

Social Marginality, Cultural Hybridity and Politics of Identity: Reading Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* and *The Mystic Masseur*

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Abstract

V.S. Naipaul's The Mimic Men and The Mystic Masseur scrutinize the multiple socio-cultural predicaments of the marginalized, the once colonized West Indian subjects groping for distinctive identities of their own. The New World Caribbean society was created by a system of indentured labour which resulted in the migration of agricultural labourers from India and China to produce sugarcane in the West Indian plantations. Situated in this creolized society, the East Indians in Trinidad impelled by the 'girmitya' impulse recreate the mythologized Hindu world through mindless replication of communal rituals. Their cultural hybridity further seduced them to mimic western cultural paradigms. My paper proposes to examine how their uncouth strategies of self-definition ironically aggravate their alienation trapped in a maze of identity politics and also how they acquire an awareness of their syncretistic existence.

Keywords: girmitya, hybridity, creolization, loss, displacement, identity, mimicry, home

1.

V.S. Naipaul, one of the eminent Trinidadian novelists has produced a significant body of literature that has sustained the interest of not only literary critics but also social scientists and cultural anthropologists. Interestingly, while awarding the Nobel Prize, the official citation of the Swedish Academy presented Naipaul as 'a modern philosopher', whose "...perceptive narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories" ("Nobel Prize for Literature 2001"). Writing as a person utterly displaced and yet connected by birth and education with three different societies, Naipaul acquired a unique intellectual freedom that took him out of his "colonial shell" (Naipaul, 1985, p. 12) and enabled him to judge the Caribbean space with "...an enigmatic mixture of nostalgia and patrician disdain" (Bhabha, 2001). As a social interpreter of colonial history, Naipaul therefore discovers personal resonance with the worldview of the marginalized, the once colonized West Indian subjects now cast on their own resources and groping for distinctive identities of their own.

In the words of Gareth Griffiths: "[t]he West Indian has only the fact of his separate existence...the African was colonized, the West Indian was enslaved, in the process of enslavement the West Indian was deprived of his personality, as well as his roots and his cultural identity" (1978, p. 79). After the abolition of slavery the British imperialist power evolved a system of indentured labour which resulted in the migration of agricultural labourers from India and China to produce sugarcane in the West Indian plantations. Consequently, the heterogeneity inherent in this cultural collage intensified by the virtual annihilation of the native Caribs and Arawaks and the presence of several colonial masters gave rise to a multicultural, polyglossic society where cultural conflict became recurrent social phenomenon. The inhabitants of this New World encountered the process of 'transculturation', which Mary Louis Pratt characterizes as a feature of the 'contact zone', "...where disparate cultures meet, clash, grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (1992, p. 137). This complex cultural encounter defined as 'Creolization' (Brathwaite, 1995, p. 202) is a social process of chaos, interstitial instability and disorder.

My present paper thus seeks to explore how in a hybrid social milieu, culture “is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative” and its articulation “as repetition and difference” (Bhabha, “Signs Taken”, 1994, p. 107).

2.

In such a culturally plural society the West Indian immigrants negotiated the pervasive feeling of social marginality mostly by defining themselves in relation to the social patterns and communal rituals of their ancestral homelands. Naipaul’s fiction encapsulates this profound sense of socio-cultural loss and the subaltern’s notion of a stable home, thereby embodying the ‘*girit*’ ideology¹. His texts critique such nostalgic return to an imagined India viewing the cultural baggage as an expendable burden. Naipaul’s indictment of the mythologized, claustrophobic orthodox Hindu world reconstructed by the Trinidadian Indians reveals how subservient symbolic gestures doubly estrange them from the surrounding Creole realities. They are reduced to nothing other than desperate camouflages to mitigate one’s socio-cultural alienation. Naipaul’s sarcastic remark to this obsessive sense of Indianness has thus been articulated in “Two Worlds: Nobel Lecture”: “[h]alf of us on this land of the Chagunas were pretending...perhaps feeling...that we had brought a kind of India with us, which we could, unroll like a carpet on the flat land” (2001).

