Chapter - IV

THE MIMIC MEN

Quest For Order From Crisis and Chaos
V.S. Naipaul's novels are concerned with individual's quest for identity in a changing milieu. In most of his novels he not only chronicles life but also analyses and clarifies the realities confronting human beings. "The collision of cultures and the resultant ambiguities in human adjustment, the colonial situation producing a special kind of human psychosis, and the motives within the individual creating a structure of human relationships unique to the colonial or post-colonial society are the prominent themes in his novels."¹ He deals with how an individual resists or overcomes the conditions in which he is placed, and ultimately succeeds, or fails, to survive and succeeds. Thus, his fiction acquires historical, social and psychological significance and he becomes a chronicler, historian and biographer. The novel *The Mimic Men* deals with the above said themes.

Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* (1967) deals with the post war period, a period of transition, when many countries became free from the clutches of the British rulers. But the colonial rule had exploited and influenced the natives so much that even after independence; they continued to suffer from mental slavery, nearly losing their independent ethos. In their efforts to attain cultural, political and social identity, these people lost the sense of direction because they were unable to cope with the new forms. The impact was so deep that without mimicry one found oneself culturally displaced. The decolonized countries appear to Naipaul to be barren and impoverished. The people are all demoralized and degenerated so Naipaul calls them "Mimic Men". John Thieme observes:

"Escape has become a way of life and displacement a perennial condition. For the dispossessed colonial, political independence solves no problems. A kind of cycle determinism makes it possible for them to find home. Neither colony, nor the mother country provides matrix. Dependence and displacement are his ultimates."²
Naipaul is a writer of the Third world. The Mimic Men is a novel on colonial politics in the Third world. Naipaul's major interest in this novel is the psychological effects of colonialism on the modern man. The novel deals with a particular atmosphere at Isabella, in the West Indies. It takes the form of memoirs of the narrator, a disgraced minister, exiled from his native island and living in London. It is an account of the experiences of a displaced, disillusioned and alienated person representing the modern man and "the light gay air of the earlier novels has completely disappeared here as the protagonist virtually sounds the bottom of despair".3

Ralph Singh, though a native of Isabella, never feels part of it and dreams of Asian mountains where snow falls and plains roamed by horsemen. But very soon he feels disgusted with them. Since his childhood he has felt himself shipwrecked and thought that Isabella is an island of disorder. He feels the urgency for withdrawal and decides to go to London where he meets Sandra. He marries her, returns to Isabella and acquires enough wealth. Because of his father's reputation and his orator friend Browne, he is elected to power. But power proves a mirage. He sees its futility in such an inorganic fragmented society. His marriage ends in a divorce, the pleasure brought by money fades, friends leave him in despair, and ultimately the mimicry out of which he attempts to organize his meaningless existence leads him to disillusionment. The novel thus deals with the effects of colonial education, the loneliness and despair, corruption and rootlessness which deny the possibility of integration, the problems and conflicts that the colonized countries face after independence. All these are examined in terms of the central figure Ralph Singh. He retires to a contemplative life in a London suburban hotel at the age of forty and describes his new state of mind in the following words:

It does not worry me now, as it worried me when I began this book.... I no longer yearn for ideal landscapes.... I have lived through attachment
and freed myself from one cycle of events. It gives me joy to find that in so doing I have also fulfilled the fourfold division of life prescribed by our Aryan ancestors. I have been student, householder and man of affairs, recluse.  

Ralph travels from Isabella to London and back again to Isabella. He tries to seek his Aryan heritage in imagination, to escape to London and to return home. All these attempts fail. He realizes himself from the wheel of Karma, no longer expecting the fruit of action. In the end he identifies himself with the Hindu tradition which signifies the phase of release and final reintegration.

While reading the novel "we do not observe the process of development of the narrator but his rationalization for the life he has already lived." Singh's retirement is forced and he becomes prematurely old, so that he can now view his life in a stable and detached manner. Thus, the novel becomes contemplative, written by the protagonist at his climatic period. It is to combat disorder that he finally withdraws from life and undertakes writing.

