Chapter Three
The longing to belong: The Mimic Men

The struggle against colonial oppression changes not only the direction of Western history, but challenges its historicist ‘idea’ of time as a progressive, ordered whole. The analysis of colonial depersonalization alienates not only the Enlightenment idea of ‘Man’, but challenges the transparency of social reality, as a pre-given image of human knowledge. If the order of Western historicism is disturbed in the colonial state of emergency, even more deeply disturbed is the social and psychic representation of the human subject. For the very nature of humanity becomes estranged in the colonial condition. (Bhabha 1986: xi)

This ‘disturbed social and psychic representation of the human subject’ estranged in the colonial encounter of the coloniser and the colonised has been a recurrent thematic concern in V.S. Naipaul’s literature. The author and his opus have been spawned in the unique space of the Caribbean—a space that has evolved as a multicultural and ethnically heterogeneous social order due to the convergence of historical, social, political and cultural influences of four continents. Due to its locational proximity to the American mainland and its weather conditions favourable for sugar plantations, the European colonisers used the Caribbean as a nodal point and a resettlement colony for the ‘seasoning’ of the African slaves and Asian indentured labourers. Consequently, within the context of displacement necessitated by demands
of the imperialist economy, this space became primarily populated by migrants, voluntary or otherwise, who looked back nostaligically to their alienated homelands from which they were irreversibly uprooted.

It is this sense of homelessness resulting from displacement and migration that is projected by Naipaul in his discourses, both fiction and non-fiction, creatively from the point of view of his own cultural displacements and marginality, first in Trinidad and then in England. A third-generation descendant of Indians who travelled to Trinidad to work in the Caribbean sugar plantations as indentured labourers, Naipaul was born and brought up within a colonial British system in Trinidad and subsequently, he migrated to England in the early 1950s on a scholarship to Oxford University. Thus, Naipaul is a product of the colonial condition and his inability to strike root in a particular cultural context despite being a British citizen has been critiqued by Rob Nixon as “willed homelessness” (Nixon 1988: 11). However, Naipaul’s friend and critic Paul Theroux defends the author positioning himself in a liminal space, that of the exilic thus:

He is in his own words ‘without a past, without ancestors’, ‘a little ridiculous and unlikely’. His is a condition of homelessness. It has the single advantage of enabling him to become a working resident—as much a resident in India as anywhere else—and allows him a depth of insight that is denied the metropolitan. For the rootless person, every country is a possible temporary home; but for Naipaul, there is no return, either to a past or a place […] Naipaul is the first of his line, without a tradition or a home. (1972: 78)
It is from this vantage point of the exilic consciously situated at the periphery of the dominant discourse and culture of the former centre of the imperial structure to which there ‘is no return, either to a past or a place’ that Naipaul writes his literature.

Beginning with his first novel *The Mystic Masseur* published in 1957, Naipaul has explored the interplay of the matrices of ancestry and ethnicity in determining the interfaces of identity formation of individuals vis-à-vis the Caribbean landscape after the disintegration of the colonial order in his fiction in different permutations and combinations. Pankaj Mishra sums up the growth of Naipaul as an author in his early works thus:

“Six long years of struggle and futility followed before Naipaul discovered, in such books as *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), *Miguel Street* (1959), *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958) and *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), his true subject. It was a discovery that was essentially of his own self: of the colonial who had grown up on a tiny, backward island in the Caribbean, amidst an insular Indian community, and then with the racially mixed population of Port of Spain; the man who had no clear past or affiliations, who had to figure out the world he had been thrown into while attempting to perceive the many strands that made up his self.” (2003: ix)

This ‘discovery’ by the author of a self that struggled to survive in the newly re-emerging postcolonial Caribbean space by transcending the barriers of ethnicity prompted Naipaul to continue to experiment in his literature with both characters and settings derived from the Caribbean cultural matrix.
In most of the novels, the author’s artistic engagement with the unique spatio-temporal dimensions of the Caribbean identity is explored by him through the consciousness of personas that construct their identity by negotiating their homelessness within the Caribbean landscape through the perspective of a dislocated individual. Naipaul’s protagonists struggle with the definitions of identity and the coherent construction of the self through complex subject positions and points of view within narratives that tend to disrupt the constraints of linearity and continuity. In this process, the characters inevitably interact with personal and political interfaces that impinge upon their existence in their respective contexts.

Each Naipaulian character confronts what may be termed as the ‘dilemma to belong’ in his individual manner. With the publication of his fourth novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* in 1961, one year before he ventured out to publish his first non-fictional text, Naipaul created Mohun Biswas who tried to resolve his identity crisis by constructing a house to objectify his spatial identity. However, the dimension that was missing in Mr. Biswas’ identity crisis was the experience of his own physical displacement and distancing from his country which in turn failed to give him a broader and more cosmopolitan understanding of his predicament that might have enabled him to realise that the mere occupation of physical space and building a house on it was not sufficient to transform it into a home. The desire to try to situate oneself in a home and not a mere house led to the evolution of Ralph Singh, born two novels after Mr. Biswas, in *The Mimic Men* in 1967. Ralph Singh’s construction of his identity
emerges as a more interesting study because despite his intimate association with life in the Caribbean and London, the erstwhile periphery and the centre of the former colonial apparatus, Singh fails to belong to either of the two.

