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The Department of Western Languages and Literatures and the Department of Turkish Language and Literature at Boğaziçi University are pleased to announce the launching of a new journal: METAFOR: The Boğaziçi University Journal of Literary Studies.

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Recovering (from) the Past in V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*

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Abstract

V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* juxtaposes imperial history and national present as reflected by the protagonist Ralph Singh's personal history. Singh's identity crisis leads him to find ways to re-connect with the past in the hopes of overcoming the damage created by colonialism. The sense of displacement, being a shipwreck, becomes part of his identity as he is unable to establish a complete sense of belonging either to Isabella or to London. As colonialism separates the individual from his cultural origins through re-location and colonial education, it leads to the emergence of a yearning for imagined lands located in the mythical past or in the imperial center where the individual envisions himself finding the meaning he is looking for. As both these imagined spaces turn out to be out of his reach, either geographically as in the case of India or temporally as in the case of former glorious London Singh dreams about, they only contribute to the frustration of the postcolonial individual who is left in the national space haunted by these imaginings. I argue that, for the postcolonial subject, the re-visiting of the past does not provide comfort or self-assurance due to the geographical and temporal estrangement in these particular circumstances; instead, imagined and superficial connections bring forth disappointment, restlessness and detachment, ultimately leading to a sense of self-alienation.

Keywords: Postcolonial literature, V.S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men*, colonization, nation-state, colonial and postcolonial identity

V.S. Naipaul'un *Taklitçiler* Romanında Geçmiş Kurtarmak ve Geçmişten Kurtulmak

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Özet

V.S. Naipaul'un *Taklitçiler* adlı romanı, ana karakter Ralph Singh'in kişisel tarihi üzerinden imparatorluğun geçmişini ve ulusal şimdiyi yan yana getirir. Singh'in yaşadığı kimlik bunalımı, kolonyalizmin yol açtığı zararın üstesinden gelme umuduyla, onu geçmişle yeni bağlantılar kurmaya iter. Isabella adasına veya Londra'ya tam bir aidiyet kuramamasıyla, yerinden edilmişlik, enkaz, hissiyatı kimliğinin bir parçası haline gelir. Kolonyalizmin yer değiştirme veya kolonyal eğitim yoluyla bireyleri kendi kültürel kökenlerinden koparması, bireyin yaşamında aradığı anlamı bulacağını düşündüğü, mitik geçmişte veya imparatorluğun merkezinde yer alan hayali yerlere duyduğu bir çeşit özlem hissi ortaya çıkartır. Tahayyül edilen her iki yer de, Hindistan söz konusu olduğunda coğrafi uzaklıktan ve Singh'in hayalini kurduğu geçmişteki görkemli Londra ise artık sadece geçmişte kaldığından, ulaşılmaz durumdadır ve kendi ulus-devletinin sınırları içerisinde yer alan postkolonyal bireye musallat olan bu hayaller onun yılgnlığını daha da arttırır. Bu makalede, postkolonyal birey için, geçmişe dönüşün, bu özel şartlardan kaynaklanan coğrafi ve zamansal yabancılaşma yüzünden, teselli veya öz güven hissi sağlamadığını ve kurulan hayali ve yüzeysel bağlantıların hayal kırıklığı, huzursuzluk ve en sonunda bir tür kendine yabancılaşmaya neden olduğunu ileri sürüyorum.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Sömürge sonrası edebiyat, V.S. Naipaul, *Taklitçiler*, sömürgeleştirme, ulus-devlet, kolonyal kimlik ve postkolonyal kimlik.

Elleke Boehmer, in *Migrant Metaphors*, describes V.S. Naipaul's approach to literature "as a means of laying claim to a British cultural heritage experienced but never fully understood as a colonial schoolboy."¹ Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* presents us the story of a colonial schoolboy who grows up to be a colonial politician only to end up writing his memoirs as an exile in England. While this brief summary does not do justice to the novel's complex treatment of colonization and its aftermath, it nonetheless directs us to a path where the reader can witness not only Ralph Singh's personal sense of displacement and chaos but also the broader disorder that engulfs the society before and after independence. In Naipaul's novel, the protagonist's preoccupation with history, or rather multiple histories, emerges as an effort to overcome the rupture created by both colonial and postcolonial condition. As Singh strives to recover the past that will provide him with a sense of completeness and belonging, the novel highlights the impossibility of this endeavor. The various pasts that he embraces so as to recover the *true* source of his identity, eventually, turn into disappointments and disillusionments from which he is unable to recover. In *The Mimic Men*, the severed link between the past and the present leaves the postcolonial individual in a state of displacement and homelessness, for which neither the imperial metropolis nor the independent nation-state can provide any consolation but only exacerbate the impossibility of feeling oneself whole.

