

V. S. NAIPAUL'S THE MIMIC MEN: A STUDY OF DIASPORIC IDENTITY

Rathod Rameshwar Balchand

Ph.D. Student in English
Dr. B.A.M. University,
Aurangabad

The term 'Diaspora', originally used for the Jewish excrement from its homeland, is now applied as a "metaphoric designation" for expatriates, refugees, exiles and immigrants. It refers to the work of exiles and expatriates and all those who have experienced unsettlement and dislocation at the political, existential or metaphorical levels. Today, the exiles have taken over the stage and crossed national boundaries and exchanged cultural codes. They are different from the western writers in the sense that the western writers have not lost their 'real' countries and seem stuck with alienation which is a kind of psychological exile. On the other hand, for the immigrant writers, it is a matter of maintaining a dedicate balance between culture of origin and culture of adoption. They can go back to the culture of origin only in imagination. When they look back at life back home, their position with regard to the culture of origin is that an insider and outsider. In most cases they are citizens of a new country [say Canada or the US] whose consciousness was formed back home [say India or Sri Lanka]. They live between two worlds. Their present world is always there and always real. That is why, the creations of exiles have gained central part in contemporary discourse. For instance, V.S. Naipaul "The Mimic Men".

The immigrant writers, like Salman Rushdie and Kiran Desai, create and inscribe 'alternative worlds' by exchanging one tradition for another, one culture for another, and one home for another. They are caught in dilemma of nothingness or not belonging. Their identity becomes a hyphenated identity. This very tension becomes a very source of creativity as can be seen in the works of Naipaul, Rushdie, Julia Alvarez, Hong Kingston and others. The tension between what was and what is, between memory and reality, energizes the writer's work. Memory helps the writer to re-constitute or re-create a remembered past. Memory becomes the most significant factor which sets the diasporic writer's discourse in the 'centre'. It is the nostalgia for the past that makes the immigrant survive and even creates memory.

"I am the sum of my books", said Sir Vidiadhar Surajpersad Naipaul in his Nobel Lecture on 7th December 2001. He was born in Trinidad in 1932 to a family of East Indian descent. His ancestors migrated from India three generations previously on his mother's side, and four on his father's; his father's family come from Ayodhya, in Uttar Pradesh. At the time, Trinidad was a Crown Colony : it acquired its independence in 1962. Naipaul left Trinidad in 1950 to do a degree in English at Oxford, and has since made his home in England. Naipaul did not undertake writing as a serious career until he was twenty-three, though by that time he had already completed at least one novel. In his first five works, the people, sights and sounds of his Trinidadian childhood figure prominently.

Naipaul's "The Mimie Men", published 1967, marks an important phase in his fictional career. The novel is significant for various reasons. It is perhaps the clearest expression of the

themes that shape Naipaul's novels, namely, the escape of the Third World into fantasy on being poverty-stricken and isolated on the fringes of power, the sprouting up of various political and religious movements which, though ineffective, offer a sense of drama and empty excitement finally ending up in disorder, politics dominated by appeals to race and colour, the absence of real power myths, culture or competence which have resulted in a tendency to mimic, and a feeling of homelessness and identity crisis. The structure of the novel is complex, with the narrator protagonist "Ralph" Kripal Singh breaking up chronology to piece together and bring a sense of order to his autobiography. He spends his childhood on the island of Isabella, goes abroad to attend school in England, marries an English girl and returns to his newly independent homeland where he makes money and rides the swell of nationalistic fervor to political power. His eventual exile from Isabella is even more final than the spiritual downfall of Ganesh Ramsumair in "The Mystic Masseur". He retires to lick his wounds, perhaps to begin again, but in his fate Ralph detects a pattern that is all too familiar in the West Indies : a pattern leading from isolation and frenzy to irrelevance, failure, and inevitable disorder.

"The Mimic Men" is examining the weariness of the expatriate predicament. Its first person narrator Ralph Singh, is a Trinidadian with his origins in India. A childhood shame of poverty, a confusion about reality brought about the impact of colonial rule and a longing to get away to more exciting landscapes believed in for their power to clarify and unify personality, define Ralph's character. Trying to reject a past consisting of family, school - friends, and the colonial school which demand role-playing, Ralph goes to England for studies. But certain experiences of travel abroad, marriage and politics in his native Isabella later lead him to a position where he acknowledges responsibility for that very post and personality.

