." It is evident that there is no pure or original Isabellan language, but there is reference to a language which is a mixture of English and the language of the island which is called Isabellan Creole. This language is English spoken with an Isabellan accent. This is clear when Singh visits his friend Deschampsneuf, and his father says "look at the result. Listen to me talking English in my low Isabella accent" (Naipaul 173). This is what Bhabha refers to as "almost the same but not quite" By creating this language, the Isabellans create a fake existence for themselves. Here, mimicry as Bhabha explains it, is

“camouflage.” This is because by communicating in English, people on the island try to hide their true selves in order to prevent others from seeing their “indigenous” selves which they regard as inferior, with the use of “camouflaged” identities. However, as soon as Isabellans and Europeans lose their temper, they lose the ability to control themselves and use their native tongues, thus, “losing control of their English accent” (Naipaul 77). It is also clear in the novel that Singh marries Sandra and claims that he loves her just because she is an Englishwoman and speaks English: “Language is so important. Up to this time my relationships had been with women who knew little English and of whose language I frequently knew nothing... With Sandra there was no such frustration; the mere fact of communication was a delight” (Naipaul 44). Also, Sandra’s confidence and attitude which he considers part of her personality as an Englishwoman give him the sense of security that he needs. However, eventually, their marriage ends in failure as Sandra herself experiences the same sense of homelessness as Singh.

As a result of mimicry and his inability to assert an authentic identity, Singh describes himself as a shipwrecked man on Isabella because every journey he takes ends in shipwreck. Thus, he feels “unhomed” which is the term used by Bhabha to describe the sense of displacement and the feeling of not belonging to anyplace that overcomes Singh during his life. Bhabha explains this in *The Location of Culture*, “to be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the ‘unhomely’ be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres. The unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself ...taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of ‘incredulous terror’”(13). The word “unhomed” does not mean the lack of a house or place to live in, but Bhabha uses this term to refer to the sense of belonging nowhere. This is evident as Singh’s desire to belong to London proves to be false; this is clear when he sails to England at the end of his childhood with the intention of never returning to Isabella. However, during his first visit to London, he lives as a marginalized person in an “in-between” space between two cultures: the Western culture and his own culture. This was the situation for all the tenants of the boarding house where he lived, “between attic and basement, pleasure and its penalty, we boarders lived, narrowly” (Naipaul 5). Eventually, after staying in a boarding house in London for four months, his courage fails him, and he realizes that the shipwreck and chaos he experiences in London are worse than those he experienced on Isabella:

I was restless. I travelled to the provinces, taking trains for no reason except that of movement. I travelled to the Continent. I used my savings. Everything of note or beauty reminded me of my own disturbance, spoiling both the moment and the object. My world was being corrupted! I didn't wish to see. But the restlessness remained. (Naipaul 30)

Singh eventually decides to return to Isabella again, "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" (Naipaul 31). Thus, he is in a liminal space between past and present, his past life in a colony and his unstable present in the metropolis, and he feels he doesn't belong to the metropolis. He can neither reconnect to his homeland nor does he feel at home in England either, and this intensifies his feeling of homelessness. Consequently, Singh occupies a position of double-exclusion which is the result of his "double failure" as Dhareshwar describes it in his article "Self-Fashioning, Colonial Habitus, and Double Exclusion: V. S. Naipaul's 'The Mimic Men.'" He is excluded from the island, and this begins since his childhood as colonial knowledge "incites phantasies of originality and romance of life elsewhere" (80) and his exclusion from England where he is denied a British identity and where his sense of homelessness is intensified. Even though London represents the dream of fulfillment for Singh, he finds it a shipwreck that intensifies his sense of not belonging to anyplace, "so quickly had London gone sour on me. The great city, centre of the world, in which fleeing disorder, I had hoped to find the beginning of order" (Naipaul 18). Naipaul highlights the protagonist's increasing sense of marginality and his sense of displacement whether from Isabella or England to represent the East Indian identity as one of homelessness.

