

‘The trunks of trees washed up by the sea’: Of Uprootedness and Shipwreck in V. S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*

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Abstract

This paper investigates the notion of uprootedness and cultural shipwreck in the Trinidadian novelist V. S. Naipaul’s novel *The Mimic Men* (1967). Although the novel’s fictional island may stand for Trinidad, this paper stresses the fact that, according to Naipaul, the disordered Isabella may well match the characteristics of other chaotic Third World nations. The narrator-protagonist symbolizes more of the disillusionment worthy of Naipaul’s other placeless characters like Salim in *A Bend in the River* and Mr. Biswas in *A House for Mr Biswas*. This means that Naipaul tries a writing of a (hi)story that adheres to his personal idiosyncrasies and beliefs, a narrative in which he exposes the abnormalities and pretences of a society in which nothing seems sure and lasting. As the title of the novel suggests, the pattern is that of mimicry; postcolonial countries, all together lacking a sense of creativity, duplicate and distort metropolitan models. Thus, this paper sheds light in the tunnel between the ‘us’ (Europeans) and the ‘them’ (Caribbean) arguing that for Naipaul the first stands for authenticity and reality while the second signifies mimicry and unreality.

Key words: alienation, homelessness, mimicry uprootedness, V. S. Naipaul

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**'The trunks of trees washed up by the sea':
Of Uprootedness and Shipwreck in V. S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men***

While some critics choose to dismiss V. S. Naipaul's denigrating comments on the Third World by focusing on his novelistic excellence, one may well be forced to consider one in the light of the other. With Naipaul, fiction and non-fiction intertwine as the Trinidadian novelist tries to master the mechanisms and rhetorical strategies of textualization: the act that allows the author to derive meaning out of the narrative experience. As Dissanayake and Wickramagamage (1993) have argued, "even where Naipaul maintains the creative distance between the traveller and narrator [...] he always approaches experience with a sure knowledge that it is being transformed into textuality" (p. 26). In other words, Naipaul's fiction and non-fiction, poetics and politics, are unthinkable without each other, as there is a strong autobiographical link between his themes. Though Naipaul has sometimes clearly disengaged himself from the narrative, one cannot help but consider him the protagonist of his novels. King (1980) asserts that "while the novels and short stories have seldom been about himself [Naipaul], they have reflected the various stages of his disillusionment with Trinidad, his despair with India and his concern with being a homeless ex-colonial" (p. 108). As such, Naipaul transmits his embarrassment about his home-place to his characters. They are often characters who feel themselves "shipwrecked" in the West Indies or in Africa while they still fantasize about what Naipaul calls the "real world," England. The heavy dependence on personal experience as a narrative material, and how directly the author transmits his experience to his characters, inform the various philosophies Naipaul embodies in his novels.

The close affinity of the well-informed narrator of *The Mimic Men* with Naipaul, to begin with, leads to considering the novel a fictional autobiography. *The Mimic Men* is the story of Ralph Singh, a forty-year-old postcolonial West Indian politician whose constant sense of missing a society urges him, like his creator Naipaul, to live torn between his native island Isabella and a hotel room in London. Singh sets to writing his personal history in an attempt to impose order on his life and find a geographical place to anchor his displaced identity. From the beginning of the novel, Naipaul exposes the inability of a postcolonial society to provide an ex-colonial with a coherent self-definition. Singh is a man adrift in the world, an ex-colonial whose quest for order is worthy of Naipaul's seminal theme in his other novels: The mimic men displayed between their past lives in the colony, their unstable present in the metropolis which aggravates their sense of uprootedness, and a dark future which promises to intensify their sense of in-betweenness. Moreover, like Naipaul, Singh feels himself torn apart between two poles, India and England, the first being the land of the ancestors and the second the headspring of his literary and cultural tradition. He starts dreaming about his Aryan ancestry and Indian roots while feeling "shipwrecked" on his island Isabella. He exhibits a deep interest in his Indian belonging by retaining his family name, Singh, which means lion or warrior and which has a connection with the history of the Rajputs, a ruling class of the Indian subcontinent. However, Singh, like Naipaul, suffers from an identity crisis because he feels himself marked by his Indian heritage, his real name, and his father's failure as a political activist.