Naipaul's The Mimic Men marks an important phase in his fictional career. The novel is significant for various reasons. It is perhaps the clearest expression of the themes that shape Naipaul's novels, namely, the escape of the Third World into fantasy, on being poverty-stricken and isolated on the fringes of power. "It discloses the sprouting up of various political and religious movements which, though ineffective, offer a sense of drama and empty excitement. Unobtrusively it ends . finally ending up in disorder, politics shown dominated by appeals to race and colour, the absence of real power, myths, culture or competence have resulted in a tendency to mimic, and a feeling of homelessness and identity crisis persists." The Mimic Men also seems to provide a reply to criticism which charges Naipaul of being an exponent of the metropolitan values and ideologies: "The Mimic Men clearly marks the end of ..... an absorption with his (Naipaul's) personal homelessness, a final release
from… 'a barren cycle of events,' as Naipaul in this novel seems to be concerned with the rootlessness and placelessness of a typical modern man, let alone a colonial individual." Naipaul's later novels deal with the subject of migration and its aftermath which involves the questions of identity, rootlessness, cultural difference, assimilation, unconquerable stasis, and futility. The tone for this is set, for the first time, in The Mimic Men.

Naipaul presents the predicament of Ralph Singh, the protagonist of the novel, to be identical as that of any modern man, including an ex-colonizer. The novel is narrated in the form of memoirs by the main character who is implicitly criticized by what he actually reveals about himself. It starts and ends in the present with the narrative shifting back and forth in time between Ralph Singh's childhood, student life in London, his return to the island, his political career, and exile in London. It embodies a series of compressed incidents ordered in a sequence of contrasting events to build a unified plot. As Bruce King points out, "There is an increasing mastery of striking phrases..... The distillation of a scene to epigram, a striking image or a fragment of conversation allows freedom from filling in narrative details and chronology". Unlike his previous novels, The Mimic Men ends on an optimistic note. After having been through so many failures, set-backs, the narrator-protagonist still has hope enough to say "I have cleared the decks, as it were, and prepared myself for fresh action. It will be the action of a free man."

Ralph Singh, the protagonist-narrator of the novel, is the representative of a generation which gains power at independence and can only mimic the authenticity of selfhood. His various failures at the level of personal life are indicative of a larger, national failure. The novel begins with Ralph Singh, "an exiled, or rather a withdrawn politician, fatigued by disillusion rather than failure, writing his memoirs in an aseptic, placeless London suburb". He sets out to write down his experiences with the hope of fashioning an order out of
the various unrelated adventures and encounters, through which he had been. He struggles like an artist to create something, to discover some meaning out of the muddled state of affairs experienced by him. Such an act of writing his autobiography turns out to be more than a discovery. It becomes a recovery, a retrieval of a blighted individual as a free individual with a clear and purged consciousness. At another level, this political autobiography transcends from the level of a personal, confession report to an existential allegory of the modern man.

Ralph Singh refers to this particular period of his life as something in parenthesis. The novel records Ralph Singh’s transition from innocence to experience and his passage from external disorder to personal harmony. “The writing of his story, becomes the very means to endure the terror, shipwreck, abandonment and loneliness of his situation.”11 By analyzing and interpreting his own experiences he hopes to find some order within the chaos of the present, and the uncertainty of the future in the contemporary colonial society. The social analysis which he attempts in The Mimic Men is not confined to the West Indies but extends to the entire Third World: He confesses,

“It was my hope to give expression to the restlessness, the deep disorder, which the great explorations, the overthrow in three continents of established, social organizations, the unnatural bringing together of peoples.... But this work will not now be written by me; I am too much a victim of that restlessness which was to have been my subject. And it must also be confessed that in that dream of writing I was attracted less by the act and the labour than by the calm and the order which the act would have implied.”12

In a colloquial speech Ralph provides a very convincing reason of his alienation in London where he remains on the fringe of society. He does not try to move out of his own family circle, his own country, and when he comes to London he experiences a sense of anonymity and loneliness. Ralph's frustrations increase because he views
London as a city of purity and perfection whereas in truth he finds it to be a larger Isabella with its own sort of mimic men, hypocrites and insecure people. Many of the characters living in this make-believe world have hypocritical names such as Countless John Cedric, Shylock and Rudolph. It is only when his resolution is carried out much later:

"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."\(^{13}\)

In this state of mental drift and shock he chances across Sandra, the English girl, who becomes his wife. But these days of bliss are short-lived and he finds his wife to be too tough and independent. From one drift to another Ralph makes one final effort to find an anchorage through his participation in politics, but even here Ralph's political career is doomed. In this section of the novel Naipaul's scathing criticism of the ruling politicians is brought into focus. Though Naipaul writes about the political chicanery of the ruling masters of a nascent independent country, he seems to be more interested in dealing with the fate of the unanchored and estranged individual. One important attitude becomes apparent from a study of The Mimic Men. It seems to be the narrator's contention that the colonial society can perhaps be maintained by retaining foreign traditions and values. Ralph remarks of his grandfather:

"My mother's father was no doubt an undignified figure, an object of easy satire. But at least at the end, within the framework of our order, benevolence and service were imposed on him. And he was never as totally ridiculous as the men we put in his place: men without talent or achievement save the reputed one of controlling certain sections of the populations, unproductive uncreative men who pushed themselves into prominence by an excess of that bitterness which every untalented clerk secretes."\(^{14}\)
Naipaul's portrayal of the West Indian situation in terms of history and time is looked at from a more distant and clinical angle after *A House for Mr. Biswas*. His later fiction beginning with *The Mimic Men* marks a total contrast in terms of artistic vision, which is at once more alienated, bleak and acrid. The irony operates more in relation to the characters' political and moral depravity. The idea of shipwreck and failure is more marked, but the metaphor of exile and uprooting retains its sting, with a varied cultural extension. "To be precise, the heroes and the main figures now are replicas of mimic men tamed by the corruption and the exhaustion in their being colonials."\(^{15}\)

The novel is political in a deeper sense. Ralph's political career is only a part of the third section of the novel and Naipaul's stress is on social analysis and study of Ralph as a disillusioned and displaced person, but it is the political action which is the basis of all these.\(^{16}\) The outcome of this action shapes the personality of the hero, his uprootedness, quest for order, mimicry and final pathos. Thus, Ralph is a typical product of the complex colonial ethos. He is pictured as a victim of the colonial system.

Ralph never takes any active part in politics in the real sense and when he does take, it is because of his friend Browne that he is thrown into the political world and there also he finds himself at dismay. But he is the product of the historical and political situation around him which is the result of colonialism. Indeed, "politics throughout the world is a way of recruiting those who are not politicians."\(^{17}\) Ralph merely goes on recording events and his observations are full of insight. He himself has conjured up an ideal vision of the value system in society. He finds the value system on the Caribbean island inadequate and goes to London in search of a perfect value system. "He thinks that only he is lost and his society alone lacks unity. He does not realize that this is a universal condition of a man in the twentieth century."\(^{18}\) So he goes to London, but finds the
value system there superfluous, just the enlarged version of Isabella in terms of disorder, having its own set of mimic men. There is greater disorder, greater shipwreck. As he himself is a middle class man, he doesn't have enough potentialities to overcome the situation and create a new order, a new value system. So he fluctuates between two cultures, between the obscurity of Isabella and the sterility of London life. He is unable to surrender himself or to get a place in either. So he becomes a mimic man, a subject of ridicule and finally of pathos. He becomes a puppet in the hands of destiny. It is in this sense that Ralph represents the modern man as the product of colonialism. He is not an active agent but just drifts with the flow of time.

Ralph is a hollow man who has no culture and morals of his own. Ralph best represents the directionless and aimless modern man who goes on doing things without any motive behind it. He knows that the model he is imitating is not an ideal one. He helplessly imitates it because that is the only model available to him and so he is restless inside. His cool and helpless acceptance leads him to frustration. This is the fate of a colonized man.

Naipaul's attempt to co-relate the modern man's experience in the light of his historical circumstances is provided an air of surrender and disenchantment. The precarious nature of the transition from colonialism to independence is fraught with danger, and the one thing Naipaul seems to crystallize is the inevitable fall of man due to his inability to attain a higher vision of reality. As a contrast with Biswas, Ralph Singh, the hero of the The Mimic Men, is not really oppressed, but is one of the political oppressors in the new order in the imaginary Caribbean island of Isabella. He is not fighting a system of values as Biswas does; on the other hand, he treats his withdrawal after his failure in the political world as an occasion to creatively sum up his experience through the act of writing a 'history'. To communicate the chaos of history, events and men, Singh draws on abstract ideas like
order, destruction, truth, and moral corruption. For him the idea of being born to a 'second-hand, barbarous new world plantation' is to be born to 'disorder'. Through his dreams of Aryan horsemen he yearns for a perspective of antiquity against the jumbled up, corrupt and patternless Isabella.

The tone of satire, the illusory view of man's role in political opportunism and dishonesty is heightened when placed against the colonial past. The Mimic Men, structurally written with the idea of a post mortem of colonial landscape, men, politics, the essential ennui, and the poverty of ideas through one man's consciousness, reflects all the taint and the personal sense of waste and importance: Ralph ponders,

"Given our situation, anarchy was endless, unless we acted right away. But on power and the consolidation of passing power we wasted our energies, until the bigger truth came. That in a society like ours, fragmented, inorganic, no link between man and landscape, a society, not held together by common interests there was no real internal source of power, and that no power was real which did not come from outside. Such was the controlled chaos we had, with such enthusiasm, brought upon ourselves."10