After the failure of his first visit to London and his return to Isabella, he continues to suffer from this sense of displacement, of belonging nowhere, "I knew it to be, horribly, man-made; to be exhausted, fraudulent, cruel and, above all, not mine. Yet I pretended that it was....." (Naipaul 50). His feeling about his return to Isabella was that of humiliation, "this tainted island is not for me. I decided years ago that this landscape was not mine" (Naipaul 51). This is why Singh tries to mimic the British and adopt a British identity as he regards Isabella as an inferior place. However, upon his return to Isabella, Singh is successful at first as a land developer, and succeeds in making a fortune; however, that success does not bring him a sense of satisfaction nor does he feel that he belongs to the island. This feeling of homelessness persists even in his

home, "to me as well as to Sandra our house was something to get out of whenever we could" (Naipaul 70). This is because he "had no feeling for the house as home, as personal creation" (Naipaul 71). Nevertheless, even when they decide to leave their home, they have nowhere to go: "Into that most inferior place in the world. Where could we go? The beaches? We knew them all; we could take them 'as read'. The mountain villages, Negro or mulatto, with their slave history and slave customs?" (Naipaul 70). Their mutual sense of displacement and homelessness is quite evident.

Another example of mimicry in the novel is evident when Singh builds a "Roman House" which could be regarded as "an illustration of their "stoicism (or a flirtation with the delusion of empire)" (79) as explained by Giouse Ghisalbherti, in his article "And the World Continues our Private Fabrication: An Autobiography of Shipwreck and Disorder in V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*." Singh explains that the house he built was "modeled on the house of Ventii in Pompeii, with a swimming pool replacing the *impluvium*" (Naipaul 38). Similarly, King maintains that the house is modeled upon "seventeenth-century poems in praise of the aristocratic great houses with their hierarchal order." He goes on to explain that this house is "an imitation of Inigo Jones's creation of a neo-classical architecture in England from the plans of sixteenth-century Italian architects using classical models" (82). Though the whole act of building a new house can be clearly regarded as another act of mimicry, it also reveals Singh's longing for order and his interest in Western culture, specifically the Roman culture, and the Romans had a good reputation for being well-organized people. The solidity of the Roman house which Singh constantly emphasizes also reflects his belief that Western culture and history represent solidity. This can be contrasted to the family's wooden house on Isabella which he feared as a child and imagined that it would collapse and longed whenever he visited the house of his mother's family that he wouldn't have to make that "particular journey again"; that is to say, go back to his own home again. The house here, as explained by Ghisalbherti, represents "an ambivalent attachment to a place, familiar with its security, repelled by its constraint, the double-meaning impossible to reconcile" (84). If this house collapsed, that would give him an "excuse to change his circumstance, and that is the reason that he fantasizes about its destruction" (Ghisalbherti 84). This clearly symbolizes "the chaos and uncertainties of the island, but one should not forget the common analogy between one's inner self and a house. In Singh's case, the inner self kept constantly tumbling down" (Huttunen 277). However, the completion of the house does not give Singh any satisfaction. This again reveals that mimicry

cannot bring satisfaction nor can it lead to authenticity because it gives a sense of uncertainty which makes Singh feel incomplete. This reflects Edward Said's words that" (148). Singh constantly feels "unhomed", that is to say, he feels that he belongs nowhere. Hence, *The Mimic Men* exposes "the failure of both metropolitan and peripheral societies to provide an individual with "a coherent self-concept, an individual whose inauthenticity, triggered essentially by his postcolonial in-betweenness, appeals to the others for self-esteem but, when the process fails, his sense of distress is intensified" (Baazizi 32-33). Singh's sense of disorder and uncertainty is due to the "incommensurable realities" of his childhood which are divided into his Aryan ancestors, the circumstances on Isabella and the influence of the West. He is torn between them and this makes him incapable of action as he feels that he does not belong anywhere and this leads to hollow mimicry and passively adopting false roles which others expect of him.

Singh's self- definition as a mimic man induces him to search for an authentic identity. In his attempt to do this, he adopts several personalities throughout the novel which Bhabha describes via the notion of mimicry. The colonized tend to mimic roles that are typical of the culture of the colonizer. However, these roles are described as "metonymic:"

In mimicry, the representation of identity and meaning is rearticulated along the axis of metonymy.....mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization of repression of difference, but a form of resemblance, that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically. Its threat.... comes from the prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory 'identity effects' in the play of a power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no 'itself. '(Bhabha 128-9)

That is to say that the colonized try to express their whole identity through mimicry believing that this would give them stability and order, but these roles only present a part of their identity, "a partial presence". This is because "mimicry repeats rather than re-presents" (Bhabha 125), producing a 'blurred copy' that is "almost the same but not quiet.....Almost the same but not white" (126-7). This is clearly depicted in the novel as Singh adopts different roles which all end in failure. This is because as Singh tries to assert an authentic identity through mimicry, he is only mirroring authenticity and this is the partial presentation of the "authentic" as Bhabha explains.