The Enigma of a Shipwreck in two Cultures

The Mimic Men textualizes Naipaul's approach to the Caribbean loss of culture and identity. It is profoundly concerned with the cultural vacuum from which the islands suffer. Naipaul subtitled his essay on Anguilla: "The Shipwrecked 6000" (1969, pp. 9-16), for shipwreck is the word Ralph Singh uses to refer to his being adrift on Isabella. To be shipwrecked, on the real Anguilla or the fictional Isabella, is to be adrift on the fringe of the Empire at a time when the imperial power is withdrawing. Anguilla and Trinidad are closely linked to Isabella by virtue of their smallness: "the problem of a tiny colony set adrift, part of the jetsam of an empire, a near-primitive people suddenly returned to a free state, their renewed or continuing exploitation" (Naipaul, 1969, pp. 15-6). Elsewhere,

‘A dot on the map of the world’ is what Naipaul says of his native Trinidad. The smallness of the island has long haunted Naipaul, and his eagerness of space is justified by the urge to leave an island still awaiting Columbus, a flagless island that a character in *A Flag on the Island* calls “a floating suspended place to which you brought your own flag if you wanted to. (Naipaul, 1967a, p. 132)

Haunting his presence, the image of shipwreck intensifies Singh’s fears of the “haphazard, disordered, and mixed society” (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 57) of Isabella, the “most inferior place in the world” (p. 72). Conjuring up his creator’s views, Singh argues, “to be born on an island like Isabella, an obscure New World transplantation, second-hand and barbarous, was to be born to disorder” (p. 127). He struggles about both landscapes which witness his failure to find a place for his shipwrecked soul. In an attempt to bridge the gap – his life between parentheses on Isabella – Singh continually reminds us that his existence on Isabella is just an accident of history: “the locality where accident had placed me” (p. 127). Shipwreck is an expression of his being “cut off” (p. 127), “that feeling of having been flung off the world” (p. 71). The image of “the trunks of trees washed up by the sea” (p. 119), scattered along Isabella beach, is perhaps most telling of the kind of deracination Naipaul evokes. He writes: “Here lay the tree, fast in the sand which was deep and level around it, impossible now to shift, what once had floated lightly on the waters” (p. 120). Joshi (1994) is for the view that:

This image suggests not only uprooting but also the impossibility of return. The bitter truth is that all these displaced people can never be at home again in the homelands they dream of. They have been altered by their experiences in the New World and would, were they to return, find themselves aliens in their former homelands. (p. 169)

Singh links his sense of being fractured to the image of the island as lacking the characteristics of a unitary identity: “fragmented, a part of some greater whole from which it is in exile and to which it must be related – in an act of (never completed) completion that is always also, as it were, an ex-isle, a loss of the particular” (Bongie, 1998, p. 18). Patterned on Trinidad, Isabella is an artificial construct, designed for colonial profit, and in which very different ethnicities are ‘unnaturally’ lumped together. According to Ralph Singh:

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 who could achieve fulfilment only within the security of their own societies and the landscapes hymned by their ancestors. [...] The empires of our time were short-lived, but they have altered the world forever; their passing away is their least significant feature [emphasis is mine]. (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 32)

Another aspect of Singh’s denial of Isabellan landscape – his refusal to accept the world around him – is that he tries to pattern his life in a way that not only denies the realities around him but also leads him to self-hatred, a self-destructive aesthetic. As Nandan (2003) emphasizes, Singh “reimagines the Caribbean and remakes ‘home’ through a mythology of Englishness” (p. 133). Singh looks to Isabella as a landscape “as manufactured as that of any great French or English park. But we walked in a garden of hell, among tress, some still without popular names, whose seeds had sometimes been brought to our island in the intestines of slaves” (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 158). This is an undermining of the colonial narrative in which the Caribbean islands were depicted as a paradise by showing that in reality “paradise is a battlefield” (White, 1975, p. 174). At this stage, Singh struggles between his psychic representations and social realities. In spite of his attempts to bridge the gap, Isabellan realities still disturb his fantasies. In his imagination, he sees his “mother’s mother leading her cow through a scene of pure pastoral: calendar pictures of English gardens superimposed on our Isabellan villages of mud and grass” (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 95). He also remembers

"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" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 97).