Naipaul's novel represents introspective moments from troubling times, when individuals are trying to find their way in uncharted territory, in other words the transitional period from colonization to independence, and later post-independence. In this turbulent time, Singh strives to locate his identity on the spatial and temporal boundary that separates the island of Isabella from metropolitan London. While the novel deals with history on both personal and collective levels, it – through the protagonist's attempts to reconnect with the past to give meaning to his life – also discloses the broader implications of the rupture that comes with the end of empire and the foundation of the nation-state. At this point, it bears significance to have a brief overview of Naipaul's own position with respect to the imperial and national cultural spheres. Pascale Casanova maps out the different ways a writer can be positioned in relation to the national literary space, and where this national space is located within the world literary space.² When we look at his examples, Naipaul, with his disavowal of Trinidadian identity, fits into the category that "may reject his national heritage, forsaking his homeland for a country that is more richly endowed in

¹ Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 168.

² Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M.B. DeBovise (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004)

literary resources than his own.”³ By embracing British and Indian identities, Naipaul positions himself not as a Caribbean writer – a label that he firmly resists – but as part of the British literary space, which occupies an influential standing in the world literary space.⁴ The novel under scrutiny here is heavily based on Naipaul’s experiences with British colonialism and the following decolonization process, which, inevitably, affects his approach to history and past cultural traditions.

Elleke Boehmer, in her analysis of postcolonial societies, notes that the loss that comes with the colonial condition has generally been described as a destruction of “an essential umbilical cord with history.”⁵ The attempt to recover links between generations and to establish a collective memory constitutes a major theme among post-independence writers.⁶ In this way, nationalist projects aim to recuperate from the damage done by colonization by laying claim to their roots in the past. However, Simon Gikandi, in *Maps of Englishness*, points to problems embedded in the nationalisms of postcolonial societies. He argues that nationalism was not able to offer the “radical rupture from the colonial past” that it had aimed for in the first place.⁷ This condition necessitates a closer look at some of the assumptions of postcolonial theory as well as nationalist projects. According to Gikandi, postcolonial studies, then, should prioritize “demythologiz[ing] the ideology of nationalism – especially the claim that the nation-state in Africa, the Caribbean, or the Indian subcontinent represents a political and interpretative moment in which colonialism is finally transcended.”⁸ When we consider Boehmer and Gikandi’s views together, the post-independence effort to confront and reconnect with the past becomes more problematic as the nation-state has to re-assess its own shortcomings and failures in the process.

³ Ibid., 41.

⁴ Nicholas Laughlin draws our attention to one of the most striking instances of this detachment in Naipaul’s press statement following the announcement of his Nobel Prize for Literature: “‘It is a great tribute to both England, my home, and to India, the home of my ancestors, and to the dedication and support of my agent’” (qtd. in Laughlin 65). What strikes us here is that Naipaul not only leaves Trinidad – the place of his birth – out of the picture but describes England as his ‘home,’ paving the way for more controversy on himself. Nicholas Laughlin, “V.S. Naipaul: The Writer as the Last Free Man” in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, eds. M. Bucknor and A. Donnell (New York: Routledge, 2011), 64.

⁵ Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 185.

⁶ Ibid., 182.

⁷ Simon Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1996), 7.

⁸ Ibid., 15.