"The personality hangs together. It is one and indivisible"
[Naipaul, 1967: 183]

Ralph concludes That the personality can never be new-born and that the past has an inescapable weight, are the truths brought home to Ralph. A dream of "order" is seen as facile, and Ralph arrives at a position where he tries to simplify [not banish] the past and the personality, through the rigorous discipline of writing. Out of a restlessness born from the lack of order, truth and reason in his circle of friends, and relatives in Isabella, Ralph begins to long for the journey out. His desire for a change of identity is reflected when he changes his name in childhood, from Ranjit to Ralph Sing. Ralph has never felt he belongs on his island. The image of shipwreck is crucial to an understanding to Ralph's personality. It supplies him with a hero's stature, and allows him to believe that this small island where he is a nonentity, is unimportant - he has been washed up here, but his true "magic" home is elsewhere. His need to leave Isabella is thus easily rationalised. Ralph leaves own scholarship to London, thinking he will never return. But, ironically, the feeling of shipwreck persists even in London, "the great city". This again is not his home and he is unable to wipe out "this feeling of being adrift".

The formal centre of the novel is section II, chapter 4. Here Singh, a schoolboy, is offered the friendship of the symbolically named Browne who insists on his racial past and hurt. Browne is his double, his opposite, his friend and eventually his enemy. Both are products of colonialism, ashamed of their families and homes, but with different senses of cultural and racial history. They will bring the island to independence and find themselves enemies as only through racial violence can Browne satisfy his followers.

Ralph fears Browne's "interior life. It was not my past. It was not my personality" (Naipaul 1967. 144).

This corresponds to the separate social and cultural lives led by the Indians and blacks in Trinidad. But it is also similar to Singh's unwillingness to share in the lives of the women he meets in London. He and Stella find their sexual satisfaction separately. Both sexual and political involvement require self-violation and mingling. As Browne forces on him an awareness of racial distress Singh urgently wants to withdraw.

Before it had been part of fantasy, part of the urge to escape shipwreck and to return to lands I had fashioned in my imagination, lands of horsemen, high plains, mountains and snow, Now I felt the need only to get away, to a place unknown, among people whose lives and even language I need never enter" [Naipaul, 1967.145]

Singh begins to think of other places as "the true, pure world". The chapter ends with "the disappointment of someone who had been denied the chance of making a fresh start, alone".

Analysing his own personality, Ralph finds a "complex hurt" about which one feels the causes to be colonial rule. He is left half made, confused and without the power to strike roots. Colonialism, as a subject, interests him and he has the ambition to write an extended work of history on the subject of those empires which have "altered the world for ever", despite "their passing away". The shame of being a native has ground itself into his psyche & twisted his

"memory" too, so that he has the puzzling memory "of taking an apple to [his] teachers" though there are "no apples on Isabella" [Naipaul, 1967. 90]

The whole sequence of his relationships, personal and political, falls into the two slots of "triumph or humiliation" as a result of his experience of the white man's supremacy. Ralph's deepest indictment of colonialism as a force of destruction is in seeing that he himself and other colonials are "mimic men" who only pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life. "The Mimic Men" is a damaged colonial's attempt to order his life and relationships by a migration to a more orderly society. The attempt ends in a mock - order achieved in isolation and "dependency". Ralph is best aware of "the final emptiness" that awaits him in London. The attempt at simplification had resulted only

*"in this switching back and forth between one world and another"
 [Naipaul, 1967. 154]*

And the necessity always "to rise and prepare for another departure". Grappling with "a disorder which it was beyond any one man to put right" and unable to supply a new vision, Ralph is besieged by the true expatriate homelessness of having "nowhere to go ... no new landscapes" to migrate to Seeking the complexity of "the three- dimensional", he recoils from the "two-dimensional" which he invariably finds because of his habit of looking "minutely" and being "more pained than most".

Writing like the true expatriate "from both sides" and liking "the feeling of impermanence" as an exile, Ralph puts forward the following view about expatriate outsiders like himself, in his boarding - house in London :

"We are 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" [Naipaul, 1967. 247]

The motivation and experience is Naipaul's too, but the decay, confusion and ambivalence about the shape of his own future separate Ralph from Naipaul's purposeful

creation of order, though “the gold of imagination” had given way “to the lead of reality” for Naipaul too.

He has been criticised for his insistence that the Caribbean is surrounded by the void of history. But he is pointing to the fact that Caribbean history needs to take into account the fact that the history of the colonised from their point of view had been rooted out. His writing questions why there is that void and in a sense attempts to ‘fill’ the void even as he criticises it as a void. Ralph does undergo a journey in which his questing for order in the metropolitan centre and his failure to find it, draws him back to the beginning of his own history. In a London hotel, the diasporic identity of Ralph makes him re-imagining his own history of ‘disorder’. 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. There seems to be a kind of hope at a deeper level which is suggested by Ralph Singh’s successful ordering of his various experiences which, to being with, appear formless and disorderly and involves creative manipulation. Further, in Ralph Singh’s awareness of his defects lies his triumph over his disorderly and chaotic experiences as a diaspora.

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