Fantasies coming to him from Britain (apples and gardens) merge with Isabellan realities. Memory becomes, to dislocate Homi Bhabha's concept, a "Third Space" (Bhabha, 1994, 53-6) producing a fusion of discourses that do not correspond with any reality. The conflation is the only version Singh can provide: "the editing is clearly at fault, but the edited version is all I have" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 97), Singh declares. The image of the apples perhaps comes to him from textbooks, ideas, and the heritage that were taught in the colonial schools of Isabella. Singh's fantasies are a *Western construct* because they come from what he learnt from European history books: "We, here on our island, handling books printed in this world of Europe, and using its goods, had been abandoned and forgotten" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 157). The narrative contradicts the realities of Singh's daily life; it corresponds with what Bhabha would call a "pedagogical discourse" coming from outside, namely Europe. Singh lives in a fantasy world and denies the realities of Isabella, but his attempt fails, as these realities blur his imagination. In Singh's case, realities and fantasies are, to use Fredric Jameson's terminology, "incommensurable" (Jameson, 1991, p. 372).ⁱⁱ As a colonial subject, even as he does not live through the trauma of direct colonisation, Singh "remain[s] always marginal and exiled, always in the diaspora" (Hirsch, 1998, p. 420), a colonial subject who suffers from "temporal and spatial exile" (p. 422).

Realizing that "in a society like ours, fragmented, inorganic, no link between men 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 from the outside" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 224) Singh decides to leave for London. He embarks on a ship and sails to England, thinking of Columbus's reversed journey across the ocean, identifying with the experience of the discovery and saying to himself, out of determination: "No more foolish fears: I was never to return" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 194). His decision to leave for London is sustained by the inadequacy of his fantasies, which in turn accentuates his sense of separateness. He decides to leave for London where "there was no one to link [his] present to [his] past, no one to note [his] consistencies or inconsistencies" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 19). Ralph's statement corresponds to what Memmi (1957) observes the psychological formation of the colonized subject. When Memmi (1957, p. 92) argues that the colonial, denied national structures that stem from his culture, must content himself with the passive and perplexing present, he speaks of Singh's lack of a cultural link between his present and his past, the wounds of a culture he has diagnosed. His move to London proves to be an investigation of the myth of his childhood, the myth of a real world existing outside of Isabella. Like Naipaul, Singh comes to London in search of nurture for his fantasies, in search of something that would consolidate his relationship to his abstract ideas. Unlike the unanchored Isabella, London at first seemed "so rooted in its soil" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 27). In London, "a city of such miraculous light" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 26), Singh looks for the enlightenment of his inner darkness.

However, arriving in London, a city that has long represented a dream of fulfilment for Naipaul and many of his protagonists, proves to be the second shipwreck that intensifies his sense of not having arrived anywhere. Elsewhere, Naipaul named this "the enigma of arrival". In London, Singh discovers the illusionary nature of his dreams; his fantasy of a real world existing overseas is shattered. His paradoxes are reproduced; seeking a higher order, he is trapped in London's greater disorder. He finally realizes that he chose "flight to the greater disorder, the final emptiness: London and the home countries" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 7). It is a flight to the decadence of London, what had once been his centre of cultural solidity. This centre is now falling apart, thus failing to provide him with a solid sense of achievement. Ralph acknowledges that his voyage to London is a journey which allows him to experience his difference in terms of someone coming from elsewhere, as someone who "had come 'from far', from the brink" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 271). Therefore, his response to the disorder of Isabella is a flight to another vacuum, claiming

his right to become another or, at least, juxtapose his other self, some hidden parts of his metropolitan illusionary self. "At this stage of his existential experience, what matters is the attempt itself, the positive response to the call of the 'centre'" (Ben Abbas, 2004, p. 52). Even in London, Singh lacks any sense of belonging, and shipwreck is the word he uses time and again to express his uprootedness:

Shipwreck: I have used this word before. With my island background, it is the word that always came to me. And this was 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." (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 26)

The 'Liminal Space' of a Cultural In-between

After this second shipwreck, Singh feels himself belonging to nowhere. Hamner (1973) argues that "between the obscure derelict Isabella of his Youth and the sterile, evasive metropolis of his early retirement, Ralph is suspended without vital roots in either environment" (p. 137). He moves to England in search of an identity but he soon discovers that his fantasies, in which he imagines himself more like a real person, are rather more illusionary, and his arrival to England sharpens the sense of shipwreck that haunts him. The fissure, the cultural split that Singh experiences on Isabella, seems to have been recorded. His fantasy that a camera in the sky is following him, marking him as the outsider to be *surveilled* (Bhabha), is typical of this failure to claim the place as his: "The camera was in the sky. I was a man apart, disentangled from the camouflage of people" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 125). London landscape urges Singh to repress his difference through alienating him further from his desire to belong to the crowds, a life "poisoned by a feeling of shipwreck and wrongness among crowds" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 127). Insofar as he belongs to none, being always Othered in both places, Ralph accepts the cultural parameters that have been imposed, accepted, reproduced and taken as fact.