Such awareness of a ‘fractured’ identity is a recurrent motif in Naipaul’s fiction accentuating concepts of alienation, marginality and re-aligned notions of identity. For Ralph Singh, the first-person narrator of *The Mimic Men* (1967), fragmentation and loss also necessitated an ethnic contemplation of his pastlessness. The novel begins with Ralph, an exiled politician, writing his memoir in a London hotel in an attempt to understand the colonial subject’s crippling sense of dislocation and impose an order on the muddled encounters of his life. As a child Ralph responds to the cultural diversity pervasive in the island of Isabella by imagining about an exotic Indian homeland. He avidly immerses in history books on Asiatic and Persian Aryans dreaming of horsemen and oneself as their leader. Much like the cultural nostalgia of Ganesh (*The Mystic Masseur*, 1957) for half-eclipsed Indian rituals, Ralph too dissociates to muse in his Aryan fantasies:

...in my secret life I was...a Singh. China was the subject of Hok’s secret reading. Mine was of Rajputs...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, ‘...the true leader of you lies far away shipwrecked on an island the like of which you cannot visualize’(p. 104-5).

But the mythic conception of a heroic ethnic history suggests the ambivalent nature of arrival in which there is only deferment because of difference. Naipaul here espouses Bhabha’s awareness in *The Location of Culture*, that “[t]he epistemological limits of ethnocentric ideas are also the enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant...histories and voices” (1994, p. 4-5).

Ralph’s strong kinship with his imagined Indian roots maps Isabella as merely a transit point for the various ethnic groups residing on the island. Ralph thus succinctly comments on the sheer absurdity of his Chinese friend Hok’s fascination with Chinese History: “...Hok had dreams like mine, was probably also marked, and lived in imagination far from us, far from the island on which he like my father, like myself had been shipwrecked” (p. 104). Both Ralph and Hok epitomize a quintessential paradox of colonial history, that “...racial or cultural miscegenation causes people to cling even more [tenaciously] to myths of purity” (Nandan, 2003, p. 139). Their envisioning strongly corroborates Cheng’s suggestion of the socially marginalized subject’s “...introjections of a lost, never-possible perfection” (2001, p. xi). More particularly, their blind disavowal of their biculturalism and revival of the grandeur of pre-colonial past can be perceived as nothing other than farcical attempts to salvage their sense of being marooned and shipwrecked. Lisa Outar explicates this in Ralph’s case: “Ralph feels the allure of those who conquered the subcontinent, the nomads who in eschewing rootedness are never subject to conquest themselves. Only this image of inviolate wholeness can satisfy” (2005, p. 143). The Jungian motif of “collective unconscious” or racial memory thus exercises here a debilitating influence psychologically marginalizing or estranging Ralph and Hok from their desire to belong.

3.

