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PROJECTION OF 'MIMICRY' AND 'AMBIVALENCE' IN *THE MIMIC MEN* BY V.S NAIPAUL: A
POSTCOLONIAL READING

JOY DAS

State Aided College Teacher (Category I), Department of English, Saheed Kshudiram College,
Kamakhyaguri, Alipurduar, West Bengal
Email: academia.joy_das@rediffmail.com



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ABSTRACT

This paper purports to interpret V.S Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* with close analyzation of Homi K. Bhabha's notion of 'mimicry' and 'ambivalence', 'hybridity' etc. Postcolonial literature often exemplifies the dichotomy between 'self' and 'other', between native culture and colonizer's culture, mimicking tendency and consequent disillusionment. Postcolonial reading opens up space for penetrating deeper into the 'half-way life' of the colonial subjects which Naipaul exposes through his skillful crafting. Such native people often suffer from 'inferiority complex' of their essentially own culture and attempt to embrace colonizer's language, fashion, culture, style etc. and ends at finding the himself trapped in the in-between space which often generates sense of dislocation and identity crisis. Here this paper is an attempt to apprehend the postcolonial theoretical nuances, particularly the concepts of Bhabha which constitute close resonance with V.S Naipaul's narrative and the paper will also unveil the issue of 'unhomeliness' inciting from hybridity as evident in *The Mimic Men*.

Keywords: 'Mimicry', 'ambivalence', 'unhomeness', 'hybridity', 'self', 'other'.

The term 'postcolonialism' is often applied to literature emerging from the once colonized lands delineating its people and cultural issues. In other words it is an arena of analyzing certain unequal power structures from the view-point of the colonized one. Eminent postcolonial critic Homi K. Bhabha has stated that "Postcolonial perspective emerges from the colonial testimony of Third world countries within the geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South" (Bhabha 3). However, 'postcolonial' is a term which can be taken into account primarily "to identify a range of experiences and representations produced by intercultural and transnational conflict, migration and enforced settlement since the long withdrawing roar of empire in the twentieth century" (Walder 3-4). Trinidadian born British novelist V. S Naipaul is a celebrated postcolonial novelist whose writings reflect the incompatible nexus between the colonizer and colonized relationship. The admixture of certain different cultures has paved the way for fragmentation, identity crisis in post-colonial period where colonizer's attributes and indigenous attributes are in serious competition giving provenance to the notions like 'mimicry' and 'ambivalence' and such is the issue with Naipaul's most influential novel *The Mimic Men* (1967).

In contemporary postcolonial studies 'mimicry' mostly denotes trembling imitations which are postcolonial cultural entities, attempting to destabilize the lies to 'Self' for moving towards 'Others'. Such is

also the case with Ranjit Kripal Singh, the protagonist of Naipaul's novel *The Mimic Men*. Homi K. Bhabha is of the opinion that "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable 'other', as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 103). Again Bhabha is the most notable critic in highlighting the inherent contradictions of colonial discourse in his essay "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" where he attempts to disclose 'ambivalence' of colonizers' and colonized's attitudes and therefore, for him, "The menace of mimicry is its double vision that is a result of what I've described as the partial representation/recognition of the colonial object" (Bhabha 102). In colonial discourse such 'self' and 'other' interaction actually generates a hybrid space which is easily discernible in the journey of Ralph Singh who undergoes a tremendous crisis regarding his identity in the postcolonial world as represented in *The Mimic Men*.

The heterogeneous cultural heritage of V. S Naipaul who is a native Trinidadian, Indian in ancestry and residually a British, often mark his literary oeuvre with the issue of identity formation. In an interview he himself says that, "I come from a small society; I was aware that I had no influence in the world; I was part of it. And then I belonged to a minority group, I moved away, became a foreigner... Because one doesn't have a side, doesn't have a country, doesn't have a community. One is entirely an individual" (Rowe-Evans 59). Naipaul's sense of dislocation enables him to write on behalf of the colonized who often undergoes 'ambivalence' in cultural interactions. This is not only the issue with Ralph Singh of *The Mimic Men* but Naipaul's literary manifestation of such dimensions is relevant worldwide transcending the periphery of Trinidadian fictional island 'Isabella'. Regarding this critic Champa Rao Mohan's view is worth quoting, "The themes of alienation, homelessness and mimicry still preoccupy Naipaul but the perspective has changed. They are now viewed as a universal condition of the modern world afflicting both colonized and colonizers alike", (Mohan 140).