Singh, if seen in the light of Bhabha's notion of mimicry, fails in his attempts to assimilate to the metropolitan culture and, consequently, experiences the in-betweenness of the mimic man who strips himself of his identity as colonized and finds himself denied a Western one. According to Bhabha's theory of mimicry, the mimic man must keep a difference if he wants to be allowed a partial 'British identity'; in Singh's fantasies, however, to belong to the metropolis means being as authentic as any other British. His attempts fail calamitously since the metropolis aggravates his senses of uprootedness. It means that, as Hamner (1973) asserts, "the mimicry out of which he attempts to fashion an organized, meaningful existence leads to disillusionment and frenzy" (p. 102). Singh's fantasy that England can offer him a solid identity is constantly subverted by the Otherness of the metropolis. In other words, Singh's mimicry of his colonizer's identity exacerbates his sense of difference and allows his colonizer the possibility of difference needed for keeping a racial superiority. Singh never arrives at the desired assimilation/acclulturation because of his excesses and fantasies, because of his "partial presence [...] incomplete and virtual" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 123). Experiencing "the panic of ceasing to feel myself as a whole person" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 27), a sense so pervasive that this feeling of being "incomplete" and "divided bewilderingly into compartments" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 27) is reiterated throughout *The Mimic Men*.

In Singh's case, mimicry is not fully possible because he is more than he is supposed to be. In other words, he exceeds what he is asked to be. By the end of the novel, he realizes that part of his permanent sense of insecurity is his feeling of being unreal, virtual, unstable and inauthentic, especially through his suppression of his own (hi)story. After leaving the island, Singh tries to establish a meaningful relationship with his surroundings by unsuccessfully responding to identities and fake pretences that he thinks others see in him or want him to be. Put differently, he tries to redefine his self through Western eyes. To liberate himself from his fantasies, placelessness, and disorder, Singh resorts to *adopting roles*; he tries to give himself personalities which correspond with what the metropolis requires from a mimic man. However, as

Sivanandan (1990) argues, "for the moment 'they' accept you, you are finished, completed; the moment they adopt you, you have sold out, you have become the object of their history, you have no existence apart from them" (p. 33). What traumatises Singh even more devastatingly is not the constant homelessness but the fear of losing his identity: "the threat of other people's lives" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 27). He feels that other mimic men share this sense of entrapment with him like his friend Browne who "would have liked to step down from the role that imprisoned him, as once his house [...] had imprisoned him (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 230-1). They are the mimic man trapped into the fixed (in-)complete identities prescribed by their former colonizer.

Singh meets other exiled ex-politicians in London. These expatriates, as McLaren (1990) comments, "have become detached from their native systems of culture, production, and nationality" (p. 64). Like Eliot's 'hollow men', they denote the void resulting from living inauthentically in a metropolitan centre which has proved to be equally hollow at the core, the place of a second shipwreck. The metropolis creates a sense of uncertainty and uneasiness that make the mimic man measure his self against the colonizer and have no value until he has gained approval from him. This is what Singh is doomed to be in London: "in the great city, so three-dimensional, so rooted in its soil, drawing colour from such depths, only the city was real. Those of us who came to it lost some of our solidity; we were trapped into fixed, flat postures" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 27). Singh's inability to hold on to one fixed identity is all too evident since he tries to give himself a personality, and wait for the response in the eyes of others. "He needed the guidance of other men's eyes" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 18). "In London I had no guide", Singh complains, "It was up to me to choose my character, and I chose the character that was easiest and most attractive. I was the dandy, the extravagant colonial, indifferent to scholarship" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 19). Consequently, he is second-best when measured by this criterion. The mimicry and the role-playing through which he tries to construct a meaningful identity, merely lead to further disillusionment and frenzy. In London, he puts on one of Frantz Fanon's 'white masks', the one that would lead him to be accepted, one that would allow him to melt in the crowd without being continually marked by his colonial heritage. In London, his attitudes range from mimicry to self-hatred, for he thinks of himself as a formless individual who can fit into any role assigned to him by others with least feeling of inauthenticity. He became "what [he] see[s] of [himself] in the eyes of others [...] It was disquieting, yet at the same time oddly flattering, to be cherished as a substitute; and it imposed no obligation" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 20). London does not provide answers but furthers the questioning and the alienation.