Here, as well as in In a Free State and Guerrillas, Naipaul states that the new ill-organized and faceless multiracial societies will not work. The Mimic Men does not portray the menace and tension bordering on destruction and murder in the later novels. However, the impact of the past on Singh is noteworthy, for it has turned him into an aristocratic recluse, an alien of sorts, both in his island and the neutral placidity of London. "The Mimic Men is basically a novel about the change in the colonial man's outlook. Naipaul's fictional theme becomes the heroes' struggle to escape, and his sense of defeat and restlessness."20 Singh never tries to get into the island world but to abandon it. In the process, the signals of despair are more pronounced, both in personal and socio-political terms.
The novel's plot proceeds along the path of an almost rehearsed display of typical postcolonial themes. As a student in London, Ralph Singh's gradual deracination into cosmopolitanism is played out in the sexual territory of his encounters with neighbours, prostitutes, and Sandra, his English wife. The fetishistic and anxious nature of his sexual liaisons, and their interracial composition fall into relief when later it is disclosed that Ralph Singh's sexual initiation happened incestuously with an aunt, Sally. The complement of his uncle, Cecil's, relations with Ralph Singh's sister simply underscores the endogamy associated with racial purity, and the prohibition-laced psychological traces that colonialism's experience of it engenders.

The subsequent decadence that Ralph Singh and the rest of the newly educated and deracinated elite enjoy on their island returns, along with their allies among the new generation of international expatriates, provides the difference that they try to use to re-invent themselves as a new class in opposition to an old world from which they feel they have escaped. Ralph Singh does not achieve his complete "mimic" status, until he enters politics.21

The novel illustrates how the colonial education and landscape mould a delicate, if slightly abnormal sensibility. The key to the historical metaphor is not to be found in the symbol of a house, or romance or the idea of acquiring "a portion of earth". Ralph Singh is one of the mimic men, thrown up by the colonial process of Black appeasement in the new independent political hierarchy. His whole vision of banishment, loss, alienation and belonging to the fringe of all societies, his escapist visions exemplify his sense of importance and failure. He is more akin to Naipaul's future protagonists, who are chained and exhausted, ironically only to emulate the legacy received from those second-hand societies.

On the historical plane, it is as much a history of the modern West Indies with the ex-colony of Isabella going through the
transitional period of change. Singh’s individual collapse is matched by the chaos outside in that he is unable to confront reality positively. Whereas, Mr. Biswas is a rebel against the symbolic colonial rule of the Tulsiis, Ralph Singh adopts a tone of withdrawal and confession, indicating a negation of sensibility. Though Singh comes from a family of capitalists, they are no better than agents for the erstwhile colonialists, now Western capitalists. He himself belongs to the surface society, being Indian by descent, and his yearnings for Aryan ancestry and Asian landscape is indicative of a sense of lost cultures and traditions. This in twin is again implicitly suggestive of the whole history of the immigrants’ cultural and historical fracture. Singh’s observations about the political life of such hollow societies are at best ironic and pessimistic. It brings into focus Naipaul’s vision. Peter Narazeth, while questioning his stance, observes, “Whether Naipaul has such a narrow vision of life that he can only see the worst in humanity or whether the West Indian Society he writes about is so degraded that nothing can be expected of it?” However, a wry satire and deflating irony have been techniques of portrayal with Naipaul, particularly in his criticism of the West Indian multi-cultural reality. In The Mimic Men, the historical metaphor of stunted growth and human incompetence is at the very bottom of his exploration.

The novel is not in the form of a linear, chronological memoir because the narrator in his attempts to salvage his wrecked life imposes a deliberate order on the events and experiences of his life to reconstruct the meaning of his life. This self-imposed order endows him with a freedom from the restrictions a chronological and sequential narration might have imposed. It also enables him to muse upon his childhood experiences dispassionately and analytically with an adult mind which makes the second part of the novel all the more interesting and amusing. It would not be incorrect to say that it is in this novel that Naipaul achieves, for the first time, that rare quality, total detachment or ‘non-attachment’ – the mark of his maturity as a
writer – the quality which, Arnold felt, was the most essential for a writer, and more so for a writer like Naipaul who happens to be a critic of societies and cultures. With this quality at its best, the third part evolves as the most authentic document on the Third-world politics and the chaotic public affairs in an island that has recently gained independence.