This is clear as the novel starts with Singh as a student in England in his “multi-mirrored, book-shaped room with a coffin-like wardrobe” (Naipaul 5). The mirrors here symbolize the multiple selves he encounters as well as the different roles he tries to play. Mirrors reflect an image and not real self, so the significance of the multi-mirrored room is the reflection of multiple images. Hence, in London, Singh resorts to adopting roles; he tries to give himself personalities that correspond with what is required from a mimic man by the metropolis. Accordingly, he is unable to hold on to a fixed identity because he gives himself a personality, then waits for the response in the eyes of others. Throughout the novel, he questions whether his “personality” or “character” is constructed or “manufactured” by the vision of others and whether it is determined by himself: “I question now whether the personality is manufactured by the vision of others. The personality hangs together. It is one and indivisible” (Naipaul 183). In London, he finds that he has left the security that provided him with a sense of self despite its restrictions. Alone in London, without the support that he had never perceived in Isabella, he has to find his own sense of self. He states that in London, he needed “the guidance of other men’s eyes” (Naipaul 19). Ghisalbheri explains this is not “simply the mimicry of other, but a more shattering dependence, the mimicry of others’ expectations, submissiveness, and compliance to their internal but never stated demands” (76).

This is clear as the identity he chooses for himself in London is based on how people see him, “it was up to me to choose my character, and I chose the character that was easiest and most attractive. I was the dandy, the extravagant colonial, indifferent to scholarship” (Naipaul 20). However, this is immediately reversed as Lien, the Maltese house-keeper is a guide for him and plays a role in creating his character which is that of the rich colonial in London. Through writing, Singh realizes this, “but she it was- it is so obvious now- who, by suggestion and flattery, created the character of the rich colonial” (20). He explains: “we become what we see of ourselves in the eyes of others” (20). When he moves to live in Mr. Shylock’s house, he adopts the personality of the “confident, flippant dandy” which was the character he “retained and promoted, almost without design now” (Naipaul 39). He describes this character as “the creation of London” (50). However, the mimicry and role-playing through which he tries to construct an identity merely lead to further disillusionment. Thus, even though he comes to London with the aim of acquiring a good education and in turn, earning an identity, he is unable to do so because of the

negative impact of the people around him who mislead him and compel him to violate his own self by merely imitating them and seeking their approval and this leads him to aimlessness. Consequently, he is unable to put order to his own life, his chaotic existence nor secure an authentic identity as he himself was never the same person: "How could I fashion order out of these unrelated adventures and encounters, myself never the same..." (Naipaul 28). Mimicry for him is more than an act; it is a "condition which is as much a necessity as it is a social burden." (Phukan 149).

Another clear example of mimicry in the novel is Singh's political career. According to Bhabha, "the menace of mimicry is its double vision" and this is "a result of ...partial representation/ recognition of the colonial subject" (126). Bhabha cites as an example of this "Naipaul's colonial politician as play-actor" (126). After the failure of his marriage to Sandra, which is in itself another example of his adopting colonial ways, Singh adopts the identity of a politician, and it is his involvement in the political struggle on Isabella which proves to be the most decisive failure of his life, the final shipwreck. As he writes his memoirs, Singh admits that the period of involvement in colonial politics was a mistake, and he cannot avoid "a feeling of waste and regret for opportunities missed" (Naipaul 183). His political career is personal, and it is someone else who gives him this personality which is his friend Browne with whom he works as a politician as he finds in this role the character that he is lacking. His bitterness is clear in his writing as he realizes that his own sense of inadequacy as a person suffering from a lack of personality which has been part of his life since childhood led him to begin a political career that ended in failure and exile. Singh describes being a politician as a "role I had created for myself" (Naipaul 40). He adopts this character of the politician in an attempt to "repair an internal disorder:"

The politician is more than a man with a cause, even when this cause is no more than self-advancement. He is driven by some little hurt, some little incompleteness. He is seeking to exercise some skill which even to him is never as concrete as the skill of an engineer; of the true nature of this skill he is not aware until he begins to exercise it. (Naipaul 37)

This indicates that his identity as a politician is not a real one; it is merely another attempt to assert an authentic identity.