On the verge of a breakdown and in his attempt to find roots for his homeless identity, Singh marries an English woman, Sandra. The suffocating Isabella had forced him to leave, but he feels the need to return, perhaps to understand better what forced him to withdraw. He decides to return to his island with his wife believing that his fears will fade with an English woman by his side. He describes his morning arrival in terms of alienation: "I saw through each porthole the blue, green and gold of the tropical island. So pure and fresh! And I knew it to be, horribly man-made; to be exhausted, fraudulent, cruel and above all, not mine" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 52). He senses that Isabellan landscapes exercise the same effects on his English wife, for his feeling of shipwreck suddenly invades her. Before he marries her she appeared to him rooted, secure, and resourceful. He begins to look for the virtues that she can guide him through. But the bond with Sandra that begins with certainties ends in vacuum. He soon discovers that Sandra carries her own darkness, the same sense of homelessness he tries to escape: "I with my past, my darkness, she no doubt with hers" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 24). She has indeed turned to him out of a similar need for reassurance. Once he perceives her insecurity, her darkness invading his, his love for her begins to fade:

She had begun to get some of my geographical sense, that feeling of having been flung off the world [...] she told me she had awakened in the night with a feeling of fear, a simple fear, a simple

fear of place, of the absent world. [...] The very things I had once admired in her [...] were what I now pitied her for. (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 71)

He has indeed contaminated his wife by his sense of disorder. They were not only incompatible but also moving in opposite directions. "At an early age," Ralph Singh "was made aware of the oddity of an arrangement whereby two human beings, who were in no way related, paired off" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 96). The failure of his marriage awakens his fear of this oddity: "it was the fear of the man who feels the veils coming down one by one, muffling his deepest responses" (Naipaul, 1967, p. 75).

When Sandra ultimately leaves him, he has acquired the reputation of a playboy. Ralph's yarnings after English women never spring from true love, all are directed by, as Moradecai (1982) asserts, "a logic that perceives each woman as a way of grasping the elusive self Singh is after" (p. 641). He sees in English women an escape from the insecurity he suffers from, and through his relationship with them he thinks he can acquire a secure tradition. He seeks sexual relations as a refuge in "anonymous flesh" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 28) for his insecure body. But what he achieves is rather a greater sense of insecurity. His sexual involvement with English women evokes his dissatisfaction with his self both emotionally and physically. It has little to do with true love. Women first sustain his sense of self and delude him into the security that he is lacking. The perception of those women continues to define him but he acts as if he is completely unaware that it has been the pattern of his life, usually marked as an immigrant in London. His relationships are here all the more self-destructive because he is partly conscious that he is repeating what he had initially tried to avoid.

The Mimic Men furthers the divide when Singh says that mimicry is "the larger erotic dream [...] moving out of ourselves, we look for extensions of ourselves. It is with cities as it is with sex" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 17). The climax of this realization is reached during one of Ralph Singh's sexual adventures. His encounter with a prostitute during a visit to Europe proves to have brought some relief from the futile search of his self-outside himself:

It is a moment that has remained with me. After three years I can call it back at will: that moment of timelessness, horror, solace. The Highway Code Through poor, hideous flesh to have learnt about flesh: through flesh to have gone beyond flesh. (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 258)

Sexual relations compel him to seek identity and self-definition in another flesh. He constructs his sense of sex as an ideal extension of self, an appeal to another self (the prostitute's body), and more importantly, a stepping out, even for a short moment, of his own disturbing self. This soon proved to be a failure, as it drives him to a near breakdown. His longings for anonymous human flesh turn into a reminder of his failure to overcome his inability to identify a particular moment of the famous shipwreck in his life. Therefore, it becomes a series of shipwrecks evoked whenever he fails to assemble the several fragments of his broken history.

The Mimic Men is a novel in which Naipaul endeavours the construction of migrant identity. The narrator-protagonist does not feel himself attached to any one discourse or geographical place. He occupies an in-between cultural space, "a liminal space" in Homi Bhabha's words. Singh's uncertainties and disorder prevent him from assimilating in both London and Isabella. He is torn between the two. Isabella is a place of disorder while London proves to be the greater disorder. As an autobiographical character to a certain extent, Singh feels betrayed by a history that excludes him from the colonial relations: "The descendent of the slave-owner could soothe the descendent of the slave with a private patois. I was the late intruder, the picturesque Asiatic, linked to neither" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 82). His self-exile to London is motivated by his sense of being rejected in both places. *The Mimic Men* exposes the failure of both metropolitan and peripheral societies to provide a mimic man with a coherent self-concept, an individual whose

inauthenticity, triggered essentially by his postcolonial in-betweenness, appeals to the others for self-esteem but, when the process fails, his sense of distress is intensified.