In *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) such cultural mimesis of the rituals of ancestral homeland has been satirically debunked as a mockery of the original culture. The dynamic reality of the place gets substituted by "...a synchronic principle which 'stills' history and reconstructs a world based on fantasies which have no real foundation in fact" (Mishra, 1996). Ganesh like the other characters reacts to this irredeemable loss of roots by oscillating between two 'Indias' - the one far away, dictating the life and manners of the 'mimic' one here and yet remaining absurdly inaccessible. Naipaul himself admits in his "Two Worlds: Nobel Lecture" that as a child he was painfully aware of leading a peripheral social existence cast adrift between two worlds: "[i]n Trinidad as new arrivals we were a disadvantaged community, [but] that excluding idea was a kind of protection; it enabled us...to live in our own fading India. We looked inwards; the world outside existed in a kind of darkness" (Naipaul, 2001). Ironically, it is this sense of displacement coupled with an intense desire for 'Indianness' that is crystallized through a farcical social practice. As part of the ritual of Ganesh's initiation ceremony as a Brahmin boy, his head was shaven and he was provided with a saffron bundle with the specific instruction: " '[g]o to Banaras and study' " (p. 11). The novel's satiric undertone manifests itself in Ganesh's reception of the entire paraphernalia in all its sincerity. Ganesh being situated in an exiled, rootless world prefers to withdraw into the mythical shadows of the past aggrandizing his Indian self. However, his pathetic nostalgia culled its psychological sustenance through mindless repetition. The spectators were thus irritated when Ganesh literally kept on walking as revealed in Dookhie's sharp admonition at Ganesh's role-playing: " '[c]ut out this nonsense, man. Stop behaving stupid. You think I have all day to run after you? *You think you really going to Benaras? That is in India, you know, and this is Trinidad*' " (p. 11) (my emphasis). Through this confrontation of the East Indian with the surrounding Creole world, Naipaul weaves a satiric portrait of Ganesh's triply marginalized existence. In *An Area of Darkness* Naipaul succinctly sums up these cultural fissures: "[i]nto this alienness we daily ventured, and at length we were absorbed into it. But we knew that there had been change, gain, loss. We knew that something which was once whole had been washed away. What was whole was the idea of India" (1964, p. 234).

As a member of an ethnic minority, Ralph's father in *The Mimic Men* also experiences similar "genetic dislocation" (Nixon, 1992, p. 4) in relation to the dwindling status of the East Indians in the Caribbean. Naipaul here almost echoes Ganesh's hypocritical image of a Hindu ascetic preacher in his depiction of Ralph's father becoming the 'Gurudeva' for a popular political-religious movement. By a shocking instance of comic-grotesque, Naipaul further accentuates Ralph's feeling of being awkwardly suspended in an alien landscape. He is completely maimed by his father's enthusiastic sacrifice of Tamango, the racing horse owned by the Deschampsneufs, in an attempt to re-enact the Hindu ritual of 'Asvamedha' (p. 152). Naipaul's macabre presentation of the butchery of the animal aptly enunciates Ralph's growing perception of the irrelevance of such rituals when transplanted in an alien milieu and the displacement brought about by the trauma of migration. Indubitably, Ralph is aware of the symbolic significance 'Asvamedha' implies in the Hindu tradition invoking concepts of victory, prosperity, power and fertility. Nevertheless, this anachronistic act thwarts Ralph from his imagination of a grand past of Hindu culture leading him to display an ambivalence attitude towards his Hindu background. John Thieme thus observes, "...when the horse is killed, the ideal past collapses and the concrete experience shocks the child" (1987, p. 133). His negotiation of shifting identities is underpinned by restless, urgent and conscious deconstruction of Hindu cultural elements which provokes him to respond with horror:

[a]svamedha: to myself alone I spoke the word...An ancient sacrifice, in my imagination a thing of beauty, speaking of...horses and warrior-youths in morning light: now rendered obscene...Primitive, bestial and degraded; these were some of the words used by certain sections of the island. I shared their horror (p.150, p. 152) (my emphasis).³

Ralph remains dispirited by the apprehension that this awe inspiring symbol is nothing but a mundane "Hindu ritual which anyone might have observed and copied" (p. 153). He critically scrutinizes the parody of such mapping, "performed by a shipwrecked man on a desert island" (p. 153) to escape the psychic fracture generated by extirpation of roots. Bruce King also endorses that "[t]he process of losing one's Indianness started with leaving India...after that Indian traditions could only either decay into deadening ritual or become degraded" (1993, p. 68).

However, the most sensitive delineation of deep racial wounds evoked by one's perception of being socio-culturally marginalized has been projected in Ralph's friend Hok's shameless non-recognition of his mother, since she is a Negro and therefore despicable. Being a mulatto of mixed blood Hok does not appear like a Negro.