The narrative of *The Mimic Men* (1967) begins *in médias res*, focussing on Ralph Kripal Singh, a Caribbean politician living in exile in a boarding-house/private hotel in suburban London. Interspersed with flashbacks and memories, the first person narration sequence of events does not unfold in a chronological manner. The first part of the narrative begins with his current situation in London, intermingled with the memories of his previous visits to the city, the second part reverts back to his early life in the Caribbean and in the concluding section, Naipaul’s forty-year-old narrator/protagonist struggles to sum up the tale of his life by returning to the present of the narrative frame. Within this tripartite structure that allows Ralph to negotiate back and forth across spatial and temporal zones of his life, he tries to put in writing his memoir chronicling the years of his birth and childhood in Isabella, a recently independent but fictive island nation of the Caribbean, his education, marriage, political career down to his present state of being a reclusive exile.

By the virtue of being the land of his birth, Isabella is the first place that constructs the identity of the protagonist. However, for Ralph Singh who considered that “the first requisite for happiness was to be born in a famous city” (127), the misfortune “to be born on an island like Isabella, an obscure New World transplantation, second-hand and barbarous, was to be born to disorder” (127). The connotation of the island
where he is born and raised as ‘obscure’, ‘second-hand’, ‘barbarous’ and ‘disordered’ brings into focus its colonial legacy that Ralph finds very difficult to come to terms with. The name of this fictive locale definitely reinforces its colonial associations because by “choosing the name Isabella for an island closely modelled on his native Trinidad, Naipaul forces the reader to remember Trinidad's colonial past—conquered first by the Spanish before its long colonization by the British (1797-1962). The association with an imperial queen known as a primary sponsor of Columbus's voyages symbolically aligns the fictive island of Isabella to the history of discovery and dispossession in the Caribbean” (Phukan 2008: web). This dispossession not only impacts Isabella but also its inhabitants like Ralph, who, unable to change the reality of the landscape, try to leave it behind: “I decided years ago that this landscape was not mine” (53).

The repercussions of the colonial enterprise commences to impact and mould the life of the protagonist during his childhood and adolescence. While analysing one of the earliest recollections of his school life on the island, the author Ralph finds himself doubting his own memory:

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. (97)

The contradiction as to whether the fruit was an apple or an orange opens up the recollection for a very interesting analysis. The “foreignness” of the apple for the
Caribbean context and its definite association with both the Biblical story of the fall of man and also supposedly being the inspiration behind Newton’s theory of gravitation that contributed to the European Enlightenment makes the apple a definite symbol of the European self-proclaimed superiority of religion and knowledge, two very important weapons used for colonisation.

Years later, a remarkable revelation is experienced by Ralph Singh about Isabella’s colonial past when his friend Browne points out a very significant feature of the Caribbean landscape that Ralph had always taken for granted.

Browne showed me that its tropical appearances was contrived; there was history in the vegetation we considered most natural and characteristic…He told me about the coconut, which fringed our beaches, about the sugarcane, the bamboo and mango. He told me about our flowers, whose colours we saw afresh in the postcards which were beginning to appear in our shops... In the heart of the city he showed me a clump of old fruit trees: the site of a slave provision ground. From this point look above the roofs of the city, and imagine! Our landscape was as manufactured as that of any great French or English park. But we walked in a garden of hell, among trees, some still without popular names, whose seeds had sometimes been brought to our island in the intestines of slaves. (158)

The replication of the English or French parks on the Caribbean soil and the transportation of the seeds of trees within the “intestines of slaves” forced to endure the middle passage during the process of being uprooted from their homelands and
transplantation onto the “new” space takes Ralph by surprise. This highlights the achievement of the colonial paradigm that successfully grafted both humans and vegetation onto chosen landscapes to achieve its ends.

The family background of the protagonist also left lasting impressions on him during his formative years. Even at a very young age, the first and foremost criteria that dictated Ralph’s allegiance towards either one of his parents’ family was money and its consequent social privileges. The affiliation for his father’s family is not very encouraging:

On Isabella when I was a child it was a disgrace to be poor...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 shame...My father was a schoolteacher and poor. (89)

However, because Ralph’s father had married the daughter of the owners of the Bella Bella Bottling Works, the island’s local agents for Coca Cola, Ralph is more enthusiastic to identify himself with his mother’s family:

I preferred to lay claim to my mother’s family. They were among the richest in the island and belonged to that small group known as ‘Isabella millionaires’. (89)
Ironically, though his father detested his in-laws and by extension, their product, Coca Cola, Ralph did not hesitate to reap the benefits of claiming affinity with his mother’s family’s business:

In Coca-Cola therefore I at an early age took an almost proprietorial interest…I liked going … to the bottling works, though it was a torment to me then to be anonymous. I longed to receive some sign of overlordship or even recognition from the employees… (90)

The apparent enhancement of his social position in the Isabella society as a result of his maternal family’s association with Coca-Cola is yet another illustration of Ralph’s desire to negotiate a profitable identity for himself at this stage of his life.

