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Ambivalence And Mimicry In The Postcolonial Self: A Study Of V. S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*

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Abstract

V. S. Naipaul's works explore the postcolonial psyche, especially in individuals caught between inherited colonial order and the desire for original self-definition. The *Mimic Men* (1967), one of Naipaul's most insightful novels, presents the borrowed identity experienced by Ralph Singh, a postcolonial subject attempting to order the contradictory expectations of a world shaped by colonial power. His struggle is symbolic of a larger postcolonial dilemma: the desire to belong to the metropolitan world that has defined one's aspirations, and the simultaneous awareness that such belonging is always conditional, fragile, and incomplete.

Keywords: mimicry, ambivalence, Third Space, liminality, postcolonial entity

Introduction

This paper examines the intertwined concepts of ambivalence and mimicry, two core theoretical ideas developed by Homi K. Bhabha, and their presence in Naipaul's novel. By drawing on Bhabha's analysis of mimicry as "almost the same, but not quite," on Fanon's exploration of racial and psychological alienation, and on Edward Said's critique of the imperial gaze, this study argues that *The Mimic Men* reveals the fundamentally unstable foundations of postcolonial identity and liminality. At the centre of this instability is the figure of Ralph Singh, whose life becomes a continuous performance of roles inherited from colonial discourse—inbetweenness roles he neither fully inhabits nor fully escapes.

Ambivalence and Mimicry

Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of ambivalence and mimicry remain indispensable in reading Naipaul's novel. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha describes mimicry as a strategy through which the colonized subject adopts the language, habits, and cultural codes of the colonizer while remaining marked as different. Citing Jacques Lacan's writings on the gaze, Bhabha notes:

> **"Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage… It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled." (qtd. in Bhabha 121)**

This idea is crucial for understanding Singh's dislocation. He becomes a political figure who imitates the gestures of authority he has observed in the colonial system, yet he knows that his performance lacks authenticity and coherence. His mimicry is both a desire for legitimacy and an exposure of the artificiality of power structures that is why he changes his name from Ranjit Singh to Ralph Singh .

For Bhabha, ambivalence is equally central. Ambivalence disrupts the authority of colonial discourse by revealing its dependence on contradictory demands: the colonized must imitate the colonizer to become "civilized," yet must remain inferior to justify domination. This unstable relationship produces anxiety in the colonial subject, whose identity becomes suspended between imitation and rejection.

Psychology of Colonial Alienation

Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* provides a powerful psychoanalytic account of how racialized subjects internalize colonial stereotypes. Fanon writes:

"I had to meet the white man's eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me. In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema… I took myself far off from my own presence… an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood."

This vivid description parallels Singh's experiences as he confronts the colonial gaze in both Isabella and London. Singh's "amputation" occurs not through racial confrontation alone but through historical displacement. His selfhood is defined by a lack—a void created by the collapse of traditional systems and the artificial rise of colonial institutions. Like Fanon's subject, Singh becomes alienated from his body, his past, and his cultural grounding.

Said, Ashcroft, and the Postcolonial Concept

Edward Said's concept of the "Orientalized" subject expands this discussion. In Orientalism, Said demonstrates how the colonized world becomes a representational construct shaped by Western epistemology. Singh's self-perception is mediated by this epistemology, which continues to define what constitutes "success," "culture," and "civilization." His dreams of London are not dreams of a real place but of an imperial fiction.

Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin argue in *The Empire Writes Back* that postcolonial societies inherit a cultural instability that arises from centuries of displacement and imposed systems. Singh embodies this instability. His life in Isabella is shaped by the legacy of indenture, economic dependency, and institutional mimicry. His political career emerges not from organic national formation but from the remnants of colonial order.

Ralph Singh as the Postcolonial Mimic Man

The structure of *The Mimic Men*—a memoir written by Singh during exile in London—reflects the fragmented nature of his identity. Exile is not merely a geographical condition but a psychological one. London, the imperial centre, becomes a space of both fascination and estrangement, mirroring Bhabha's "third space" where identities are negotiated rather than fixed.