His virulent rejection of his mother occurs when he feels humiliated before his school friends for having exposed the hidden fact of his hybrid pedigree. Naipaul here poignantly reveals Hok's pretension to circumvent an identity crisis where the artifice of mimicry is invoked mostly in grotesque terms:

[o]ne boy said, 'Sir, Hok went past his mother just now and he didn't say anything at all to her.'
The teacher, revealing unexpected depths, was appalled...

... Hok looked down at the pavement and went purple, rubbing his hands together. We looked for the mother, the hidden creature whom Hok saw everyday,...she was indeed a surprise, a Negro woman of the people, short and rather fat, quite unremarkable.

She waddled away, indifferent herself to the son she had just brushed past... (p. 103).

The visibility of 'Otherness' here punctures the camouflaged identity that Hok displays. Bhabha's illuminating discussion about the 'stereotype' and its primal instinct for total identification, adequately explicates Naipaul's projection of Hok's disorientation. Bhabha enumerates in *The Other Question*: "...the drama underlying these dramatic 'everyday' colonial scenes is not difficult to discern... the black child turns away from himself, his race, in his total identification with the positivity of whiteness which is at once colour and no colour" (1994, p. 76). Indeed, the tragic irony of Hok's fantasy is predicated upon what Dolly Zulakha Hassan endorses - "[t]he novel implies that the emotional security and a real sense of [unified] identity are unachievable in heterogeneous societies of the Caribbean" (1989, p. 253). The shocking reality of one's fluid, schizophrenic self thus recurrently cripples the bizarre imaginations of the children.

4.

The anguished awareness of this cultural dislocation and the frenzied quest for a coherent social identity inadvertently seduced the Indian immigrants to appropriate the value systems of the west. The natives suffer from a colonial hangover and measure their advancements in terms of their successful imitation of the colonial masters. In the process, as Ashish Nandy claims, "...the concept of the modern West" gets easily transformed "from a geographical and temporal entity to that of a psychological category" (1983, p. xiii). For Ralph too, the servile fascination for the colonial culture subtended by feelings of shame and self-loathing leads him to refer disdainfully to his Indian name: "[w]e were Singhs. My father's father's name was Kripal. My father...ran these names together to give himself the surname of Kripalsingh. My own name was Ranjit; and my birth certificate said I was Ranjit Kripalsingh. That gave me two names. But Deschampsneufs had five apart from his last name...I thought to compete. I broke Kripalsingh into two, correctly reviving an ancient fracture...gave myself the further name of Ralph ...and signed myself R.R.K." (p. 100) (my emphasis).

That many Indians felt the psychological urge to assume Anglicized names does connote at a deeper level that they found it disparaging enough to preserve their separate ethnic identity. Thus in his essay *In the Middle of the Journey*, Naipaul reassess the nature of ethnic identity in terms of distress and marginality: "India [is] an ache, for which one has great tenderness, but from which at length one always wishes to separate oneself" (1972, p. 46). Anne Cheng further amplifies the "racial melancholia" of the Caribbean Indians who are "...intimately tied to the psychical experience of grief" (2001, p. x). Similarly, Ralph's concealment of his Indianness emanates from the loss of an idea of himself as an ethnic subject with a coherent cultural tradition: "[i]n this way I felt I mitigated the fantasy or deception; and it helped in school reports, where I was simply Singh R." (p. 100). This futile attempt of the West Indian subject to diminish the fact of his blackness by adopting white mask endows him with an ambiguous identity, which Bhabha defines in his essay "Of Mimicry and Man: the Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" as "almost the same, but not quite" (1994, p. 86). Hence one must necessarily acknowledge that the subaltern is irretrievably doomed to a state of "...flawed colonial mimesis in which to be Anglicized, is emphatically not to be English" (Bhabha, *Of Mimicry and Man*, 1994, p. 87).