Growing up in Isabella with his cousin Cecil and his childhood friends Deschampsneufs, Hok, Evans and Browne, Ralph is initiated in the process of role playing and mimicry at a very young age. During his school days, he witnesses his friend Hok, an issue of mixed parentage, try to avoid acknowledging his mother publicly because she was a Negro.

One boy said, ‘Sir, Hok went past his mother just now and he didn’t say anything at all to her.’

The teacher, revealing unexpected depths, was appalled. ‘Is this true, Hok? Your mother, boy?’

…We looked for the mother, the hidden creature whom Hok saw every day, had said goodbye to that morning and was to see again in two hours or so at lunchtime. She was indeed a surprise, a Negro woman of the people, short and
fat, quite unremarkable. She waddled away, indifferent herself to the son she
had just brushed past. (103)

Ralph and the other boys witness Hok’s humiliating “betrayal into ordinariness” and
his expulsion from “that private hemisphere where lay his true life” (104) when the
teacher forces Hok to talk to his mother. Hok’s attempted rejection of his mother due
to her distinct racial identity and Ralph’s desire to flaunt his maternal family
connections to Coca Cola underscore the desire the boys feel to acknowledge or
discard important aspects of their identity in order to derive the maximum advantage.

Even his name has an interesting history. In one of the earliest self-conscious act of
constructing his own identity, Ralph chooses to alter his name to mimic his friend
Deschampsneufs, (the son of a French family that changed their occupation from the
breeder of slaves to horses) whose name, other than the surname, consisted of five
short and ordinary French words whose “conglomeration of the ordinary wonderfully
suggested the extraordinary” (100). He modifies his original name Ranjit Kripalsingh
to Ralph Ranjit Kripal Singh shortened to R. R. K. Singh or Ralph Singh in the public
domain. Initially, this transformation of the protagonist remains undetected both in
his school and in his family:

“...I was simply Singh R. From the age of eight till the age of twelve this was
one of my heavy secrets. I feared discovery at school and at home.” (100)

Eventually, when his birth certificate exposes the discrepancy in R Singh’s identity,
the boy explains to his astonished schoolteacher:
‘Ranjit is my secret name,’ I said. ‘It is a custom among Hindus of certain castes. The secret name is my real name but it ought not to be used in public.’ (100)

Thence lies the necessity of the addition of Ralph as his “calling name” that is so unimportant that it “can be taken in vain by anyone” (101). This process of transformation of the name according to the so-called Hindu ritual of using different names for private and public use requires validation from the protagonist’s father who is “...not pleased at having to sign an affidavit that the son he had sent out into the world as Ranjit Kripalsingh had been transformed into Ralph Singh.” (101). The successful alteration of his name, and above all, the ability to convince his disapproving elders highlights the skill Ralph possesses, even as a child, to exploit others to his further his own interests.

Similarly, at a later stage in his life, Ralph did not hesitate to take advantage of his father’s meteoric but short lived rise to fame that soon turned to notoriety within the social and religious framework of the island. Ralph’s father had suddenly left his job and metamorphosed into the Gurudeva, the spiritual leader who offered to his disciples “a type of Hinduism that he expounded; a mixture of the mad and the logical. He offered something to many people; but it was his example and his presence rather than his teaching which mattered. His movement spread like fire” (138).
Despite their disinclination, the family of the Gurudeva, that is, Ralph, his sister and his mother find themselves enveloped within the folds of the new found fame of the Gurudeva that continues to grow until the incident of the horse sacrifice. Gurudeva and his disciples were suspected of sacrificing Deschampsneufs’ prize winning race horse Tamango as a part of a ritual for the “aswamedha”. The discovery of the Tamango’s dismembered corpse garlanded with flowers was “outrageous and obscene to everyone on that sport-crazed island...” (152) This incident abruptly diminishes the stature of the Gurudeva who withdraws into a reclusive life. However, the father’s short lived spectacular public life serves its purpose later when the son makes the most of his East Indian genealogical descent and the Gurudeva’s public appeal to kick start his own political career on the island. Thus, Ralph’s mastery of the ability to choose to emphasise or to ignore or try to modify certain aspects of his identity to gain maximum advantage at such a young age foreshadows the events of his later life.

Another aspect of his identity that Ralph desperately yearns to modify is the location he inhabits. During a family trip to Cecil’s father’s beach house, the swaying and rustling of coconut trees and the crashing and hissing of the white surf on the wide sandy beaches appear incapable of stimulating Ralph’s sensibility. He perceives the sea as the “living, destroying element” (114).

Not my element. I preferred land; I preferred mountains and snow. (114) The seascape surrounding Isabella initiates in Ralph an identity crisis that contributes to his feeling of homelessness. Unlike the successful modification of his name that
Ralph had accomplished during his school life, the overwhelming desire he experiences during his teenage years to manipulate his descent and escape from the island remains confined to the realm of his fantasy.

I lived a secret life in a world of endless plains, tall bare mountains, white with snow at their peaks, among nomads on horseback... waking in the mornings to mist and rain and dangerous weather. I was a Singh. And I would dream that all over the Central Asian plains the horsemen looked for their leader. Then a wise man came to them and said, ‘...The true leader of you lies far away, shipwrecked on an island, the like of which you cannot visualise.’