Ranjit Kripal Singh, the colonial political man of Trinidadian origin, seemingly divides his life into three phases: life in London, life in Isabella and lastly life in flux. A minute analysis of his journey as represented in *The Mimic Men* pertains close resemblance with Bhabha's notion of 'mimicry' and 'ambivalence' as Singh himself says that "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 quickly to the new" (Naipaul 156). Bhabha always puts emphasis on this double articulation of mimicry with colonial 'others' ambivalent attitude which is intensely visible in Ralph's words. Again such destabilization of mimicry is well manifested in Bill Ashcroft's words that "The mimicry of the postcolonial subject is therefore always potentially destabilizing to colonial discourse and locates an area of considerable political and cultural uncertainty in the structure of imperial dominance" (Ashcroft 142). One of the prominent reason of 'mimicry' is to the colonized's sense of inferiority of his culture, just as "This tainted island is not for me. I decided years ago that this landscape is not mine. Let us move on. Let us stay on the ship and be taken somewhere else" (Naipaul 53), but his ambivalent nature comes forth as he tries to incorporate London lifestyle in his island rather than staying in London.

During his scholarly life in London, Singh gets close with Sandra, and his marriage with her is a significant instance of mimicking colonial culture as he says that 'She was English. With her the mere fact of communication was delight' (Naipaul 47). Again it is a sense of superiority of Sandra which fascinated Singh mostly: "It was in her walk, in the bite of her speech, even in the way she ate food which she considered expensive... To me, drifting about the big city that had reduced me to futility, she was all that was positive" (Naipaul 50). From the above statement a kind of love-hate attitude is easily perceivable and that's why it is said that mimicry often shapes into 'menace' than 'resemblance' and regarding this Bhabha's vision is that "The effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing... mimicry is at once resemblance and menace" (Bhabha 100). With lots of expectation and confidence Singh attempts to rehabilitate his fragmented life with marriage but obviously with ambivalent outlook and for this reason Singh names his marriage bond as "the dark romance of a mixed marriage" (Naipaul 52).

Homi K. Bhabha in his essay "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" deliberately represents 'mimicry' as an outcome of the colonizer's civilizing mission which follows the dictum 'human are not wholly human'. In fact, the imperial educational system of Isabella as portrayed by V.S Naipaul in *The Mimic Men* is an offshoot of 'mimicry' as evident from Singh's words "We pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World ..." (Naipaul 156). The result of such colonial educational system is cultural trauma which reaches its culmination when the protagonist decides to change his own name from Ranjit Kripal Singh to Ralph Singh: "...I gave myself a new name... I mitigated the fantasy or deception and it helped in school reports..." (Naipaul 100). It explicitly denotes that Singh's sense of colonial superiority leads him to change his cultural identity and he also did it as a part of competition with 'French Deschampsneufs'. However not only Ralph Singh, his cousin Cecil, the black Evans, Browne etc. also engage themselves in mimicry, even one goes to the extent of ignoring his mother's negro identity. Such issues hold strong resemblance with Frantz Fanon's idea of 'Black skin, white masks' when the colonized tries to internalize the 'self' as 'other' and obviously such things paves way for identity crisis, alienation, and cultural dislocation which is also prevalent in Ralph's life.

Critic James Lindroth is of the opinion that Ralph Singh transgresses from "the mimicry of the fraudulent pretense to the mimesis of authentic creative performance" (Lindroth 529), but even in the most creative phase in his life when he attempts to become writer or politician, there are ample instances of his mimicking self in *The Mimic Men*. Just as in establishing himself as an independent person he never looks for his essentially own strategies, rather eager to mimic others specially Mr. Shylock and that too for his outward gestures: "I thought Mr. Shylock looked distinguished, like a lawyer or politician. He had the habit of stroking the lobe of his ear and inclining his head to listen, I thought the gesture was attractive; I copied it" (Naipaul 9).