The Mimic Men offers glimpses into the tribulations faced by the protagonist, who strives to understand not only his past but also his present through the past. Singh's narrative reveals both his fantasies where he attempts to uncover links to his ancestors of a glorified past, and his skepticism toward the nationalization project of Isabella in which he actively participates. His act of writing is intended to give meaning and order to his life by understanding his own past within the context of Isabella's history. The novel provides reflections on Gikandi's idea of demythologizing nationalism so as to examine the continuities between the imperial past and the national present. Gikandi's discussion of decolonization and the nation-state illustrates the complexity of nationalism when taken into account with the accompanying modernization projects in the post-independence period. If nationalist projects strive to reach back to a past that will enable them to break their ties with empire, they also "claim to be the true agent of modernity and modernization, a function [they] sought to wrench from the metropolis itself."⁹ Non-European societies' relationship with modernity and modernization, which are generally regarded as European concepts due to having arrived through colonization or cultural influence, reveals the way Europe relates to these societies' modernization process in addition to the societies' own perspective. Dipesh Chakrabarty's elaboration on European historicism and the idea of "first in Europe, then elsewhere" helps us to comprehend the dynamics of the relationship between the non-Western nation-state and modernity and modernization projects.¹⁰ Chakrabarty claims that historicism enabled the establishment of a cultural distance in which Europe appeared as the original site for the emergence of capitalism, modernity, or enlightenment. By assuming this position, Europe finds itself capable of saying "not yet" to non-European societies, in other words implying that colonies are not ready for implementing these ideas in their native lands, at least not by themselves. It is anticolonial nationalism that challenged this understanding by rejecting the historicist progression of modernity as well as inserting the subordinate social classes into political life.¹¹ Thus, through both rejection and appropriation of certain tenets of European modernity, alternative modernities come into being as part of nationalist projects in different parts of the world.

Chakrabarty also notes that, during non-European modernization efforts, integration of subordinate social classes into political life occurs without any prior preparation.¹² The idea of a particular society's unpreparedness for modernization comes up in Gregory Jusdanis's examination of modernization in Greek context in *Belated Modernity*. In this book, Jusdanis states his aim as

⁹ Ibid., 17.

¹⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), 7

¹¹ Ibid., 7-9.

¹² Ibid., 8.

“discover[ing] the implications of purposeful modernization in the cultural realm and the fate of the modernizing project in a society unprepared for it.”¹³ In Naipaul’s novel here, modernization comes to the fore as part of the nationalist project’s attempt to transform the society while the society itself is still grappling with the transition to decolonization. Jusdanis argues that “an-other modernity” comes into being as “an experiment on the margins, which, having internalized the tensions between dominant and minor, periphery and center, prototype and copy, imitates and also creates, follows but resists.”¹⁴ In *The Mimic Men*, this experiment takes the form of mediation between the imperial metropolis and the colonial periphery.

The Mimic Men, composed of three sections, presents us with a non-linear narrative that starts and ends in London, putting the narrator’s Isabella days in between. While the first section consists of Singh’s first time in London and then the return to Isabella with his wife Sandra, the second section focuses on Singh’s childhood and the days leading to his departure for London. The last section is where we are back in Isabella as the narrator becomes active in politics, which eventually leads to his exile in London, where he is writing the memoirs we are reading. The non-chronological ordering of Singh’s life story finds an explanation at the very end of the novel when he realizes what the act of writing has enabled him to do: “to impose order on my own history, to abolish that disturbance which is what a narrative in sequence might have led me to.”¹⁵ It is important to remember that this is what Singh finally realizes at the end of his memoirs, rather than being the motivation behind his writing. The narrator’s intermittent authorial interventions to provide a retrospective look to certain events in his life underscore the desire to eradicate the sense of disorder. Nina Wilson-Tagore states that “Singh’s history had been a reordering of the events of his life as a means of understanding his historical condition and of fashioning order out of a personal chaos.”¹⁶ In order to understand where Singh’s personal history stands in relation to the nation’s history, and the significance of the act of writing in bringing them together, we need to take a look at the beginning of the novel where Singh first explains his motivation to write his memoirs.

The novel opens with the first-person narrator’s recollections of the boarding house and the snow during his first time in London. At the end of these few pages, the reader comes across an image that will haunt the narrator’s life as well as the rest of the novel: “I knew that my own journey, scarcely begun, had ended in the

¹³ Gregory Jusdanis, *Belated Modernity and Aesthetic Culture: Inventing National Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), xi.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xi-xii.

¹⁵ V.S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* (New York: Random House, 2001), 292.