Naipaul gives more narrative space to the period of Singh's exile in London than his established career as postcolonial politician in Isabella. Towards the end of the novel, Singh justifies this when he comments: "this present residence in London, which I suppose can be called exile, has turned out to be the most fruitful" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 271). It is here that he realizes that this 'fruitful exile' is what leads him to dismiss his fantasies and "no longer yearn for ideal landscapes and no longer wish to know the god of the city" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 273) since "the god of the city was elusive" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 18). The nature of Singh's, hence Naipaul's, uprootedness, loss, alienation, and loneliness is not physical or geographical but spiritual, inside him. The physical world is a private fabrication, a place of higher disorder, and Naipaul relegates his narrator-protagonist to an imaginary world to 'look for the extension of his self' and to allow him access to the lost order. In London, he seeks the god of the city, the ideal he created in his imagination when he was still living in Isabella, but this ideal remains with him since the real London cannot fit its image created in Singh's imagination. As Weiss (1992) has pointed out, it stands for Singh's "romantic desire for the 'real world' beyond Trinidad. This real world, or imagined home, is not exactly England but a construct of it, a collective, colonial fantasy of the metropolis, the centre to which all things from the colonies gravitate (p. 88). Singh is then not expected to find order in the physical aspect of the city but in his fantasized construct of it. At this stage, he detaches himself from the actual realities, both Isabellian and metropolitan, and resorts to the world of fantasy and utopia.

The nation, as Anderson (1983) defines it in his monumental *Imagined Communities*, "is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign [...] Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (p. 6). This is true for Singh, to whom the physical world is fixed in time and place; he finds movement in an imagined construct of it. He withdraws from metropolitan life to a suburban hotel. This withdrawal informs his will to revisit the history of colonialism and his position within it. He displays the resignation, isolation, self-destruction, and interior monologues typical of Naipaul's quest for rewriting an imagined history from a different perspective. Ralph Singh's small room in a suburban hotel is, in fact, close to Naipaul's reaction to his London life as described in *An Area of Darkness* (1964): "I came to London – And I was lost. London was not the centre of my world, I had been misled; but there was nowhere else to go." He was "thrown more and more into myself, fighting to keep my balance ... all mythical lands faded, and in the big city I was confined to a smaller world than I had ever known" (p. 45).

(Re)ordering and (Re)writing the (Hi)story of a Shipwreck

Like Naipaul, Singh decides to establish order and coherence in his life by writing it up as a fictionalized history. As he declares early in the novel: "my first instinct was towards the writing of history" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 85). He denies his past to allow his present a 'fresh start': "I have cleared the decks, as it were, and prepared myself for fresh action, it will be the action of a free man" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 274). He decides to "clear the decks" and put between parentheses segments of his life that do not cohere with that history. He suppresses the connection with his family, for "to be descended from generations of idlers and failures, an unbroken line of the unimaginative, unenterprising and oppressed, had always seemed [...] to be a cause for deep, silent shame" (Naipaul 1967, p. 89). He also decides to remove his marriage with Sandra and his political career: "I once again see my marriage as an episode in parenthesis; I see all its emotions as, profoundly, fraudulent" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 274). *The Mimic Men* unfolds the awareness that other mimic men in London also try to be accepted through the erasure – 'remaking' – of their pasts as colonials. From Ralph's point of view, what is encouraging is that his writing is not an end in itself: "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" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 267). He goes on to argue that "writing,

for all its initial distortion, clarifies, and even becomes a process of life" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 274). In other words, Singh believes in a history that will suit his fantasies. This very willingness to "clear the decks" and set for a fresh start, to turn his back on the suffocating Isabella, is less a response to the call of the hegemonic centre than a refusal to continue suffering from the cultural and economic stasis of his Island. Isabella is too small for someone whose dreams stretch to a bigger imperial centre. "I had longed for largeness," Singh complains, "How, in the city, could largeness come to me?" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 27) His ties with Isabella are loosening, as he can no longer hold on to a place growing smaller and suffocating.

Like Ganesh in *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) who decides to rewrite his autobiography, which the narrator of the novel characterized as "the history of our times" (p. 18), Singh attempts to create for himself an identity through a fictional re-arrangement of his past. For Singh, writing is the creative recreation of experience, an act that elevates it to the status of facts. By imposing order on his past, he historicizes events and makes them manageable. His sense of insecurity and disorder, of being fractured and unsettled, begins to heal through writing. After writing his history and dismissing disturbing events, only then he can live the passage to a second life, a second identity reincarnated, washed of his colonial past. He has once looked down at writers as somehow "incomplete people, to whom writing was a substitute for what it then pleased me to call life" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 266). With the help of writing he begins to identify meaningful relations among the scattered experiences and events of his past. For instance, in his hotel room, he finds, for the first time, a concrete order that exists in reality, not fashioned in his fantasies. He sees this order in small things, like an accurate timetable, regular dinner and breakfast times, the unchanging order of the furniture. As he begins to create the order of his past, Singh, therefore, begins to see the order around him. It means that, as Singh begins a new relation with his past, through rewriting it up as history, he also begins to live his actual present as real. According to Mustafa (1995), with his memoir becoming "a carefully constructed paradigm of an empirically determined state of mind", Singh's re-arrangement of his past as history almost "gains the formal status of a trope" (p. 101). Soon after he begins writing his memories, he realizes that past events, as they are being re-created, become historical and manageable. Through writing, events are re-placed, laid to rest, and therefore cease to disturb:

By this re-creation the event became historical and manageable; it was given its place; it will no longer disturb me. And this became my aim: from the central fact of this setting, my presence in this city which I have known as student, politician and now as refugee-immigrant. (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 266)

The narrative technique he chooses for his writing is, to quote Walsh (1973), "dissolving and non-linear, in correspondence with the starts and swerves of the recovering memory, his instrument of self examination" (p. 62). Likewise, Joshi (1994) argues that "chronological order is discarded as Kripalsingh [Ralph Singh] *seizes* each episode brought up by memory and examines it in the context of his present situation – thus keeping the act of composition constantly before us" (p. 166). Ralph decides to rearrange his memoirs in a non-chronological order since he often breaks sequence and shifts from one historical period to another, forward and backward. This method helps him "to impose order on my own history, to abolish that disturbance which is what a narrative in sequence might have led me to" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 266). The distinction between a narrative written in a chronological order and the always-interrupted, sequential, narrative Ralph intends to write is essentially the difference between 'art for art's sake' and art as "a substitute" for what it pleased him to call life. As such, Naipaul suspends the narrative and allows Singh a look back at the fragments of his life in order to examine the possibility of rearranging them into a meaningful history. The narrative movement backward and forward in time would have intensified Singh's sense of disorder. Therefore, Singh establishes the order in his life through writing it up in a non-chronological order. The haunting colonial past, the loneliness of the big city, the futility of chasing ideal landscapes, and the traumatic homelessness impel Singh to reassemble the fragments of his identity as an

ex-colonial in a metropolitan centre and attempt to unlock the closures of his present postcolonial disillusionment.

As Boehmer (1995) argues in the conclusion to her *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* "it is writing which foregrounds and celebrates a national or historical rootlessness" (p. 240). With the help of writing, Singh revisits his past convictions like whether personality is constructed from other people's views, as he had thought when he kept adopting roles. He then raises doubts about the roles that were forced on him. In this way, he moves from the area of mimicry to that of mimesis, from sterile imitation to the creative representation of the real world in writing (Lindroth, 1984, pp. 519-29). In fiction he can create a world of his own, a world in which he can be secure, and a world in which he can enjoy the comfort his reshuffled history now offers. He achieves order by creating meaningful relationships between different experiences through narration, an act that allows him to liberate himself from the dilemma of adopting roles. He therefore creates another narrative that does not necessarily cohere with metropolitan order, a narrative in which he can finally define himself to himself.

Through the investigation of London's realities, through the logic that Singh wants to unfold, the city now goes sour on him. He decides to withdraw to his small hotel room to brood upon his past and the inauthentic roles he kept on playing, trying to understand what has happened that aggravated his sense of inauthenticity, in-betweenness, and shipwreck. With this we can understand the process of writing, of "clearing the decks" for action. Mahood (1977) contends that "Ralph Singh can become a historian rather than one who plays at being a historian. What he could now assume is not a fresh role but a responsibility: to bring to verbal order and understanding the disorder of the imperial past" (p. 165). Singh believes he will never be able to write his own history and the history of colonialism because he was so much a victim of the disorder he intends to chronicle in his book. As such, "it must also be confessed that in that dream of writing [he] was attracted less by the act and the labour than by the calm and the order which the act would have implied" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 32). Later, he realizes that it is all the way possible to achieve such order insofar as that order results from the ordering experience of writing, not as a precondition. He is very successful through such a process, for his efforts to revisit the disordered past, to acknowledge that disorder, becomes an extension of that past – an extension beyond the limitations of the past. Only by a closer scrutiny of the details of the past, events that might have passed unrecorded and the closures that hastened the disorder, does he achieve order. Assuming the weaknesses and responding to them, he diagnoses the ills of his past and tries to heal them.