In his article "Politics & The Diasporic Consciousness In '*The Mimic Men*'," Smriti Singh explains that the protagonist is the "product of the



prevailing historical and political situation which in turn is the result of colonialism” (39). Naipaul reveals in his novel that people who work in politics throughout the world are no politicians, and this indicates the relevance of his novel to other ex-colonies. This is clear in the novel when Singh, the narrator, says:

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. We mistake words and the acclamation of words for power; as soon as our bluff is called we are lost. Politics for us are a do-or-die, once-for-all charge. Once we are committed we fight more than political battles; we often fight quite literally for our lives. (Naipaul 8)

According to Smriti Singh, this is a “cynical view” of politics and indicates that the leaders of the newly independent, non- white countries are neither better nor more humanist than the imperialists they had replaced. He contends that Naipaul “excels in his observations about political life in such a hollow society” (41). Through his protagonist, Naipaul highlights the hypocrisy of those third-world politicians by drawing the following caricature:

We would see them in their new suits even on the hottest days. We could see the foolish stern faces they had prepared for the public to hide their pleasure at their new eminence....We would see them ...as they were driven in government cars marked with the letter M, on which they had insisted, to proclaim their status as Ministers. (Naipaul 191).

Thus, as Smritri Singh maintains, these politicians “begin in bluff and end in bluff.” Though Singh belongs to an independent state, he and the other politicians are “colonized intellectuals” who behave like “common opportunists” and the “indigenous population is discerned only as an indistinct mass” to be used for their personal gains (Singh 45). Accordingly, Naipaul’s “explicit portrayal of East Indianness as “other” is linked to an implicit examination of how “new” political identities are formed, erased, or forgotten in the changing political climate of the West Indies during decolonization” (Singh 138). Singh eventually realizes, in retrospect, through the process of writing, that politics does not heal individual hurt: “The tragedy of power like mine is that there is no way down. There can only be extinction. Dust to dust; rags to

rags; fear to fear” (Naipaul 40). Thus, this is the fate of men in power. He eventually admits while writing his memoirs that being a politician was not his vocation and for that reason it ended in failure. Furthermore, the political movement ended in failure because of a lack of concrete changes beyond the enticing drama, and this is again because of mimicry. This word “drama” which Singh repeatedly uses indicates play-acting and in turn reveals the falsity of the movement and the hollowness of mimicry that can only lead to inauthenticity. Singh admits that they used “borrowed phrases which were part of the escape from thought” (Naipaul 198). He uses this expression “borrowed phrases” to underline their mimicry and how it ultimately led him away from finding a sense of self.

Finally, he leaves the island and returns to London where he starts his life as a recluse, writing his memoirs, and it is this act of writing which he considers the most fruitful pursuit. As he writes his memoirs in the hotel room, he is in a “liminal” space; this liminality is explained as that moment “when the past has lost its grip and the future has not yet taken its definite shape” (qtd. in Kalua 24). Even though it might be a moment of restlessness as the future is unknowable, it is also “an expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment” (Bhabha 6). This is because as Bhabha maintains, it is through writing that one can assert an authentic identity and put order to chaotic existence. This process of writing allows the protagonist to occupy his identity retrospectively and produce it again, so that he can know who he is and come to terms with his society. Furthermore, this “liminality” is described by Fetson Kalua in his article “Homi Bhabha’s Third Space and African Identity” as representative of “a phase in the life of a subject-an individual, a community, or a nation- which belies any attempts at settled assumptions about its identity because of inherent contradictions and instabilities that often come to haunt the subject” (Kalua 24). Bhabha’s idea of liminality as the “beyond” cannot be considered as an “overdetermined space but one loaded with ambiguity; it represents an act of unleashing that post-dialectical moment when people reject structures and hegemonies and occupy any one of the heterogeneous spaces where they negotiate narratives of their existences as well as of particular spaces of meanings and different identities within the postcolonial condition” (Kalua 24). This is achieved through the process of writing as Naipaul employs the hotel room as the “liminal space” where Singh can no longer relate to his past and at the same time is unable to determine the future. He has no strong bonds to “any one discourse or geographical space” as Tuomas Huttunen explains in his article “V.S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*: Narrative Transcending of Order and Disorder” (269). He is confused about his identity as he admits that he has

always been a mimic man, and he is increasingly isolated from his culture as an Indian and eventually becomes a man without a home as Naipaul depicts in his novel, so he withdraws from society to the hotel room where he writes his memoirs as a means of giving order to his past and trying to understand how he became a mimic man.