¹⁶ Nina Wilson-Tagore, *Historical Thought and Literary Representation in West Indian Literature* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 70.

shipwreck which all my life I had sought to avoid.”¹⁷ Following this sentence is the narrator’s commentary on his own beginning as well as the description of what he has envisioned his writing to achieve: “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.”¹⁸ Yet, he is far from writing something greater than himself with no political career left. As Singh describes his current life in London, the reader notices the pessimism and indifference that have led him to a state of passivity. Disillusionment characterizes his state of mind: “I no longer dream of ideal landscapes or seek to attach myself to them. All landscapes eventually turn to land, the gold of the imagination to the lead of the reality.”¹⁹ In a way, the memoir is the recounting of how his hopes for new landscapes and beginnings have turned into lost dreams that only reinforce his long-existing sense of being shipwrecked.

While Singh’s preoccupation with the idea of shipwreck appears to stem from a personal condition, the emphasis on the idea of disorder in a broader context leads us to examine the relationship between his sense of shipwreck and the social, political and historical conditions contributing to it. In fact, he points to colonization as the underlying reason for the general sense of restlessness that deeply affects not only him but all the people of Isabella. “The unnatural bringing together of peoples who could achieve fulfillment only within the security of their own societies and the landscapes,” says the narrator, prepares the conditions for a society imbued in chaos and disorder.²⁰ This characterization of Isabellan society indicates the separation from one’s origins and the rupture colonization creates in the personal and collective histories of different peoples. Michael Gorra scrutinizes Naipaul’s general approach to the composition of Caribbean society and argues that according to Naipaul, these people “have failed to form a common culture, have collided without cohering.”²¹ From this perspective, Singh’s writing constitutes an attempt to explore the different repercussions of this lack of common culture among people of Isabella and its consequences on his personal history.

The attempt to read *The Mimic Men* as problematizing its society’s ordeals with history and modernization necessitates a closer look to the social and cultural conditions that shaped the national context as well as the writer’s stance toward them. Nina Wilson-Tagoe’s statement on the relationship between West Indian writers and history provides an important entry point for understanding Naipaul’s

¹⁷ V.S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* (New York: Random House, 2001), 10 (emphasis mine).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

²¹ Michael Gorra, *After Empire: Scott, Naipaul, Rushdie* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 80.

(as well as Singh's) preoccupation with the idea of history in *The Mimic Men*: "Traumatized by history, the West Indian writer is yet continually haunted by its specter and perpetually engaged with redefining it."²² In the novel, Singh, writing his autobiography, is taking over the role of a West Indian writer and engaging with his personal history in order to give meaning or impose order on both his personal history and collective history: "It was my hope to give expression to the restlessness, the deep disorder ... it must also be confessed that in that dream of writing I was attracted less by the act and the labor than by the calm and the order which the act would have implied."²³ However, Wilson-Tagoe also cautions us about possible difficulties in West Indian writers' attempts to deal with history and time. Due to the representation of the West Indian as a victim through the history of colonialism and slavery, writers need to confront the dilemma of either struggling "to transcend history and reconstruct new identities or accept the despairing conclusion that displacement and violation have been historically determined and therefore unconquerable."²⁴ This dilemma constitutes the focal point in *The Mimic Men*, where the reader witnesses Singh's repeated attempts to leave Isabella behind, both literally and metaphorically, only to realize the futility of his efforts.

Imre Szeman, in *Zones of Instability*, notes that West Indian authors' writings after the 1960s, in other words after the dissolution of West Indies Federation and the independence of the major islands, were no longer driven by nationalism or showed skepticism toward the earlier national literary projects.²⁵ Naipaul reveals a rather adverse reaction to both the idea of federation in the Caribbean and nationalism in general. While he shares the common view that the West Indies as an entity owes its existence to colonial history and therefore the federation cannot succeed, he also thinks that nationalism cannot succeed in the area.²⁶ This pessimistic view paves the way for Singh's overall disappointment with Isabella and his search for ways to find meaning in London. If we follow Stefano Harney's claim that "V.S. Naipaul has never seen the nation as his home," Singh appears as the wanderer looking for home outside Isabella.²⁷ However, his sense of shipwreck coming from being born on an island like

²² Nina Wilson-Tagore, *Historical Thought and Literary Representation in West Indian Literature* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 2.

²³ V.S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* (New York: Random House, 2001), 39.

²⁴ Nina Wilson-Tagore, *Historical Thought and Literary Representation in West Indian Literature* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 4.