(105)

In this dream, Ralph’s relentless desire for both lineage and location comingle in the image of the shipwrecked individual, an image that recurs several times in different scenes in the novel. From the beginning of his narrative, Ralph, in the capacity of both the narrator and the protagonist, underscores his persistent desire to escape from Isabella.

“And what was an unmarked boy doing here, shipwrecked chieftain on an unknown shore, awaiting rescue, awaiting the arrival of ships of curious shape to take him back to his mountains? Poor boy, poor leader.” (11)

Very subtly intertwined with this desire to escape is also another want which Ralph is not very conscious of at this stage in his life. Words like ‘leader’ and ‘chieftain’ foreshadow his future vocation as a politician.
Ralph’s continual longing to escape from the Caribbean space starts to take shape in reality when during a sports event at his school, he makes up his mind to use education as a means to fulfilling at least one of his overwhelming desires: “I wished to make a fresh, clean start. And it was now that I resolved to abandon the shipwrecked island and all on it, and to seek my chieftainship in that real world...” (118). This ‘wish’ subtly reveals the gradual maturation of the earlier shipwrecked leader waiting “to be rescued” passively into the chieftain wanting to actively “abandon” the island.

The opportunity to exchange sandy beaches for landscapes of plains, mountains, rivers and snow materialises when Ralph sets sail to London for the first time for higher studies on a scholarship.

     Fresh air! Escape! To bigger fears, to bigger men, to bigger lands, to continents with mountains five miles high and rivers so wide you couldn’t see the other bank...Goodbye to this encircling, tainted sea! (179)

Leaving behind the “tainted” sea surrounding Isabella, Ralph embraces London as the “great city, centre of the world, in which, fleeing disorder, I had hoped to find the beginning of order.” (18) Even though he cannot rectify his failure to be born in a famous city, Ralph tries his best to adapt himself to the erstwhile metropolis of the Empire. He is overwhelmed when he sees snow for the first time:

     Snow. At last; my element. And these were the flakes, the airiest crushed ice. More than crushed: shivered.” (4)
The acceptance of snow and not the sea as his element however remains problematic for Ralph because the perfection and purity that he perceives in the snow leaves him in a state of confusion: “Yet what was I to do with so complete a beauty?” (5) The uncertainty to respond to the completeness of the beauty of the snow covered landscape of England, however, does not diminish Ralph’s enthusiasm for the landscape as he perceives the difference between the Caribbean sunset and the sunset in his new environment:

“...there is no light like that of the temperate zone. It was a light which gave solidity to everything and drew colour out from the heart of objects. To me, from the tropics, where night succeeded day abruptly, dusk was new and enchanting.” (17)

At this point, the effect of the light of the ‘temperate zone’ on the surrounding objects make them appear colourful to Ralph’s ‘tropical’ vision.

To his dismay, however, Ralph soon discovers that in the London cityscape, the light that illuminated the solidity and colour of the scenery also exposed its barrenness:

Here was the city, the world. I waited for the flowering to come to me....The river was edged and pierced with reflections of light, blue and red and yellow... The tram was filled with individuals, each man returning to his own cell. The factories and warehouses, whose exterior lights decorated the river, were empty and fraudulent. I would play with famous names as I walked empty streets and stood on bridges. But the magic of names soon faded. Here was the river, here the bridge, there that famous building. But the god was
veiled. My incantations of names remained unanswered. In the great city, so solid in its light, which gave colour even to unrendered concrete—to me as colourless as rotting wooden fences and new corrugated-iron roofs—in this city life was two-dimensional. (18)

The loss of colour and meaning of the English buildings, bridges and streets in Ralph’s eyes now makes it unavoidable for him to question his perception of the Caribbean landscape and gaze back at Isabella with an altered vision.

Disillusioned so soon after his physical separation from the Caribbean, Ralph gradually begins to realise that mere relocation to a more developed region of the world was insufficient to mould his identity positively. The miraculous transformation of his personality that Ralph had visualised would happen in London does not materialise, leaving him with a feeling of being unanchored:

We can see how far, for all the continuing consciousness of wholeness and sanity, we had become distorted. Coming to London, the great city, seeking order, seeking the flowering, the extension of myself that ought to have come to me in a city of such miraculous light, I had tried to hasten a process which had seemed elusive. I had tried to give myself a personality. It was something I had tried more than once before, and waited for the response in the eyes of others. But now I no longer knew what I was; ambition became confused, then faded…Shipwreck. I have used this word before. With my island background, it was the word that always came to me. And this is what I felt I had encountered again in the great city: this feeling of being adrift, a cell of
perception, little more, that might be altered, if only fleetingly, by any encounter (27).

In consequence of the fading of his long cherished ambition and the failure to find a new personality for himself, Ralph falls back upon his ‘island background’. Again he experiences a “shipwreck” because geographically both Isabella and England are islands.