### Bhabha's Third Space

Bhabha explains that there are social and psychological poles that create what he calls the "third space" and describes them as forming a "double time." Moreover, he defines the two sides of this double time as "pedagogical" and "performative". The pedagogical pole is represented by Western history and ideology and comes to the subject from the outside, specifically through colonial education. The "performative" pole is the "discourse produced by the subject in normal everyday life by plotting and ordering experiences to give them meaning, i.e. the production by the consciousness of memories, images, etc." (Huttunen 271). Through the process of narration, these two discourses the "pedagogical" and the "performative" are united, and memory forms "a kind of third space and produces a strange mixture of discourses that does not correspond to reality as either of the original discourses understands it" (Huttunen 274). However, through the process of narration, the subject is able to create a relationship between contradictory realities. This is evident in the novel because despite Singh's initial confusion, this process of writing "points up the immense freedoms which come about when contradictions are synthesized and overrun in the Third Space" (Kalua 24). This is because writing becomes a means of self-definition. By reevaluating his life and the false identities which he assumed as a result of mimicry, Singh is able to gain a sense of mental freedom in his attempt to gain an authentic identity, and this is achieved through the process of writing. As a person who occupies a liminal space, Singh is "capable of creating a new identity for himself through the narrative rearrangement of the past" (Huttunen 269).

Thus, through the process of writing, Singh moves to a third space which is neither that of past memories of the plantation of Isabella nor that of his present surroundings in London, but a mixture of these two. This results in a "private fabrication" which is precisely the mixture of the differing realities of the actual and the imaginary. The history Singh is writing is this kind of "private fabrication" (Huttunen 284). These differing realities that surrounded Singh were his Aryan ancestry, the circumstances on Isabella and the influences coming from London. Hence, this history "forms into a kind of area of the mind, where

incommensurable realities can be united. At the same time, he is writing his identity anew, refiguring his life story” (Huttunen 284). This is the third space of enunciation that Bhabha refers to that can be achieved by moving through the spheres of the “pedagogical” and the “performative”. Writing becomes a means by which he can reflect upon his different experiences and find reasons for his failure. Singh is able to do this as he “continuously objectifies and distances his past self from his present self through the self-conscious examination of his own past deeds” (Huttunen 269). Consequently, through the process of writing, he learns how colonial experiences have affected and shaped his life and therefore, writing is a step towards creating an identity and has a healing effect.

Hence, writing for Singh is an outlet, a remedy for psychic disorders. He describes his decision to start writing at the beginning of his political career as “an urge that surprised me in the midst of activity, during those moments of stillness and withdrawal which came to me in the days of power, when with compassion for others there also came an awareness of myself not as an individual but as a performer” (Naipaul 81). Consequently, he made this decision because of the sense of disorder he felt around him, “a disorder that was beyond any one man to control yet which, I felt, if I could pin down, might bring me calm” (Naipaul 81). By re-evaluating different events in his life, the protagonist is able to come to terms with his past:

By this recreation 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 243)

Hence, this is Bhabha’s third space of enunciation that can be achieved by moving through the spheres of the “pedagogical” and the “performative”. According to Bhabha, all texts are written in this ambivalent cultural space. Singh creates Bhabha’s third space through the mixture of the imaginary and the real as well as the mixture of discourses coming from outside “pedagogical” and those that he himself creates “performative.” Accordingly, through the narrative rearrangement of the past, “he transcends both the effects of disillusionment with the order promised by Western discourse, and the effects of the feeling of disorder caused by his postcolonial displaced origin” (Huttunen 287). Through the process of writing, Singh finally realizes that previously he merely behaved as was expected from him, and it is this hollow mimicry which lead to a loss of identity. He chooses to leave the hotel room, the liminal space, where after writing his

experiences, he is willing to go back to life, and play a role in society; however, what this role will be is not clear:

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.....Yet some fear of action remains. I do not wish to be re-engaged in that cycle form which I have freed myself. I fear to be continually washed up on this city. (Naipaul 251)

Even though he expresses his fear of action, he is still willing to play an active role in society. Singh is ready to start a new life. It is therefore a story of redemption as Singh is able to reach a new level of self-awareness. Consequently, after rearranging his past through writing, he is ready for “the action of a free man” (251) who “has defined himself and is free of other people’s views” (Huttunen 279). Singh moves from the “area of mimicry to that of mimesis, from sterile imitation to creative representation of the real world in writing” (Lindroth 529). Thus, he acknowledges that he has been a mimic man and is ready to join society again and play an effective role in it.

## Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has been an analysis of *The Mimic Men* and the identity crisis which has faced the protagonist due to his inability to assert an authentic identity as a result of his hollow mimicry of Western customs and values, and this has ultimately led to inauthenticity. The novel’s title, colonial education which prepares children to mimic Western culture, the example of the apple, the use of the English language and his marriage to an English woman as well as the Roman house are examples of this hollow mimicry which have been analyzed in this paper. Moreover, in his attempt to assert an authentic identity, Singh has adopted different roles as the dandy and rich colonial in London and the politician in Isabella which have been examined in this paper as a form of mimicry. However, the process of writing has given him a better understanding of different experiences and how he has become a mimic man. Finally, at the age of forty, Ralph Singh’s integration in society and his active life, the period of his life in “parenthesis” as he has described

it, have come to an end, so that he has finally withdrawn from society to write his memoirs in a suburban London hotel. The final phase of his life is that of withdrawal.

Narration has allowed him to create meaningful relationships between past experiences, and therefore, he has succeeded in achieving order and liberating himself from the dilemma of mimicry. Thus, it is only through a "closer scrutiny of the details of the past, events that might have passed unrecorded and the closures that hastened the disorder, does he achieve order. Assuming the weaknesses and responding to them, he has diagnosed the ills of his past and tried to heal them" (Baazizi 35). Singh has turned to accept his homelessness as what makes him a free man, no longer seeking the guidance of something outside of himself. He has succeeded in turning isolation to strength. This is because disorder is ultimately individual and not societal, and each individual has to face his own disorder.

It is only after he has left the island to lead a simple life in a suburban hotel in London, and after imposing order to his life through the process of writing that he feels that he has "cleared the decks, as it were, and prepared himself for fresh action" (Naipaul 251). He is able to recover some sense of himself and the past and be prepared to reclaim his life again after all the "shipwrecks" that he suffered from during his life have been partially overcome through the retrospective understanding made possible by writing his life story. He has moved into Bhabha's third space of enunciation through the mixture of the imaginary and the real as well as the mixture of discourses coming from outside "pedagogical" and those that he himself creates "performative." Hence, the process of writing has provided Singh with satisfaction and the sense of order that he was looking for; it has also become an important step in asserting an authentic identity. He contends that the process of writing his memoirs has provided the order which he had previously searched for in vain.

Moreover, as evident in the novel, deconstruction of stereotypes is one of the important steps to assert an authentic identity. At the end of the novel, Singh is left with two alternatives to choose from, either mimicking his Aryan ancestors and thus reintegrating himself in a cultural tradition that could provide order as well as redemption from the shipwrecks of his life or joining the world again and playing an effective role in it. He chooses to leave the hotel room, the liminal space, where after writing his experiences, he is willing to go back to life, and play a role in society; however, what this role will be is not clear. Therefore, it is a story of redemption as Singh has reached a new level of self-awareness and is ready to start a new life for he has freed himself from the predicament of mimicry which only leads to a loss of identity, and has decided to play an active role in society.

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## تجاوز المحاكاة بالكتابة عن الذات في رواية "الدمي" لثي اس نايبول

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### المستخلص

يعكس الأدب الكاريبي الحالة في مجتمعات ما بعد الاستعمار وهي حالة تعكس الاندماج فيما لم يستطع الشعب المستعمر الاندماج فيه سابقاً. إن الطبيعة الممزقة للمجتمع بسبب الاستعمار تمنح سكان جزر الهند الغربية إحساساً حاداً بالمنفى، وتعكس أدبيات هذه المنطقة عواقب الاستعمار التي تحاول التصالح معها. إن الهدف من هذه الورقة البحثية هو تحليل رواية أحد كبار الكتاب الكاريبيين؛ الكاتب البريطاني الترينيدادي من أصل هندي؛ فيديادهار سوراچيراساد نايبول، بعنوان "الدمي" (*The Mimic Men*) تعرض الرواية موضوع المحاكاة من خلال وصف تجربة المستعمر في عالم ما بعد الاستعمار. يستكشف نايبول قوة المحاكاة ما بعد الاستعمار التي تدمر ماضي الشعوب وتجردهم من هويتهم. إن سينغ، بطل الرواية، يعاني من الشلل النفسي والعاطفي بسبب الظروف ما بعد الاستعمار التي ولد فيها ويعاني بطل الرواية في النهاية من أزمة هوية عميقة. تركز الورقة على موضوعات التشرد والتقليد وكتابة المذكرات كوسيلة لخلق هوية أصيلة. يتم تحليل الرواية في إطار نظرية هومي بابا لما بعد الاستعمار عن التقليد والفضاء الثالث. الكلمات المفتاحية: المحاكاة - الفضاء الثالث - أزمة هوية - نايبول - الدمى