²⁵ Imre Szeman, *Zones of Instability: Literature, Postcolonialism and the Nation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 66-67.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

²⁷ Stefano Harney, *Nationalism and Identity: Culture and the Imagination in a Caribbean Diaspora* (London: Zed Books, 1996), 10.

Isabella haunts him during his attempts to find a place that would provide him with the sense of belonging and order he needs.

Singh regards his existence on Isabella as accidental, a by-product of the colonial project. For Wilson-Tagoe, Singh's feelings of shipwreck can be traced back to "a Crusoe archetype"; however, it has transformed to include "all the psychological disorders Caribbean people inherit from their condition of displacement and their status as colonials."²⁸ Singh's realization that there might be other people around him who also share the same sense of displacement affirms that it is a shared condition. What the image of shipwreck underscores is a constant search for a place of belonging, a place of return where the individual would feel at home and united with his roots. Gorra, highlighting the impossibility of a return in the context of Caribbean, poses a simple yet illuminating question that explicates the futility of Singh's attempts to find a sense of completeness in the past: "To what past? To whose?"²⁹ The diversity of the inhabitants' ethnic, racial, and historical backgrounds prevents the possibility of a solution on a collective basis; at the same time it makes Singh realize the overwhelming presence of displacement and homelessness.

Stuart Hall describes the Caribbean as "the first, the original and the purest diaspora," which constitutes a particular difficulty in identity politics of both the broader region and the fictional world of Isabella.³⁰ Hall's diagnosis resonates with Gorra's question above; the impossibility of a return to the original homeland – or in fact even adjudicating whose homeland – and the violence that comes with this break with one's roots. Singh's fantasies about his family's past, which I will analyze later on, reveal how the rupture that comes with living in the Caribbean prevents him from forming a healthy relationship with his origins. Geoffrey Kabat, examining the novel's treatment of historical disorder and narrative order, argues that Singh is removed from all three cultures to which he has a connection: India is literally and figuratively out of his reach; London provides a temporary relief but then makes him feel an outsider, and Isabella is the source of original restlessness.³¹ What he experiences is an utter homelessness and sense of non-belonging no matter where he is.

Singh's sense of homelessness and shipwreck takes us to Georg Lukacs's notion of transcendental homelessness and the novelistic hero's struggles with it. Lukacs argues that in the modern world the transcendental bond between the artist or author and "the world of created forms" is disrupted, causing the epic to

²⁸ Nina Wilson-Tagore, *Historical Thought and Literary Representation in West Indian Literature* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 60.

²⁹ Michael Gorra, *After Empire: Scott, Naipaul, Rushdie* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 78.

³⁰ Stuart Hall, "Negotiating Caribbean Identities" *New Left Review* 209 (1995):6.

³¹ Geoffrey Kabat, "Historical Disorder and Narrative Order in Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*" *Commonwealth Novel in English* 9 (2001):209.

disappear and the novel to trace the search for “an aim that is no longer clearly and unequivocally given.”³² The novel form, as representation of this transcendental homelessness, strives “to uncover and construct the totality of life.”³³ Singh’s desire to impose order on his personal history and overcome the sense of chaos and displacement through the act of writing reminds us of Lukacs’s transcendental homeless and the following attempt to give meaning to a world that no longer operates on the previously established relations. Singh’s search for meaning exacerbates his sense of homelessness. That Lukacs describes the novelistic hero as a “seeker” prompts the reader to think about the ideal places Singh pursues in order to lessen his disillusionment, which, in the end, aggravates his sense of being adrift.³⁴ In this sense, Naipaul’s novel cannot offer the totality of life that Lukacs is after. Indeed, the novel points to the impossibility of attaining a sense of completeness and unity.

