



## Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul's Study Novel: *The Mimic Men*

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**Abstract:** *The Mimic Men* is a novel by British-Trinidadian author V.S. Naipaul, first published in 1967. Combining elements of both fiction and nonfiction and completed while Naipaul was writer-in-residence at Uganda's Makerere University, it is considered one of Naipaul's most serious and poetic novels. It centers on Ranjit "Ralph" Singh, an politician of both East and West Indian origin in exile living in London as he attempts to write his memoirs. The novel flashes back to his time in power, as he struggles to balance his personal life with his political ambitions and at times, seems to abandon his goals. Exploring themes of cultural differences between Europe and the Caribbean, colonialism, love, and the politics and economics of the Caribbean, *The Mimic Men* received overall positive reviews, although it was controversial for its depiction of West Indians as trying to mimic European behavior.

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### Introduction:

*The Mimic Men* is a unique literary work that focuses on V.S. Naipaul's ability to translate the undeniable scrutiny that we see displayed in oppressed history. Naipaul's literary style is echoed through the characters of his novel, *The Mimic Men*. This novel serves as the autobiographical memoir of a colonial exile/politician-writer living as a refugee in London. *The Mimic Men* is the embodiment of real and the unreal, happiness and sorrow, perfection and imperfection, and dispelling illusions. The novel inherently questions what is real and what isn't - defining real vs unreal, while asking whether the world is what we believe it to be. This conflict is at the heart of the novel: the self-criticism, examination, reflection, and growth of the characters is a driving point of the narrative.

V. S. Naipaul is a literary circumnavigator, only ever really at home in himself, in his inimitable voice. Singularly unaffected by literary fashion and models he has wrought existing genres into a style of his own, in which the customary distinctions between fiction and non-fiction are of subordinate importance. "

Naipaul's literary domain has extended far beyond the West Indian island of Trinidad, his first subject, and now encompasses India, Africa, America from south to north, the Islamic countries of Asia and, not least, England. Naipaul is Conrad's heir as the annalist of the destinies of empires in the moral sense: what they do to human beings. His authority as a narrator is grounded in his memory of what others have forgotten, the history of the vanquished.

The farcical yarns in his first work, *The Mystic Masseur*, and the short stories in *Miguel Street* with their blend of Chekhov and calypso established Naipaul as a humorist and a portrayer of street life. He took a giant stride with *A House for Mr. Biswas*, one of those singular novels that seem to constitute their own complete universes, in this case a miniature India on the periphery of the British Empire, the scene of his father's circumscribed existence. In allowing peripheral figures their place in the momentousness of great literature, Naipaul reverses normal perspectives and denies readers at the centre their protective detachment. This principle was made to serve in a series of novels in which, despite the increasingly documentary tone, the characters did not therefore become less colourful. Fictional narratives, autobiography and documentaries have merged in Naipaul's writing without it always being possible to say which element dominates.

Ranjit Kripal Singh is a 40-year-old man of Indian heritage born on the fictional Caribbean island of Isabella in the 1920s. Isabella is a British colony, and Singh is a British citizen, which allows him to immigrate to the UK after his fall from government power in Isabella and subsequent exile. He writes his memoirs in a suburban London hotel, beginning with his university years in London. While living in a boarding house, he met a young Maltese woman named Lien, who introduced him to many friends, all from countries colonized by the British empire. At university, Singh meets a British woman and fellow student named Sandra. He soon falls in love with the younger woman, but after he graduates, she fails out

of university and is left with no real job prospects. Singh agrees to marry her, and she decides to move with him to Isabella. Singh's paternal grandparents own the island's bottling factory, and Singh is willed a substantial amount of land and money. Renting his land out for development, he becomes one of the most successful men on the island. However, he feels little fulfillment with his success, and his marriage is largely loveless.

#### **Sandra Singh**

**Sandra** Singh is Ralph's wife - much to Ralph's irritation. Sandra is a large, big-boned, large-breasted woman with imposing features.

In the novel, she decides to distance herself from her lower-class London family in a desperate attempt to move upward in society.