Like Naipaul, Singh seems to have found his home in writing, through the very possibility of reimagining his belonging. Tracing his transition from external disorder to internal harmony, Singh realizes that the binaries he creates between London and Isabella in the end do not define geographical spaces but imagined – fictionalized – spheres. In the words of Ciompi (2002), Naipaul "demystifies both the Nietzschean and postmodernist ethics of living daringly and groundlessly by squandering oneself in the world, and, at the same time, the pre-political view that home may be an idealized free zone outside history" (p. 40). To carve out a narrative space in which his alterity can be renegotiated, Singh turns to accept his homelessness as what makes him a free man, no longer seeking the guidance of something outside of his self. He succeeded to turn isolation to strength. Disorder is ultimately individual and not societal. The individual has to face his own disorder since failure comes only when "moving out [of] ourselves, [when] we look for [the] extensions of ourselves" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 17).

Singh's attempt at re-writing his history is perhaps a narrative of a survivor of the colonial shipwreck who only has broken pieces of a mirror with which to see, maybe for the first time, a reflection of his fractured image. His narrative, its form and content, embodies that fracture. The memoirs are written in flashbacks, events reiterated and moved backward and forward. It is the structure of the novel itself. *The Mimic Men* goes back and forth in time between Singh's childhood, his student life in London, his return

to Isabella, his political career, and his exile in London where he sets to writing his memoirs. The novel begins with Singh as a student in England in his "multi-mirrored, book-shaped room with a coffin-like wardrobe" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 3). The form of the mirrors implies the multiple selves Singh encounters, as well as the different roles he tries to play. It is precisely through this hybridization, and the difficulty in physically locating his identities in one single geographical place, that Singh, and through him Naipaul, experiences a profound existential crisis. "Sitting towards the light or towards the mirror" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 27), Singh's multi-mirrored room allows him to discover an authentic self that he now shapes in a book called history. He ultimately understands that his history cannot be dictated from outside since otherwise it will only mimic the West.

In a nutshell, *The Mimic Men* is the novel that provides Naipaul's diagnosis of the estrangement of ex-colonials, a significant aspect of his vision of postcolonial societies. The well-informed narrator Ralph Singh comes indistinguishably too close to Naipaul. His narrative is "a more than autobiographical work, the exposition of the malaise of our times pointed and illuminated by personal experience and that knowledge of the possible which can come only from a closeness to power" (Naipaul, 1967b, p. 6). The novel unfolds the clearest expression of Naipaul's various ideas regarding the mimicry of the Third World, and the escape from its uncertainties into fantasy and imagination. The life trajectory of Naipaul is very similar to that of Singh whose intellectual and emotional development, as well as the conclusions he arrives at about Isabella and London are very similar to Naipaul's life experience and the conclusions of his non-fiction. The intensity of Naipaul's reflection on his identity formation is what provides Ralph Singh with the narrative threads along which his own sense of 'shipwreck' is questioned. Just as Ralph Singh imposes order on his life through writing, Naipaul has always believed in the power of narrative to understand life, art as a liberating means from alienation. Singh's search for a home in London is Naipaul's perpetual search for origins, and Singh's attempt at finding order in his life is Naipaul's disgust about his being always straddled between cultures, with none being really his.

Notes

¹ See Bhabha's essay "DissemiNation: Time, narrative and the Margins of the modern nation," *The Location of Culture*, *Op. cit.*: 199-244. Bhabha defines two sides of this double space: *pedagogical* and *performative*. The pedagogical, dictated by Western historiography, is a discourse coming from outside, while the performative is a discourse produced by the colonial subject in every-day life, and which is produced by recourse to consciousness, memories, etc.

¹¹ According to Fredric Jameson (1991), the world consists of different realities that they can be observed but they cannot be united: "the new modes of perception seem indeed to operate by way of the simultaneous preservation of just such incompatibles, a kind of incommensurability-vision that does not pull the eyes back to focus but provisionally entertains the tension of their multiple coordinates" (p. 372).

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Dr. Nabil Baazizi has completed and defended his PhD dissertation at the University of Paris 3 – Sorbonne Nouvelle. Entitled "The Problematics of Writing Back to the Imperial Centre: Joseph Conrad, Chinua Achebe, and V. S. Naipaul in Conversation," it traces the literary genealogies of colonial and postcolonial narratives, investigating the strategies of decolonizing fictions in Africa and the Caribbean. Dr. Baazizi has received many grants and fellowships to French, American and Canadian universities where he explored his main areas of research, namely postcolonial literature. He has also participated in numerous international conferences and published articles on these issues. His latest articles appear in *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* and *Arab World English Journal*.

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