The novel begins in *medias res*. The narrator, a disgraced colonial politician now exiled in a London suburban hotel is found recording his new impressions of London which are quite contrary to what he felt in the past, shortly after the War. In the opening part of the novel, he writes about his student days, his marriage to an English girl, Sandra, his return to Isabella, and his success in the world of business, politics, and the ultimate debacle. *The Mimic Men* the autobiographical account gives the protagonist both an historical as well as an existential context and thus redeems the previous static reality as a study of the relationship between political power and human nothingness, oppressor and oppressed, colonizer and colonized.23

The implications of the novel emerge from an understanding of the nature of the engagement of the protagonist and narrator with the political situation, specifically during the first two elections (1946, 1950) based on adult universal suffrage to the democratic parliament just before and following independence from British Colonial Rule. The narrator identifies the destiny of the country with the personality of its emerging political leaders. For, according to him there is no political machinery which can absorb the shocks of individual conduct:

"Nationalism was impossible in Trinidad. In the colonial society everyman had to be for himself; everyman had to grasp whatever dignity and power he was allowed; he owed no loyalty to the island and scarcely any to his group. To understand this is to understand the squalor of the politics that came to Trinidad in 1946 when,
after no popular agitation, universal adult suffrage was declared. The privilege took the population by surprise. Old attitudes persisted: the government was something removed, the local eminence was despised. The new politics were reserved for the enterprising, who had seen the prodigious commercial possibilities. There were no parties, only individuals. Corruption, not unexpected, around only amusement and even mild approval. 24

Political power embodies the colonized’s dream of power, possession and self-realization. The validity of this dream is questioned by the narrator. Paradoxically, though distanced from the drama of the novel in time and place, he is emotionally entrapped within the situation and hopes for release through objective understanding. Watching garbage behind the pillar. “The narrator’s irony and satire is a reflection on the unquestioning and greedy mimicking of patterns of behaviour of the colonial which achievement of political independence and democracy implicitly rejects.” 25 This mimic behaviour is generated as much by a natural human response to the contemporary world to leap across centuries into roles esteemed by the world powers as to a lack of indigenous institutions and thought systems. The essential fact that the colonial is now incorporated into the subjective reality of the colonized has to be accepted in order to contend with the reality of the situation. The polarization of awareness along a continuum of consciousness which ranges from simplicity to sophistication (literal to literacy) dramatizes the emergence and existence of the third world protagonist: Ralph contends,

“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 sweet. 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, 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 to
ideal, but bitterness to bitterness, he betrays, and mangles; emancipation is not possible for all."\textsuperscript{26}

For the first time Naipaul widens the form of contemplative autobiography to include his views on politics, power, isolation, displacement, racial conflicts and above all, the problem of identity. The novel also examines the loneliness and despair of an immigrant student in the impersonal mega polis of London and the problems associated with mixed marriages in the contemporary West Indian society. In the later pages of the novel the author presents a perceptive account of the cultural and political situation of an ex-colony emerging into independence and struggling for identity. The attitude of the politics living a life of complacency and comfortable withdrawal is also presented. "The remarkable note is that all these various ideas are presented like beads on a string which presents the central theme of the present novel – the nature of mimic men in various phases of his experience, his sense of loss, loneliness and despair, his visions of escapism and fantasy and his flight to final emptiness."\textsuperscript{27} Ralph sees all these as the product of the education which he received at the Isabella Imperial and the environmental influences of his childhood and school days. While this is a favourite subject of Naipaul, the butt of his ironical digs, in the present novel it is given largest scope because the damaging effects are much more widespread and even more devastating. As the protagonist recalls his school days, he is filled with a sense of gloom:

"Anything that touched on everyday life excited laughter when it was mentioned in a class room: the name of a shop, the name of a street, the name of street-corner foods. The laughter denied our knowledge of these things to which after the hours of school we were to return. We denied the landscape and the people we could see out of open doors and windows, we who took apples to the teacher and wrote essays about visits to temperate farms."\textsuperscript{28}

Similarly, Naipaul's own comment made in a revealing essay in \textit{Times Literary Supplement}, makes it clear how alien mythology and
imported books offer the colonial students only fantasies: "There was, for instance, Wordsworth's notorious poem about the Daffodils. A pretty little flower, nor doubt, but we have never seen it could the poem have any meaning for us?" 39

Naipaul's novels may be considered political to the extent that, as Molly Mohmood says in *The Colonial Encounter*, "all colonial novels arise from the novelist's sense of political pressure, and also because the protagonist sets his heart on the western polis as the enchanted city which will release him from the drabness and drudgery of his semi-urban existence." 30 The novels under consideration dramatize the period of transition from colonial rule to self-government. The turbulence of this period is the consequence of the loss of the colonial order with nothing to replace it except borrowed from the concepts which are manipulated by personalities motivated by the historical fear of non-existence. It is in R.R.K. Singh's words 'Chaos on which order has been imposed.' Politics and government is an experiential phenomenon. The more responsible members of this society suddenly become conscious of their lack of experience....the best is missing. It has no leaders to bring it to maturity.