Sandra decides to do so by getting a degree from the respected college where Ralph is enrolled. Ironically, Sandra's plans are halted when she is unable to pass the examinations. After two attempts, she changes her course and persuades Ralph to marry her - with the intentions of going to Isabella with him. Once she arrives in Isabella, Sandra immediately attempts to fit in by mimicking the manners of the wealthy. Sandra is mocked and rejected by society. Eventually, she moves to Miami after leaving Ralph amidst a sea of infidelities.

#### **Cecil**

**Cecil** is the younger brother of Ralph's mother - making him Ralph's uncle as well as his schoolmate. In numerous scenes we see Cecil acting over the top and flamboyant. These traits, along with his streaks of aggression, are said to have started in his childhood. Cecil inherits the bottling patent on which the family wealth is based, but he soon loses the family fortune and his license. Armed with a Luger pistol, he tyrannizes Isabella residents. It is implied with strong certainty that Cecil is the person who shoots Ralph's father and his common-law wife.

The memoirs then flash back to his childhood growing up on Isabella. His father is a schoolteacher, while his mother is set to inherit the island's bottling factory. His uncle Cecil is only a few years older than Singh, and had a tense rivalry with Singh's father. An arrogant, rich young man, Cecil has little respect for his elders. Singh attends the British school Isabella Imperial, and makes many friends there. He is close with his father, and recalls a time in his childhood when his father took the whole family for a drive around the island. There, he sees the poor neighborhoods largely filled with black residents. He recalls feeling contempt for them due to their poverty. His school friend Browne is deeply affected by the poverty around them, and began to advocate on behalf of the island's poor. This leads to the end of his friendship with Singh. Singh's father eventually quits

his teaching job and becomes a spiritual leader and social activist, living in the forest with poor people. The government tries to break up this movement, but it eventually ends on its own. During World War II, Singh's father is placed in an internment camp. Cecil inherits the bottling factory, but his youth and arrogance led him to run it into the ground. When his father is released, he and Singh are reunited before Singh goes abroad to study in London. There, he got word that his father had been shot and killed by Cecil. In his masterpiece *The Enigma of Arrival* Naipaul visits the reality of England like an anthropologist studying some hitherto unexplored native tribe deep in the jungle. With apparently short-sighted and random observations he creates an unrelenting image of the placid collapse of the old colonial ruling culture and the demise of European neighbourhoods.

Naipaul has drawn attention to the novel's lack of universality as a form, that it presupposes an inviolate human world of the kind that has been shattered for conquered peoples. He began to experience the inadequacy of fiction while he was working on *The Loss of El Dorado*, in which after extensive study of the archives he described the appalling colonial history of Trinidad. He found that he had to cling to the authenticity of the details and the voices and abstain from mere fictionalisation while at the same time continuing to render his material in the form of literature. His travel books allow witnesses to testify at every turn, not least in his powerful description of the eastern regions of the Islamic world, *Beyond Belief*. The author's empathy finds expression in the acuity of his ear.

Naipaul is a modern *philosophe*, carrying on the tradition that started originally with *Lettrespersanes* and *Candide*. In a vigilant style, which has been deservedly admired, he transforms rage into precision and allows events to speak with their own inherent irony.

The post-colonial writings are characterized by the fact that these writers sought to represent the daily life realities of the colonized communities such as poverty, tyranny, corruption, chaos, restriction, political views clash, and educational decline. These writings provide a sort of historical documents as well as literary works because the writers of these works are mostly of the colonized communities who have a first-hand experience of this life. They were so accurate in depicting the social status to the extent that these works can be seen as a kind of autobiography of some of them.

To this type of writings Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* belongs. It gives the impression that there is a kind of interrelation between the fictional and the real. Thus it is natural that he comes across the inquiry raised by one of his scholars about this particular novel. In an

interview held with Naipaul in 1981, he was asked, To what extent can the narrator in the novel (*The Mimic Men*) be similar to speak for you? His response was clear, No, no, no. That isn't me. (Cited in Dooley, 2006, 184) The reason behind raising such a question is the fact that there is no clear differentiation between the author and character. They handled the psychological status of their characters who experienced ideological duality, estrangement, confusion, and moral conflict.