Ralph’s futile effort to correlate his personality with the locale he inhabits that initially made him abhor the “tainted” seascape of Isabella, now forces him to try to come to terms with the place he was born and brought up at:

...I found myself longing for the certainties of my life on the island of Isabella, certainties which I had once dismissed as shipwreck. (26)

...I abolished landscapes from my mind. 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 (27, 31).

This longing for the “certainties” of his life on Isabella while situated in London mirrors his earlier yearning for the imaginary reclamation of the space occupied by his Central Asian ancestors. Ralph’s sense of feeling homeless in Isabella because of his yearning for a land he had only imagined as a region of mountains and rivers is substituted in London by his homesickness for the place he was more familiar with, that is, Isabella. Therefore, his firsthand confrontation with the English space of
London makes Ralph desperate to reclaim only those landscapes with which he was familiar and radically alters his earlier wish to ‘escape from’ his native place into the urge to ‘escape back’ to his own country.

The duality and ambivalence of Ralph’s contact with both the Caribbean and English milieu at this stage of his life heightens his feeling of displacement and homelessness. Earlier he had disowned the sea and accepted the snow as his ‘element’. Now he claims a dual affinity with the elements: “So I had already made the double journey between my two landscapes of sea and snow” (31). However, in both the settings, Ralph fails to ‘feel at home’ and this inability forces him to withdraw himself from one setting to the other in rapid succession:

I felt I had known a double failure, and I felt I continued to live between their twin threats. (32)

Unknown to him at this point of time, Ralph continues to oscillate between these two locales several times in the quest for the spatial dimension of his identity.

To each, at the first parting, I thought I had said good-bye, since I had got to know each in my own way.” (31)

His going back to Isabella foreshadows Ralph’s revisit to London as a Caribbean politician and his eventual exile.

The phase of his life between his return to Isabella and his eventual exile to London is termed by Ralph the writer as a “period in parenthesis” (32). His return to Isabella accompanied by his English wife Sandra marks the beginning of this crucial chapter
in his life. The forty year old Ralph looks back upon his marriage as an “episode” (42). The seeds of the eventual disintegration of the “dark romance of the mixed marriage” (51) are present from the beginning of this relationship. Ralph’s recollection of his “textbook example of ill-advised marriage” (42) commences by identifying Sandra as the initiator of this short-lived alliance:

And in fact marriage was her idea (42).

Ironically, from their first accidental meeting near the school notice-board, Sandra’s command over her language (45), the isolation from her family and community (46) and her “capacity for creating occasions” (46) appeared to Ralph as the “perfect basis for a relationship” (47). Despite possessing “looks [which] were of the sort that improves with the strength and definition of maturity” (44) the physical intimacy that Sandra provides him with is perceived by Ralph as her dutifulness and determination (50).

The specific reactions of a few people to Ralph and Sandra’s marriage highlight the contradictory public perception of this marriage. Misled by Sandra to believe them as married even before the ceremony had taken place, Ralph’s landlady, Mrs. Ellis’s “hope” for the couple’s happiness is a diluted by her understated doubt about Ralph’s choice of the bride (49). Similarly, the marriage registrar’s concern for Sandra that prompted him to give her the “address of an association which offered information and protection to British women overseas” (51) during the wedding ceremony highlights the doubts he has in Sandra’s choice of a husband.
Above all, the unfavourable reaction of Ralph’s mother to her non-Hindu English daughter-in-law during the couple’s disembarkation at a dock in Isabella propels the Ralph to seek shelter in a hotel. The hotel, a transitory and provisional site of residence, facilitates the couple to form bonds with a “neutral, fluid group” of young and “expatriate” Caribbean professionals who had studied and married abroad (57). This association continues even after the couple shifts to their marital home.

In the meantime, Ralph’s inheritance of “a 120-acre of wasteland just outside the city” (60) from his maternal grandfather enables him to earn his livelihood by developing that land into “Kripalville—such was the name I gave the development, speedily corrupted to Crippleville” (61). Eventually, Crippleville “acquired an integrity which was to last” (63) and became a successful business venture for Ralph.

However, the financial success of Ralph started to become inversely proportional to the disintegration of his marriage with Sandra.

What makes a marriage? What makes a house with two people empty? Surely we were compatible, even complementary. Yet it was this very compatibility that drew her away from me. (71)

The couple began to sleep in separate rooms as Ralph gradually realised his attitude towards his wife changing: “The very things I had once admired in her—confidence, ambition, rightness—were what I now pitied her for” (71). Sandra began to quarrel with most of their acquaintances and eventually she concludes:
‘I suppose this must be the most inferior place in the world,’ she said. ‘Inferior natives, inferior expats. Frightfully inferior and frightfully happy. The two must go together.’ (71-72)

Like Ralph, Sandra too was uncomfortable, both in the metropolis and the former colony. Paralleling Ralph’s unhappiness at being born at Isabella and his unsuccessful attempt to ‘feel at home’ in London, Sandra, too, looked upon England as “the country she had wished to get away from” because in London, “no family or group awaited her” (72) and the rented house in Isabella did not offer her a better alternative.