"Singh's political theorizing, arising out of his experience, is purely descriptive." 31 He draws out the connections between the childhood and adult life of a politician to reveal the accidental nature of island politics. The island politician is a born leader of men who finds himself in politics as a matter of chance rather than choice. Singh enters politics as an antidote to a broken marriage, because it is the 'thing to do' for a man of his status and qualifications and because he is 'egged on' by his friend Browne. Though Ralph Singh is busy in analyzing his own actions, he is actually trying to achieve universality and objectivity. As Bruce F. Mac Donald remarks "through Ralph Singh's generalizations, observations, and even through his failure,
Naipaul has revealed much about the nature of Ralph’s generation and about his island society.32

In the very opening page Singh has expressed, “we lack order. Above all, we lack power and we do not understand that we lack power” (8) and later “To be born on an island like Isabella, an obscure New World transplantation, second-hand and barbarous, was to be born to disorder” (118). With such impressions in his mind about his island society, he comes to London, the great city, ‘city of miraculous light’, seeking order, the flowering and extension of himself. He tries to give himself a personality. But now, with all the experiences and affairs in this city, he seems to be completely disillusioned regarding the sustaining powers of London. He finds, “The great city, centre of the world, in which fleeing disorder, I had hoped to find the beginning of order”(18). His frustration is revealed in many of his outbursts. In that distressed state he wanders aimlessly about England where he comes across Sandra at the school notice board. This accidental meeting later leads to their marriage.

Ralph Singh saw the magnitude of her social ambition which attracted him. Her rapaciousness and eccentricities fascinated him. He comes to feel that with her resourcefulness and avidity, she could guide him through life’s uncertainties: Paul Theroux confides, “Sandra’s sureness is a great attraction, and she has an aura of good luck about her, for she has rejected her family and her past, and living by her wits she is rising... Singh sees a great deal of yearning in her, but up till the time of their first meeting others have developed on Singh and looked to him for guidance now Singh begins to depend on Sandra, he trusts to her luck.”33

Once on the island, all his hopes and dreams turn into nothing. His mother disapproves of his marriage with a foreign girl. She rejects Sandra at the first sight. Sandra reciprocates the same. The resultant hostility makes them land in an Isabella hotel rather than in
his mother's house. Singh's gesture of rebellion against conventions thus invites rejection not only in the domestic front but also from the society which leaves him isolated and shipwrecked. He is increasingly made aware of the fact that "The initial seeming warmth, acceptance and approval gradually disappeared in course of time for Isabella is an unstable, shallow, mixed and chaotic society".\textsuperscript{34}

Naipaul does not portray Singh's experiences as that of a West Indian only but as that of a typical modern man who might be confronted anywhere in this world. Through Ralph Singh he depicts man as living in constant fear of change, insignificance, and alienation. The characters attempt to escape into an ideal, static vision of the self, to deny the continuity of life in the 'crystallization' of experience. Bruce Mac Donald propounds that "the individual chooses the act which best symbolizes the needs of his particular condition... the act expresses a dissatisfaction with the present and an attempt to see oneself or one's society as part of an ideal reality or god".\textsuperscript{35}

Part two of the novel deals with Ralph Singh's childhood experiences and his adolescent life. As these experiences are filtered through the analytic mind of the adult Ralph Singh, part two evolves as the most interesting and enlightening part. In this part, it is portrayed with clarity in an embryonic form, the maladies and evils which are later to loom large over the postcolonial settings. They are, the tendency of the children to mimic, their eagerness to disown and escape from their past and reality and live masked and unreal lives to an extent where they conceal their real names and live with false identities, or without any identity for that matter.

This terrifying anomaly of the situation can be explained as the consequence of the disorder and inauthenticity imposed by the centre on the margins of the empire. The polarity between the authentic experience of the real world and the inauthentic experience of the
unvalidated periphery is repeated in the novel in an aggregation of such opposites as order and disorder, reality and unreality, authenticity and inauthenticity, power and powerlessness. It is Singh, who as a narrator articulates so clearly all these opposites between the centre, the focus of order which uses the standard language, and the periphery, a tissue of disorder that uses the edges of language. (Ralph Singh is later to realize the important role that language plays in postcolonial politics). It has been pointed out that The Mimic Men is "a novel which incorporated an extreme version of the opposition between centre and margin." Further, "The book contrasts the metropolitan centre, which is the location not only of the power which comes from the control of language but also of order itself, with the periphery of colonial world, in which only the illusion of power exists and in which disorder always predominates." The knowledge of the powerlessness and impotency of their independence must have come to the children intuitively and hence so many fantasies and secrets at such a young age. The second part is full of such unreal things as dreams and fantasies.