### **The Mimic Men**

*The Mimic Men* is one of the remarkable post-colonial novels written by the Caribbean writer V. S. Naipaul. It handles the situation of confusion that affected the community of Isabella, an imaginary island in the Caribbean Sea. It handles all the topics of identity problems, social chaos, ideological confusion, political subordination, and corruption. It can be considered as a successful example of the post-colonial novels as it drew the attention of the critics and was able to win the Nobel Prize for its significant treatment of the above-mentioned topics. Divided into three major parts, the novel discusses the life of an ex-colonial politician Ralph Singh. Following the stream of consciousness style narration, it narrates the events of Singh's life experiences as memories. He exhibits his life as a series of misfortunes starting from his present stage, going back to his childhood and his life as a young man. Through a successful first person omniscient narration, Singh tells the readers all the thoughts and feelings of the other characters in the story. He shows his full awareness of what was happening around him although he was so confused and not able to take proper decisions. Thus, one can say that Singh is a reliable narrator, despite his weaknesses and moodiness. "

### **V.S. Naipaul and Fiction**

*The Mimic Men* is Naipaul's most thoughtful work that portrays and recreates the fragmented history of his homeland in Trinidad. Naipaul confesses that:

*At first I looked for this release in humor, but as the horizon of my writing expanded I sought to reconstruct my disintegrated society, to impose order on the world, to seek patterns, to tell myself, this is what happens when people are strong; this is what happens when people are weak. I had to find that degree of intellectual comfort, or I would have gone mad.*

### **Manifestation of Colonization**

V.S. Naipaul, in *The Mimic Men*, expresses his discontent towards colonization and its chaotic impact on the psychological, social and political aspects of the individuals of the colonized countries. Through the character of a former expatriated politician who tried to examine his interests and character as an

independent personality, Naipaul emphasizes the role of colonization in creating a case of psychological confusion and social conflict. 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.

*The Mimic Men* seeks to see and judge the colonial experience on people's attitudes, reactions and understanding of things around them. In other words, this novel has its action centered on the past, the life in Isabella and how its rhythm has been drastically affected. Thus the collective tone of the following paragraph "we" is fully emphasized.

*We were a haphazard, disordered and mixed society. It was a group to whom the island was a setting; its activities and interests were no more than they seemed. There were no complicating loyalties or depths; for everyone the past had been cut away.*

The last sentence in the quotation above is very expressive and typically the state of rootlessness which characterizes the attitude of the colonized people in Isabella. They have nothing to hide and their actions are marked by superficiality: In that fortnight we got to know as much about the group as there was to know.

The deep feeling of inferiority as a result of being colonized increased their sense of alienation and displacement. The British colonial education and culture were presented as a substitute or at least arrival for the original Aryan education, culture, traditions and even religion. They were introduced as new systems of discipline, success, and achievement. As a result they dominated these people's lives to the extent that the colonized started to identify themselves with the colonizers rather than with their original culture. The great city, centre of the world, in which, fleeing disorder, I had hoped to find the beginning of order. Singh's repeated phrase 'the great city' shows his fascination with London more than his homeland Isabella. It reflects his standpoint as a really colonized character unable to judge this experience of colonization properly. This cultural domination is certainly a key point in this novel and its striking title of imitating others literally.

However, not able to digest the colonizers' culture, tradition, and religion, they were not able to associate themselves with the colonizers rightly. For example his social group were proud of their American background more than their Isabellian origin; "On Isabella they were linked less by their background and professional standing than by their expatriate and fantastically cosmopolitan wives or girlfriends. Americans, singly and in pairs, were an added element. We also find that this attitude of mimicry overwhelming others like Sally, Cecil's elder sister

who finds her pleasure in “reading American magazines for the fashions, which she discussed with these girls. Another example is Nana, the rich bottler on the island, travelling to America to buy a pipe.

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