Eventually both Ralph and Sandra begin to ascribe the discontentment of their relationship to influence of the rented house they were living in. Ralph uses the metaphor of colonisation to highlight their inability to transform the house into their home:

Was it the house? ...We both thought it attractive but for some reason we had never succeeded in colonizing it. Large areas of it remained empty; it felt like a rented house, which soon has to go back to its owner. It had never seemed important to us to have a house of our own. I had no feeling for the house as home, as personal creation. I had no things, no treasures, no collection even of books, no household gods, as Sandra would have said; and apart from a few school prizes, neither had she. (74)
This inability to transform the site of the house into their home due to the provisional nature of their ownership right over it prompts Ralph to build his own house at Crippleville mimicking the Roman house of Pompeii and Herculaneum (74).

However, even the construction of the Roman house failed to cement the cracks that were threatening the marriage of Ralph and Sandra. Ralph began to seek physical intimacy in extramarital liaisons and he doubted that Sandra was also taking recourse to similar means.

The habits of my student days, which had never altogether died, were now revived. On the island I had become acquainted with a number of women of various races, of utmost discretion; what had been an extravagance became, as before, an addiction, but now guiltless and clinical. (74)

Eventually, Sandra parted ways with Ralph who looks upon her departure as the logical outcome of his deteriorating relationship with her.

Sandra was after all in a position to leave; other relationships awaited her, other countries. I had nowhere to go; I wished to experience no new landscapes; I had cut myself off from that avidity which I still attributed to her. It was not for me to decide to leave; that decision was hers alone. (80)

However, before she leaves, Sandra makes a very ominous statement that may be interpreted as a metaphor that encapsulates the failure of her marriage to Ralph. She says: “The Niger is a tributary of that Siene” (84). Seine is a major river of north-western France, whereas Niger flows on the western part of the African continent.
Therefore, apparently the two rivers are not even remotely connected to each other. However, the association between the two rivers emerges when placed against the backdrop of colonialism and imperialism. In fact, most of the African territory through which the Niger River flows was part of the French colonial territory known as the French West Africa.

Therefore, Sandra’s statement brings into sharp focus the different socio-cultural background of Ralph and Sandra and their respective positions in the postcolonial contexts. It also highlights their racial discrepancy which causes the non-acceptance of Sandra by Ralph’s family and then, the eventual disintegration of the marriage.

After Sandra’s departure, Ralph progressed to the next logical step by shaping his career as a politician.

I have said that my marriage and the political career which succeeded it and seemed to flow from it, all that active part of my life, occurred in a sort of parenthesis. (199)

Browne acts as the catalyst that motivates Ralph to try his luck as a politician. The project begins when at Browne’s insistence, Ralph agrees to write an article about his father for a paper called The Socialist. Ironically, though the Roman house failed to sustain Ralph’s marriage, it becomes the scene of Ralph’s first literary and political action:
And there in the Roman house—where I had prepared the scene for an occasion with an altogether different issue—our agreement was made. (203)

The publication of Ralph’s essay heralds the beginning of his political career, a career that began with success against the backdrop of the Roman house.

The truth of the movement lay in the Roman house. It also lay in our undeniable success. We attracted support from all races and all classes. We offered, as it soon appeared, more than release from bitterness. We offered drama. (213)

Ralph tried to blend in the role of the politician that Browne steered him into: “He presented me with my role. I did not reject him” (204). The novelty of the combination of Ralph and Browne offered the islanders an alternative to the established politicians of Isabella:

...we were a demonstration of what was desirable and possible. We had the resources, in intellect and offers of support, to question the system itself. We denied competion; and indeed, there was none. Simply by coming forward—Browne, myself and The Socialist, all together—we put an end to the old order. It was like that. (207)

Under Browne’s tutelage, Ralph evolves a public image for himself that lays the foundation for his initial political success:
I had become a public figure and an attractive one. It was the personality Browne had seen: the rich man with a certain name who had put himself on the side of the poor, who appeared to have turned his back on the making of money and on his former associates...So in the unlikely circumstances the London dandy was resurrected...it was pleasant in those early days just to be this self. I had known nothing like it. (210)

Browne’s skilful and successful management of Ralph’s public profile to obtain maximum political benefit “...led to the inevitable: the success of election night, the cheering, the flag-waving, the drinking” (217). This adroitly orchestrated electoral victory signals the beginning of Ralph’s career as a politician.

Initially, Ralph takes pleasure in the privilege of his position as a politician to name streets, roads, government buildings, documents and whatever else strikes his fancy. He also devotes his energy to cutting ribbons and inaugurating schools, roads, laundries, shoe-shops and filling stations and ensures his visibility through photographs with foreign nationals to augment his public image (234-235). This is a replication of his childhood desire to identify himself with the Bella Bella Bottling Works to enhance his social position.

However, after the euphoria of electoral victory wears off, Ralph realises that beneath his personas of the “public dandy, the political manoeuvrer and the organizer”, he is not a politician like Browne because the prospect of power in Isabella “fatigued” him (225). He realises the powerlessness of the politician to fulfil the promises he and his
party made to the people whose support provides the foundation of their electoral success. During their election campaign, the men of Ralph and Browne’s party, in exchange for votes, promised to “abolish poverty in twelve months”, to “abolish bicycle licences”, to provide “farmers with higher prices for sugar and copra and cocoa”, to “renegotiate the bauxite royalties”, to “nationalize every foreign-owned estate” and even to “kick the whites into the sea and send the Asiatics back to Asia. They promised; they promised...” (216).