The vision of a world of men who consume what they cannot produce haunts Naipaul's work. And it is the presence of this which lends a tone of futility, rage, and sombre pathos to his later novels, as is revealed in Ralph Singh's words of lamentation in a moment of self-illumination in The Mimic Men: "We, here on our island, handling books printed in this World Europe, and using its goods, had been abandoned and forgotten" (146). The pathos lies in their ignorance of the fact that mere possession of these goods does not lead to a mastery. This phenomenon is known as the "Cargo-cult", which suggests an association of wealth power with the goods – the cargo which the Europeans possessed.

Ralph Singh analyzing his own personality, finds a 'complex hurt' about which one feels the causes to be colonial rule. He is left half-made, confused, and without the power to strike roots.
Colonialism, as a subject, interests him and he has the ambition to write an extended work of history on the subject of those empires which have "altered the world forever" despite "their passing away." The shame of being a native has ground itself into his psyche and twisted his "memory" too, so that he has the puzzling memory "of taking an apple to his teacher" though there are "no apples on Isabella." The whole sequence of his relationships, personal and political, falls into the two slots of 'triumph or humiliation' as a result of his experiences of the White man's supremacy. His sexual impotence and humiliation with Lady Stella occur at the same time as the 'humiliation' of his political failure in London. Ralph's deepest indictment of colonialism as a force of destruction is in seeing that he himself and other colonials are "mimic men" who only "pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life." 

Ralph Singh excels in his brilliant portrait of the political life of his own times in such a hollow society as Isabella and its victims. The novel comes to gain universal significance by virtue of the observation that Singh makes about his own society which in fact turns out to be a valid observation on the post colonial society, in general. When Sandra makes her exit, Browne replaces her place in Singh's life. It is Browne who designs the political future for Ralph Singh and the Roman House is to become the centre of hectic political activity soon. The island politician is "a born leader of men who finds himself in politics as a matter of chance rather than choice". Singh also enters politics as an antidote to a broken marriage. His political career is very much like his father's. Just like his father, he attempts to escape his shipwreck by maintaining his connection with the Aryan past. Bruce MacDonald finds "the symbolism of their respective acts cements the bonds with the culture of their ancestors as they pursue the elusive gods of sex, city and state." 

In The Mimic Men Naipaul seems to suggest that writing has itself become a way of life and an achievement. Rama Nair observes in
an article "Island as a Metaphor of Creativity: A Study of V.S. Naipaul's A House for Mrs. Biswas and The Mimic Men":

"Through the ordering of their experiences as a reporter and as a writer, respectively both Mr. Biswas and Ralph Singh come closer to life, and writing becomes not just a symbol of identity. It becomes the identity itself. This creative act enables them to come to terms with the reality of their own socio-cultural situation." \(^{44}\)

In subject and technique The Mimic Men marks a break from Naipaul's earlier novels. As far as the author is concerned, the critics are in full agreement that the novel does not hold much hope for the colonial victims. The novel has a tone of lightness even though it deals with a very grim problem faced by people living in a colonial country. Structurally the novel marks a new break from his earlier novels which are mainly episodic whereas in the present novel the narrator frequently resorts to flash-back technique and bunching of images and moods. Naipaul here faces a well-known problem of using 'a point of view' method. Ralph Singh is very much the author's persona and his views are at once confessional and objective. At one level Ralph Singh's account amounts to self-censure or a kind of therapeutic autobiography, while at another level it is a scathing indictment of the mimic men of the new world.

The real merit of the book lies in the author's success in writing from both sides, a tone of impartiality which is only occasionally impaired by the writer's fondness for things and memories Asian. In terms of imagery recurrent imagery the novel marks a major change. Victor Ramraj has rightly noted:

"A new set of metaphors - shipwreck and snow and sea - come together with the now familiar - house image. Moreover, in the present novel Naipaul seems to be attempting what he once described as 'true satire' - true satire grows out of the largest vision that is all - embracing Christ-like visions." \(^{45}\)
The Mimic Men thus makes a milestone in Naipaul's use of the fictional form. The subject of the novel is more than politics, marriage or race. In his own interpretation, it is nothing less than 'a vision of disorder' - 'placelessness' and breakdown of human relationships in the world of the 'mimic men'. The Mimic Men does not portray the menance and tension bordering on destruction and murder in the later novels. However, the impact of the past on Singh is noteworthy, for it has turned him into an aristocratic recluse, an alien of sorts, both in his island and the neutral placidity of London. The Mimic Men is basically a novel about the change in the colonial man's outlook. Ralph Singh is one of the mimic men, thrown up by the colonial process of Black appeasement in the new independent political hierarchy.