When we consider Singh’s preoccupation with the already lost ideal landscapes, the novel’s first section with Singh’s recollections of his first time in London enables us to focus on his expectations from London and the ensuing disappointment. The narrator’s disillusionment with London starts early on as his hope to find “the beginning of order” fades away soon after his arrival.³⁵ Bruce King argues that if *The Mimic Men* is about disorder, it is also about the myths of order; ideal cities which are expected to offer order and a sense of completeness. He states that “there is no ideal city ... [t]here are only ideas of such an ideal.”³⁶ In this regard, Singh’s disappointment stems from the incompatibility between the ideal London he has dreamed of and the London he experiences. His first experience of snow, which he calls “[his] element,” and its beauty are, literally and metaphorically, framed with the dreariness of the city as he looks out of the window of his empty room and sees “brown smoke rising from ugly chimneypots, the plastered wall of the house next to the bombsite,” which leads him to view the city under a new and not-so-magical light.³⁷ Rob Nixon, in *London Calling*, suggests that Naipaul himself had a similar experience with London. The London he arrived in was not the London he imagined and idealized through his colonial education, and Naipaul’s disappointment was a result of his longing for the old imperial capital that he knew from books.³⁸ Singh,

³² Georg Lukacs, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), 40-41.

³³ Ibid., 60.

³⁴ Ibid., 65.

³⁵ V.S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* (New York: Random House, 2001), 22.

³⁶ Bruce King, *V.S. Naipaul* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 76.

³⁷ V.S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* (New York: Random House, 2001), 8.

³⁸ Rob Nixon, *London Calling: V.S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 37.

who is also a student of colonial education like Naipaul, suffers from the same symptom: the imagined London of the books and the London of the present time. The “pure world” of the books where lively landscapes and cities present themselves to Singh leaves its place to London’s “two-dimensional” life that turns his initial excitement to disappointment.³⁹ As Singh’s expectations from the city wither against the real London, the city starts to lose its allure for him quite fast. Also, the fact that London is unable to present him with the opportunity to overcome his sense of disorder leaves its mark in his memories about London.

Singh’s desire to create a world where he would no longer feel lost or shipwrecked leads him to reach out to previous generations of his family. As Singh’s family history is marked with the tension between his father and the mother’s side of the family, it is noteworthy to see how Singh imagines his maternal and paternal origins as they relate to the identity he strives to establish as an adolescent. The father’s initial superior status, compared to the mother’s lower-class background, is challenged with his father-in-law’s success in business and becoming one of the “Isabella millionaires.”⁴⁰ Indeed, Singh traces the idea of shipwreck to his father: “I used to get the feeling that my father had in some storybook way been shipwrecked on the island and that over the years the hope of rescue had altogether faded.”⁴¹ Given the father’s inferior status in the eyes of the family, it does not come as a surprise that he first tries to lay claim to the mother’s side and creates a vivid image of a previous generation in an ideal landscape: “In my imagination I saw my 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: village lanes on cool mornings, the ditches green and grassy, the water crystal, the front gardens of thatched huts bright with delicate flowers of every hue.”⁴² This superimposition has its roots in the ideal landscapes Singh knows from books. By integrating them into his family history, he strives to create a link between his roots and the ideal lands, in this case England. Indeed, by inserting his grandparents into a British landscape, he strives to embrace Britishness through this fabricated family lineage. That he imagines this scene after the father’s belittling of the mother’s family for selling milk is also interesting. Through its transference to the British countryside, the scene attains a pastoral beauty and elegance. However, when we think of the image, it appears unnatural and unsettling. The combination of two worlds, Isabellan and British, occurs in an artificial manner where one is simply positioned on top of the other, which, in fact, reinforces the impossibility of connecting these worlds. In this manner, it resembles a reverse

³⁹V.S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* (New York: Random House, 2001), 23.

⁴⁰Ibid., 101.

⁴¹Ibid., 107.

⁴²Ibid., 107-108.

version of the history of colonialism in Isabella where the British brought its own world, namely political, social, and cultural structures, which, in the end, leads to the emergence of mimic men who are unable to reconcile the conflicting aspects of their identities as colonial subjects. In the end, Singh's childish fantasy about his grandparents, based on the premise of the arbitrary conjoining of two worlds, underlines his current sense of displacement rather than offering any consolation.