Now, faced with reality that renders him incapable of fulfilling those promises, Ralph identifies two factors that make the “colonial” politician an “easy object of satire” forcing him to “go back on his own words” and “betray himself” in such a manner that “in the end he has no cause save his own survival. The support he has attracted, not ideal to ideal, but bitterness to bitterness, he betrays and mangles; emancipation is not possible for all” (228). The first is the continued dependency of the newly independent postcolonial nation on its former ‘centre of power’ that facilitates the continuation of the erstwhile coloniser’s dominance (neo-colonialism) in the internal matters of the new country.

We were a colony, a benevolently administered dependency. So long as our dependence remained unquestioned, our politics were a joke. (206)

The second reason that Ralph identifies is the failure of larger social structure of the newly independent society to generate its own source of internal power:

...in a society like ours, fragmented, inorganic, no link between man and landscape, a society not held together by common interests, there was no true
internal source of power, and that no power was real which did not come the outside. Such was the controlled chaos we had, with such enthusiasm, brought upon ourselves. (224)

This dependency on the external source of power to solve the administrative problems of his country foreshadows Ralph’s eventual failure and disgrace as a politician.

In the capacity of the politician, Ralph faces three tasks of increasing difficulty that test his abilities to the maximum. His first challenge is to deal with the financial strain on the country’s economy caused due to the expenses incurred for supporting the English expatriates employed in the administrative section of the island nation’s civil service.

“Each expatriate cost us twice as much as a local man.” (228)

Ralph and his colleagues solved the problem by manipulating the public opinion and shifting the focus from the expensive white servants to the equally expensive and more offensive coloured civil servants who drained away the country’s wealth for their personal benefit (228-229).

The second trial consisted of the renegotiation of the bauxite contract with the private companies that mined bauxite in Isabella. When Ralph tried to convey the local demand to the appropriate quarter, he was tactfully snubbed by the companies who contrasted the ineffective grade of the Isabella’s bauxite with the better quality and affordability of the South American, Jamaican and Australian bauxite. Taking the hint, Ralph effectively counters his countrymen by gently highlighting the
repercussions of offending the companies that hold the reigns of the country’s economy:

By making too much trouble we were gambling with our future; even as it was, there was little to stop all the companies leaving Isabella, and then the natives could play as long as they pleased with the red dust...Besides, any degree of uncertainty about the future might lead to the abandonment of plans, well under way, for the establishment of an alumina plant. And that was an investment of some millions. (237)

With this success, Ralph attained the peak of his political success. “After this descent was to be rapid” (238). Like his father before him, Ralph is unable to hold on to his position and power in the public life and the third trial precipitated his fall.

I was at the centre of events which I could not control. I was aware of feeling focussing on me. (239)

The awareness of his helplessness is intensified when Ralph is confronted with the issue of the nationalization of the sugar estates. Inevitably, Ralph finds himself trapped into the responsibility of carrying out a task which London had categorically ruled out as impossible. To keep up appearances and control the outburst of the local populace that began assuming a racial character, a delegation including Ralph was despatched to London (239).
Ralph’s second journey to London in his official capacity contrasts sharply with his earlier trip as a student to find a home in the Metropolis.

There would be a return, of course, but that would be in the nature of a visit, an ascertaining of what I knew would be there. (242)

The delegation reaches London and is put up at the transient site of a hotel to wait for three days before they are scheduled to meet the English officials.

Ralph contrasts the glamour, ambience and facilities of his provisional residence, the hotel that “radiates its magic to the city” (243) for its residents with its undercurrent as a mere place of work for all its employees. While his aides get busy in exploring the City, Ralph spends his time contrasting his earlier memories of London with its present reality.

I tried to be a tourist in the city which once had taught me the impossibility of escape. (243-244)

Eventually, the delegation is granted audience and then dismissed by the English officials who dictate their unyielding stance of anti nationalization in clear and concise terms. Ralph makes one last desperate attempt to convince an English Minister in what turns out to be a brief but humiliating experience.

His manner indicated clearly that our game had gone on long enough and he had other things to do than to assist the public relations of colonial politicians.

In about forty-five seconds he painted so lively a picture of the consequences
of any intemperate action by the government of Isabella that I felt personally rebuked.
Then I spoke the sentence which tormented me almost as soon as I had said it.
It was this which no doubt made the interview so painful in recollection. I said, ‘How can I take this message back to my people?’ ‘My people’: for that I deserved all I got. He said: ‘You can take back to your people any message you like.’ And that was the end. (245)

The finality of unfruitful meeting sealed Ralph’s future. As the rest of the delegation returned to Isabella, Ralph stayed back in London to renew his acquaintance with Lord Stockwell and his family. Stockwell had met the Gurudeva twice and his sugar estates were also at stake in the nationalization issue that was affecting Isabella. Ralph even engaged in a short lived affair with Stockwell’s daughter Stella attracted by her “capacity for delight, such as I had found in Sandra, but without Sandra’s anguish” (252).