Singh's memories of Isabella reveal a society built on mimicry. The political class imitates the ceremonial and bureaucratic practices of the former colonial rulers, yet these performances lack historical grounding. This hollow imitation results in a state of perpetual instability. Singh's own political career is shaped by this mimicry: he adopts the speech patterns, gestures, and ideological vocabulary of British politicians, yet he remains painfully conscious of the artificiality of the entire enterprise.

Dissemination of colonial ideology through Education

Singh's schooling plays a central role in his internalization of colonial values. Like Fanon's child encountering the white gaze, Singh learns to see the world—and himself—through the lens of imperial authority. The school becomes a mechanism of cultural regulation, producing subjects who aspire to the metropolitan ideals they can never fully embody. This "almost but not quite" presence, to borrow Bhabha's phrase, becomes the foundation of Singh's identity. As Thomas Macaulay rightly said about Indian education, they wanted servile mimic men who can only be "*Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect."*

Ambivalence in Personal Relationships

Singh's relationships with women—Sandra, Isabella figures, and the women he encounters in London—reveal his deep ambivalence. His desire is mediated through colonial structures of race and class; he admires the European women who embody the sophistication he associates with the metropolitan world but feels simultaneously unworthy and resentful. This ambivalence parallels his political identity: he wishes to belong to the imperial centre yet resents its unattainability.

Ambivalence in the Political Sphere

The politics of Isabella are presented as a mirror of colonial administration. Singh becomes a "mimic man" in the political sphere by reenacting the authority he witnessed in colonial rulers.

His speeches, his mannerisms, and even his ambitions are borrowed. Yet he senses that the island's politics are a stage performance lacking real substance. The institutions—the parliament, civil service, and bureaucratic procedures—are remnants of colonial rule stripped of their original purpose. As Ashcroft argues, postcolonial nations often inherit structures that do not organically develop from local realities, leading to disorientation and fragmentation. Singh's failure as a political leader is not merely personal; it is emblematic of a larger systemic failure.

The Third Space: Between Colonizer and Colonized

Singh's identity is neither entirely colonial nor entirely native. He occupies what Bhabha calls the "third space," where cultural meanings are negotiated rather than fixed. This space is not liberatory for Singh; instead, it produces anxiety and paralysis. His attempts to reconcile his multiple identities—Indian ancestry, Caribbean upbringing, British education—result in fragmentation rather than synthesis.

Bhabha's concept of hybridity suggests that the third space can disrupt imperial authority by creating new cultural forms. However, in Naipaul's novel, hybridity becomes a source of instability. Singh lacks a stable cultural foundation upon which to build a sense of self, and the hybrid identity he inherits only deepens his alienation.

The Failure of Mimicry

Ultimately, Singh's life demonstrates the futility of mimicry as a strategy for self-definition. His imitation of metropolitan ideals does not grant him belonging; instead, it intensifies his awareness of exclusion. He becomes a parody of both colonial and local identities.

His memoirs, written in isolation in London, reflect his failure to reconcile the contradictions of his life. The narrative itself is fragmented, oscillating between nostalgia and bitterness, ambition and disillusionment. This fragmentation is not merely stylistic but structural—an embodiment of the postcolonial condition.

Conclusion

The Mimic Men offers a profound exploration of the psychological, cultural, and political consequences of colonialism. Through the figure of Ralph Singh, Naipaul captures the internal divisions of the postcolonial self—divisions produced by mimicry, ambivalence, and the disorienting inheritance of colonial structures. Using the theoretical insights of Bhabha, Fanon, Said, and Ashcroft, this paper shows that Singh's identity crisis is not an isolated phenomenon but a reflection of a broader historical condition.

Singh's life illustrates the paradox of mimicry: the colonized subject is encouraged to imitate the colonizer to acquire legitimacy, yet such imitation exposes the impossibility of fully inhabiting the colonial identity. The result is ambivalence—a simultaneous desire for and rejection of the metropolitan world. Naipaul's portrayal of Singh reveals the deep psychological scars left by colonialism and the challenges of constructing a coherent identity in its aftermath.

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