Although Singh seems to disavow his father, his secret fantasies about his paternal origins prove to be more empowering, enabling him to escape to an idealized Indian past where he no longer feels a shipwreck. The Indian past presents him with the opportunity to move beyond his marginalization as an East Indian in the West Indies. In these fantasies, he is where he (thinks he) really belongs, where he is powerful. As he reads about the history of Aryan peoples, he starts to imagine himself as one of them, the long lost leader of Aryan horsemen:

But in my secret life I was the son of my father, and a Singh...I lived a secret life in a world of endless plains, tall bare mountains, white with snow at their peaks, among nomads on horseback, daily pitching my tent beside cold green mountain torrents that raged over grey rock, 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, "You are looking in the wrong place. The true leader of you lies far away, shipwrecked on an island the like of which you cannot visualize."⁴³

Here, Singh imagines another ideal landscape that is beyond his reach. As he fantasizes about being the leader of horsemen, he assumes a position of self-importance and confidence which he greatly lacks in Isabella. Indeed, what lies under his attempts to forge a connection to a glorious history is his constant need for self-assurance originating from his colonial subjectivity. However, his romantic recovery of Indian roots through imagination does not provide him any substantial support in his daily life or in his search for a remedy to overcome the sense of shipwreck.

Singh's attempt to create a personality through his fantasies about his familial heritage takes up a different form through his self-naming at school. The transformation of Ranjit Kripalsingh to Ralph Singh occurs as a result of his sense of incompetence as well as a need to compete with those other students who seem to have figured out the ways of the world. He states that, by breaking his surname into two, he revives an ancient fracture, which is preceded by Ralph

⁴³ Ibid., 117-118.

now.⁴⁴ The naming brings forth a number of issues. In the first place, the act of naming points to Singh's attempt to assert authority and take charge of his identity-in-the-shaping. Though he is aware of the deceptive aspect of the fabricated name of R.R.K. Singh, he still manages to have it on written records, thus changing the way he appears on paper. This first instance of having control in the way his name appears in written records becomes rather telling when we think about Singh's preoccupation with bringing order to his personal history through the act of writing, namely on a page. Bruce King draws our attention to the fact that Singh's name becomes "fractured and anglicized" through this transformation.⁴⁵ In addition to this, the fracturing aims to recover a part of his identity that is no longer in Singh's reach, namely his Indian roots. In the act of self-naming, Singh strives to combine two imagined familial lines, Ralph of the superimposed English landscape and Singh of the Aryan horsemen living in India. This rather bizarre mixing conveys his desire to empower himself by bringing together the British, what he regards as the ideal, and the Indian, the ancient mythicized origins. However, it also reveals the dilemma of the postcolonial subject: the yearning to be like the British while maintaining the connection to his roots, which eventually results in the split self that highlights the sense of non-belonging.

If we consider his family as the initial source for Singh's recollection of his childhood as "a period of incompetence, bewilderment, solitude and shameful fantasies," the colonial education he receives constitutes the second, and more influential, source that exacerbates the sense of lack in his life.⁴⁶ That his first memory of school is an edited one reveals the extent of displacement in his early life, where imagination takes precedence over reality: "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."⁴⁷ An apple from faraway lands replaces an Isabellan orange in his memory, revealing the significance of his later experiences in shaping his memories about childhood. Through his education, Singh's personal feelings of inadequacy gradually turn into awareness about the condition of Isabella in general, that the island is not the true, pure world but an inferior imitation. His yearning for lands that are real and pure prompts his criticism of Isabella: "We, here on our island, handling books printed in this world, and using its goods, had been abandoned and forgotten. We pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World, one unknown corner of it, with all its

⁴⁴ Ibid., 112-113.

⁴⁵ Bruce King, *V.S. Naipaul* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 72.

⁴⁶ V.S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* (New York: Random House, 2001), 109.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 109-110.

reminders of the corruption that came so quickly to the new.”⁴⁸ Here, the novel draws our attention to the colonial subjectivity that is unable to free itself from the influence of the Old World despite being forgotten by it. Colonial education perpetuates the feeling of inferiority by providing representations of a life not of Isabella but other lands. As the Old World becomes the main reference point for students, it does not come as a surprise that they end up imitating and looking up to the lives they read in books, which only brings more disillusionment with the fact it is impossible for them to belong to the cities and lives they admire. In this sense, Naipaul underscores the colonial predicament that traps individuals in an acute sense of self-awareness where they are conscious of their own condition yet unable to challenge it. It is ultimately this awareness that leads Singh to seek an escape from Isabella.