After about eight days, Ralph returns to the Roman house in Isabella to find that a “massive, contradictory but a satisfying case” has been made against him to discredit him publicly.

My private life—my methodical making of money, the racial exclusiveness of my development at Crippleville, my marriage to Sandra, my relationship with Wendy, my escapade with Stella—all this was used to heighten the picture of my public imposture. (260)
Desertion by all of his friends including Browne and the subsequent race riots in Isabella forces Ralph to accept from the new government, the “offer of a free and safe passage, to London again, by the air, with sixty-six pounds of luggage and fifty thousand dollars” (264).

After his third journey to England, Ralph tries desperately to find a place for himself: “I decided, when I arrived, not to stay in London...I wished to avoid running into anyone I knew” (271). His quest for a permanent residence outside London led him to travel relentlessly across the British landscape:

Daily, by erratic bus services, making difficult connections, I travelled from small town to small town, seeking shelter with my sixty-six pounds of luggage, always aware in the late afternoon of my imminent homelessness. I consumed the hours of daylight with long waits and brief periods of travel. Money, of which I was at last aware, was leaking out of my pocket. (272)

His futile journey continued till he realised that for a man “sitting at the limit of desolation with sixty-six pounds of luggage in two Antler suitcases, concentrating on the moment” (273), there was no better city to stay in except London.

He returns to London, the city that he had known as a student, a politician and eventually as a refugee-immigrant (266) and takes up residence in Mr. Shylock’s boarding house-come-hotel on the Kensington High Street. This journey signifies for Ralph his adherence to the fourfold division of life prescribed by his Aryan ancestors.
for he had evolved from student to a householder, then a man of affairs who had finally morphed into a recluse (274).

In contrast to those who passed through the hotel as a site of transience, Ralph “fits in” the hotel along with the other more permanent inmates, some who had stayed there as long as twenty-three years. Ralph’s prolonged stay at the hotel begins to foster a sense of belonging in him which all his previous homes in Isabella had failed to do and he begins to identify himself with the ‘non-place’ as his habitat.

When I first came here I used to think of this life as the life of the maimed. But we who belong here are neither maimed nor very old. Three-quarters of the men here are of my age; they have responsible jobs to which they go off in their motorcars every morning. We are the people who for one reason or another have withdrawn, from our respective countries, from the city where we find ourselves, from our families. We have withdrawn from unnecessary responsibility and attachment. We have simplified our lives. I cannot believe our establishment is unique. It comforts me to think that in this city alone there must be hundreds and thousands like ourselves. (269-270)

This identification with the location helps Ralph progress from the singular ‘I’ to the plural ‘we’. He not only discovers a site to anchor his own identity, but also learns to share that space with the other inmates.

As soon as Ralph learns situate himself in the stable site afforded by the hotel, he acquires a writing table from the hotel, sets it beside the window and begins to write
his memoirs to impose order on his own history by transcribing his ‘active life’ of forty years within a narrative framework. In this process, he is able to overcome the formlessness of his experiences primarily due to the order, sequence and regularity of the hotel setting.

It never occurred to me that I would have grown to relish the constriction and order of hotel life, which previously had driven me to despair; and that the contrast between my unchanging room and the slow progression of what was being created there would give me such satisfaction. (267)

Ralph spends just about three years to encompass his narrative in a tripartite structure. When he began writing, Ralph was envisaging the possibility of using his writing as a base to make a new career for himself:

The financial uplift at the end would be small, I knew. But I thought there was a good chance that publication might lead to some form of irregular, agreeable employment: reviews and articles on colonial or ‘third world’ matters...even on occasion to indulge in the harmless banter of a radio discussion...some little niche in television... (266)

Eventually, when he completes his memoir, Ralph’s initial goal changes significantly:

It never occurred to me that the writing of this book might have become an end in itself, that the recording of a life might become an extension of that life. (267)
Andrew Gurr sums up the resolution of Ralph’s identity crisis by arguing that in his exilic condition, writing becomes an act of emancipation. In the context of *The Mimic Men* it also becomes an identity which frees him from the role of the colonial imitator, the mimic function of the title (Gurr 1981: 85). Throughout his life, Ralph had sought the validation of his own identity in the eyes of others. Thus, he made himself malleable enough to fit into the roles others fashioned out for him, mimicking others in order to avoid the struggle to construct his identity on his own terms. It is only when he dissociates himself completely during his exile that he comes to terms with his own self.

Gurr correlates the discovery Ralph’s self with that of his creator: “After *Mr. Biswas*, and after several years of globetrotting as a professional journalist, Naipaul’s sense of identity crystalised in *The Mimic Men* around the exiled writer’s ultimate defence, artistic freedom. Only art can give a truly coherent order to experience” (Gurr 1981: 85). Thus, for both Ralph Singh and his creator V. S. Naipaul, trapped in the postcolonial contexts situated at the periphery of the metropolis, literature provides the private space to which they ‘long to belong’.
“Many of us want our lives to unfold like a novel.”
—Albert Wendt, *Ola*