Two significant methodological points arise in The Mimic Men. First, Ralph Singh writes to examine the manner in which his subjectivity has been constituted by the colonial experience, Mr. Biswas writes to escape, to lose himself within himself, a self he can neither understand nor express. The act of writing begins as an experiment in A House for Mr. Biswas. In The Mimic Men it is a much more conscious and skillful act, and although it does not function independently of the subject it seeks to reconstitute, the discourse cannot learn from psycho-analysis, "be reduced to what is being said explicitly; like thought itself and behaviour, it bears the weight of the 'other', the 'other' of which we are all unaware or which we half refuse." Further, the nature of Singh's subjectivity is mediated as he tells his story and seeks to understand his relationship to his world.

Second, the narrator in The Mimic Men is decidedly distant from the object upon which he mediates and meditates. As in A Flag On The Island, in which the narrator is an American, the narrator here is separate from his society and thereby able to make certain objective judgments about it. Although the process of distancing
creates a number of conflicts that separate the narrator from his society, it also enables him to examine, in specific terms, the manner in which his identity has been shaped by his economic class position. More so than Mr. Biswas, Ralph Singh is a specific product of a particular socio economic formation called colonialism.49

Selwyn R. Cudjoe’s political reading of Naipaul’s The Mimic Men50 places it in a post colonial frame work, but it is a negative analysis of the text’s postcoloniality. Cudjoe argues that the protagonist’s understanding of what it means to be a colonial subject in a postcolonial society is limited, and that the choices he makes and the actions he takes in relation to his identity are meaningless. Cudjoe has suggested that Naipaul does not give his post colonial subjects or post colonial societies a sense of agency, or the ability to transform socially and politically, because Naipaul adheres to a colonial ideology first and foremost.

Commenting upon Malgonkar’s novel The Princess, Naipaul draws attention to “the Indian withdrawal and denial”, which according to him, “is part of the confusion of Indian Anglo-Indian”.51 This “withdrawal, denial and confusion of values” is the lot of all colonial people. Ralph Singh is no exception. Withdrawal “had been a part of his fantasy, part of his urge to escape shipwreck” (173) His ambivalence and jumpiness only aggravated his disappointment. He thought of “this life as the life of the maimed”. (296) How can a man feel happy who is obsessed with “this absurd disorder” and the “sense of captivity” and of “placelessness” (184) He can express occasionally “the negative frenzy of a deep violation which could lead to further frenzy alone” (245) This attitude denies even a creative feeling or revolt. The person begins to suffer from schizophrenia and is perpetually at war with himself and the world, “until at last an undeclared state of war existed between the others” and Ralph (79). He loses his sense of reality and possesses “the fear of the man who feels the veils coming down one by one”. (85) It may be safely
assumed that Ralph's predicament is the predicament of all rootless colonials like him. In the novel he speaks not as an individual, but as a representative of his people.

Naipaul is charged with pessimism in *The Mimic Men*. But he portrays the factual reality and no writer can be blamed for reflecting his own society. It does not mean that Naipaul's vision of society is a narrow one and that he can see only the worse side of human beings. Naipaul is clear on this point: "I wrote what I saw, what in fact, I see everyday and what I know." Peter Nazareth also points out:

"The despair and pessimism reflected in *The Mimic Men* does not lead one to the conclusion that human beings at Isabella are damned or irrelevant. Instead, the novel reveals valuable truths about such a degraded society."

Naipaul's post colonial experience is offered as a realist self-portrait that gazes back at its viewers with the look of one who knows that hidden in his flaws and blemishes lies the sickness of his soul. The realism of the novel functions severally. Ralph Singh's self-consciousness, which is also presented as a form of self-knowledge, to start with, is achieved by his ability to cast himself in the third person as he recollects by his habits and their origins. The many references to the actual writing of the memoir, furthermore, play on a self-reflexivity to the extent that they achieve the formal status of a trope.

*The Mimic Men* sounds like a novel of indomitable darkness at the superficial level as there is nothing positive like the comforting image of a "House" in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. The image here is of shipwreck in Ralph Singh's mind. But there seems to be a kind of hope at a deeper level which is suggested by Ralph Singh's successful ordering of his various experiences which, to begin with, appear formless and disorderly and involves creative manipulation. Further, in Ralph Singh's awareness of his defects lies his triumph over his disorderly and chaotic experiences.
REFERENCES


34. Ibid. p.73.

35. Bruce F. Mac Donald, p.254.

37. Ibid. p.89.


40. Ibid, p.90.

41. Ibid, p.146.


43. Bruce F. Mac Donald. p.251.