If Singh is one of the mimic men of the New World in *Isabella*, he becomes another mimic man in the Old World of London by his performance of colonial dandy. Homi Bhabha’s reading of mimicry in Naipaul’s novel focuses on the aspect of “repeating” rather than “re-presenting.”⁴⁹ When we think of Browne’s singing and dancing performances at the school or the Deschampsneufs’ current behaviors within the context of their family history, they both enact and repeat the personas what they have seen as representations of their social roles: the stereotypical black image dating back to slavery and the Creole who takes pride in his ties to European culture and civilization. Singh, on the other hand, gets the chance to perform the personality of his own choosing in the metropolis: “In London I had no guide. There was no one to link my present with my past, no one to note my consistencies or inconsistencies. 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.”⁵⁰ While he strives to take his past, which is a source of both anxiety and promise, out of the picture in his life in London, his choice of colonial dandy, nevertheless, points to a desire to overcome a sense of insecurity coming from his past. Selwyn Cudjoe claims that Singh, unlike his predecessors, has a better understanding of the colonial process and “he is able, much more consciously, to construct his identity.”⁵¹ Yet, what is interesting here is although Singh has a grasp of colonial process, he does not fight against the pre-conceived colonial notions; instead he chooses to play along the lines so as to fit himself into the role expected from him in London. Thus, as John Thieme states in *The Web of Tradition*, Singh’s awareness of being a product of colonialism does not lead to any attempt that will free him from the

⁴⁸ Ibid., 175.

⁴⁹ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 88.

⁵⁰ V.S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* (New York: Random House, 2001), 24.

⁵¹ Selwyn Cudjoe, *V.S. Naipaul: A Materialist Reading* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 100.

colonial paradigms.⁵² In this way, the novel's representation of Singh in London does not suggest a break from the previous tensions that have led to the split self; on the contrary, it points to a stronger sense of displacement as he "finds [himself] longing for the certainties of [his] life on the island of Isabella, certainties which [he] had once dismissed as shipwreck."⁵³ To a certain extent, the performance of colonial dandy in the imperial metropolis leads to a revisiting of his ideas about Isabella.

While Singh's colonial dandy persona does not lead to the sense of order and belonging he has been seeking, his other self-conscious performance, that of colonial politician, underscores the continuity of the sense of displacement in the post-independence Isabella. Singh's involvement in politics starts with writing an article about his father in *The Socialist*, the magazine run by his childhood friend Browne, celebrating the anniversary of the populist movement. Singh's description of this article hints to the reader about the future of his political career: "The essay about my father for *The Socialist* wrote itself.... The irony doesn't escape me: that article was, deeply, dishonest. It was the work of a convert, a man just created, just presented with a picture of himself."⁵⁴ Without any genuine interest and attachment to Isabella, Singh's political career does not go beyond playacting. Bruce King draws our attention to the fact that Singh, who used to fantasize about being a leader of Aryan people, withdraws into passivity and generalities once given the opportunity to be a real leader.⁵⁵ In this sense, independence does not bring any change to his sense of shipwreck. This time, he becomes drawn to another glorious past that is not his, namely the Classical period of European history. As he becomes more and more detached from Isabella in his Roman house, working on his Latin and writing letters to Browne on Pompeii, he can be described as seeking refuge in the past so as to avoid any real contact with the problems of Isabella. In a similar vein, Cudjoe states that "the further Singh moves away from an organic relationship with his society, the further he moves away from understanding his self or his society's truth."⁵⁶ The novel's depiction of Singh, along with the broader nationalist movement on the island, indicates that the nation-state has only exacerbated the long-existing sense of displacement as people, this time, continue their lives as mimic men of independent Isabella.

⁵² John Thieme, *The Web of Tradition: Uses of Allusion in V.S. Naipaul's Fiction* (Hertford: Hansib Publications, 1987), 124.

⁵³ V.S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* (New York: Random House, 2001), 32.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁵⁵ Bruce King, *V.S. Naipaul* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 74.

⁵⁶ Selwyn Cudjoe, *V.S. Naipaul: A Materialist Reading* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 111.

Naipaul's novel embodies the restlessness that starts with the rupture created by the colonial encounter and continues well after the independence of the nation-state. Separated from his original culture, the postcolonial subject experiences an identity crisis as he struggles to find reference points to define his self. However, the novel also discloses the futility of the attempts to anchor one's identity through imagined connections from past. These connections, unable to offer any meaningful contribution to the effort to overcome the split in the self, only underscore the sense of non-belonging and displacement, thus accentuating the impossibility of recovering the past as well as recovering from the past.

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