Again in *The Mimic Men*, Singh's adherence to mimicry becomes explicit from his excessive charm for the Roman Houses and in his own words, "I was struck by the simplicity of the Roman house, its outward austerity, its inner, private magnificence; I was struck by its suitability to our climate; I yielded to impulse" (Naipaul 77). And here Singh's ambivalent attitude also comes forth which exemplifies the disparity between what is hoped and the actual outcome, much resonating Bhabha's notion of 'ambivalence' in his essay "Signs Taken for Wonder" as when Singh builds a kind of replica of Roman House much enthusiastically, sooner he "lost interest in it (the house) but we both kept this secret from the other" (Naipaul 79). Then in the later stage while seeking identity as politician away from London, he expresses his ambivalent attitude while asking for London's intervention in sorting out his Islands' problem. Moreover ambivalent nature of politicians is well exhibited in Singh's words: "Politicians are people who truly make something out of nothing. They have few concrete gifts to offer. They are manipulators; they offer themselves as manipulators. Having no gifts to offer, they seldom know what they seek" (Naipaul 42).

Both 'mimicry' and 'ambivalence' are the resultant of colonial interaction which creates a kind of 'Contact zone' for the colonizer and the colonized and this incites to 'hybridity'. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha explores the idea of 'hybridity' as what is "new, neither the one nor the other" (Bhabha 28). For him it connotes dynamism in colonial discourse which was previously unmixed and consolidated to 'self' only. Here in *The Mimic Men*, Naipaul intensely represents such kind of hybridity as Ralph Singh and his fellow mates in Isabella all undergo multicultural interactions. It generates a 'hybrid space' which belongs neither to colonizer nor to the colonized, and often results in estrangement from native culture which is the issue with Singh. As a result of the imperial past he cannot identify himself in his own way, rather always looks for colonial 'other' in formulation of his identity, mostly through 'mimicry'. It also impinges the 'self' into crisis and concept like 'Unhomeliness' becomes evident, which according to Bhabha is a position in which the colonized cannot identify himself with the colonizer's culture nor with his indigenous culture. This is exactly what happens with Ralph Singh for his long cherishing of 'mimicry' and 'ambivalence': "I thought I should preserve the photograph. But I left it where I had found it...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 11). He not only feels estranged from London life but feels the same with his native culture: "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" (Naipaul 12).

'Mimicry' and 'ambivalence' are actually tools in Naipaul's literary oeuvre which pertain close semblance with author's life episodes. In fact identity crisis, cultural dislocation, ambivalent attitude as reflected in *The Mimic Men* is also visible in author's life and in his other novels including *Half a Life*. Analogy between Willie Somerset Chandran, protagonist of *Half a Life* and Ralph Singh can easily be drawn as both has inclination for mimicking colonial culture and therefore, emigrates to London to contrive a stable life and again like Ralph. Willie has no emotional ties with his family. Next both experiences same sense of 'Unhomeliness' and remains caught in-between position and as a way-out both chooses writing.

After a minute analyzation of the entire novel *The Mimic Men*, it can be easily apprehended that Homi K. Bhabha's ethos of 'mimicry' and 'ambivalence' are prevalent throughout the text. In fact Naipaul tries to forecast the devastating effects of 'mimicry' through his character portrayals. The heterogeneous culture which Naipaul projects through his narrative, ultimately paves way for 'mimicking selves' which is also present in Bhabha's notion: "Colonial encounter between the white presence and its black semblance, there emerges the question of ambivalence of mimicry as a problematic of colonial subjection" (Bhabha104). In postcolonial literature ample reference of 'mimicry' and 'ambivalence' is discernible but Naipaul brilliantly manifests Bhabha's idea of 'mimicry' as 'almost the same but not quite' in resulting disillusionment of the protagonist. Moreover Naipaul's uniqueness lies in his universalizing the predicament of the 'mimic men' in postcolonial world transcending boundaries of Isabella.

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