This interstitial passage between fixed cultural identifications is the space of hybridity itself, the space in which cultural meanings always contain traces of other meanings. Robert Young enunciates in his book *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* that "[h]ybridization as raceless chaos...produces no stable form, but rather something close to Bhabha's restless...radical heterogeneity" (2002, p. 25). This despair about the identity crisis of the Indians has further been reiterated by Lisa Outar: "[w]e no longer get an acceptance of Indianness as part of a larger Creole community...Rather it morphs into a source of pain and disappointment" (2005, p. 139).

Such traumatic perception ironically propagates fabricated myths of origin/ethnicity best embodied in Ralph's explication to the teacher: " 'Ranjit is my secret name,' I said. 'It is a custom among Hindus of certain castes. This secret name is my real name but it ought not to be used in public' " (p. 100). Ralph's transformation to an ambiguous pastiche self is symptomatic of the precariousness of a subaltern whose identity by choice acquires arbitrary dimensions: " '[t]hat's where the calling name of Ralph is useful. The calling name is unimportant and can be taken in vain by anyone' " (p. 101).

Naipaul's awareness of the exclusion of Indian indentured community from the larger Creole society perhaps explains Vivek Dhareshwar's interpretation of Ralph's racial/ethnic ambivalence. According to him, although Ralph "...recognizes the hybrid or mixed character of the island, he at the same time conceives of himself as an intruder" (1989, p. 94) disintegrated by a historical rupture. Ralph's is a case of triple alienation from the surrounding insignificance of his island landscape, the disordered past of his ancestral homeland and the fairytale quality of the true pure world that lies somewhere else. The central metaphor of 'shipwreck' here sharply endorses Ralph's feeling of being perpetually disowned and marginalized: "[t]he descendant of the slave-owner could soothe the descendant of the slave with a private patois. I was the late intruder, the picturesque Asiatic, linked to neither" (p. 82).

In Naipaul's fiction the postcolonial Caribbean society has therefore been perceived in a subaltern, adjunct relation to the metropolis that redraws its frontiers in the menacing agnostic boundary of cultural difference. As a member of the East Indian community of Trinidad experientially surviving a transition from feudalism to capitalism, Ganesh's character in *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) does not in any way simplify this complex matrix of identities. Even as a child Ganesh too became poignantly conscious of his vulnerable status as a culturally inscribed migrant within a migrant world. Foolishly trying to enhance their dignity through their impeccable manner of dressing, both Ganesh and his father provoke the scornful laughter of a woman at the Princes Town railway station on the occasion of Ganesh's admission to the Queen's Royal College.² They evoke only mockery for their sartorial incongruities- the old man for his "dhoti, koortah, white cap and unfurled umbrella" (p. 9) and the son for his new attire of "a khaki toupee" (p. 9). Ganesh's humiliation is intensified when all his efforts at self-aggrandizement invite only contempt and rage from the Headmaster of the school:

Ganesh preferred not to remember what happened the next day when he was taken to school. His father gesticulating with his white cap and umbrella; the English principal patient, then firm and finally exasperated; the old man enraged, muttering, '*Gaddaha ! Gaddaha*' (p. 10)

Ashis Nandy perceptively analyzes such grotesque mimicry and the whole absurdity of supplanting one's native identity by a pompous Western mannerism. He therefore correctly concludes that "[t]he Hindu is comically Indian [even] while trying to be Western" (Nandy, 1983, p. 83).

Naipaul employs a characteristic bathetic humour to foreground how the 'fullness' of the stereotype is always conditioned by a 'lack'. This notion of cultural hybridity becomes ostensible when Ganesh childishly tries to master the correct Standard English than his own creolized dialect as part of his preparation for becoming a writer. Naipaul's concern here however transcends the apparent comic affectations in speech style. It is more profoundly related to the dialectical hybridity on linguistic terms effected by the absorption of English words within the syntax of the Hindi language. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin contend more forcefully that in this dialectical relationship, the postcolonial text's "...*use of language incorporates the warning that the site of the shared discourse ...is not the site of a shared mental experience and should not be seen as such*" (1989, p. 59) (my emphasis). Consequently, Ganesh's language is the broken, pathetically ridiculous lingo of a displaced community magnifying the inescapable cultural hybridity of the Caribbean people. A comic appeal is thus sustained by the character's distortions of words and his idiosyncrasies of speech. For instance, a word like calendar easily gets transformed to "Kyalendar" (p. 109), feature is spelt as "Feecher" (p. 164) and sarcastic becomes "Suckastic" (p. 162). The nuance of this hybrid language gets further parodied in Leela's vying for " 'talking good English' "(p. 33) and in her obsession with punctuation signifying the gaps between language and lived experience:

Notice

Notice, is. Hereby; Provided: That, Seats!
Are, Provided: for; Female: Shop, Assistants! (p. 33).

The ludicrous variant of 'proper English' is a revelation of 'Otherness' in the metonymic function of language. According to Ashcroft, it "...establishes a silence beyond which the cultural Otherness of the text cannot be traversed by the colonial language" (1989, p. 53). Through such failure to imbibe properly the foreign language, Naipaul tacitly projects how colonialism involves a deliberate undervaluing of a people's vehicle of expression. Ganesh is hopelessly incompetent to articulate the master's language and hence what is 'English' in these discourses, "...is determined by its belatedness" (Bhabha, "Signs Taken", 1994, p. 107). But at a deeper level, they connote the menace of mimicry in its double vision that operates through a shared linguistic consciousness. Hence such linguistic hybridity even while eliciting amusement can become one of the most potent weapons for the subalterns to forge a sense of communality through their distinctive English patois.

5.

Naipaul epitomizes the most singular voice of the subaltern's precarious state of being perpetually exiled - compelled to travel, but condemned to find no permanent cultural home. Apparently, Naipaul too seemed to share his protagonist Ralph's belief that the sole escape route out of the abyss of futility is in the metropolitan centre. Trinidad was for the young Naipaul as for his characters a period of waiting, "...for life at the centre of things" (Naipaul, 1987, p. 120). But when finally he reaches his promised land, "...in the place that for all those years had been the elsewhere", he "knew London to be fantasy" (Naipaul, 1987, p. 124). Disillusioned by the cultural shock of failing to negotiate with the external aspects of the city, Naipaul gives an insipid view of the metropolis in *The Enigma of Arrival*: "[f]or the first days it rained...Then it stopped raining and beyond the lawn...I saw fields with stripped trees...The river was called Avon: not the one connected with Shakespeare... after the rain, all that I saw...were flat fields and a narrow river" (1987, p. 5).

In *The Mimic Men*, the spatial configurations of London and Isabella are inevitably yoked together in Ralph's literary imagination to convey that ever receding contrapuntal notion of home and social identity. His feeling of being subsumed by an abysmal loneliness is crystallized in the protagonist's idiom of cultural displacement which extends to the inhabitants of London as well as to the city's elusive character: "I would play with famous names as I walked empty streets ...But the magic of the names soon faded. Here was the river, here the bridge, ... *But the God was veiled. My incantation of names remained unanswered*" (Naipaul, 1967, p. 18) (my emphasis).

This epiphanic realization of being socially abandoned and culturally alienated by the cobweb of a surreptitious politics of identity has been further illustrated in Fanon's own words. The subaltern's life as Fanon analyses in *Black Skin, White Masks*, "is nothing but a long flight from others and from himself. He has been alienated even from his own body; his emotional life has been cut into two; he has been reduced to pursuing the impossible dream of universal brotherhood" (1967, p. 180). This identity crisis has been subtly revealed when Ralph visits England for political negotiations so as to solve the economic problem caused by the nationalization of the sugar estate owned by Lord Stockwell. It is not only the corrupting influence of power that Naipaul represents here but also the predicament of a politician who is condemned to perpetuate the "bastard status of his little world" (Ramadevi, 1996, p. 81). The politician here ceases to be a free man, "...lifted out of himself and separate[d] from his own personality" (p. 209).

The callous snobbishness exhibited by the imperial master towards a subaltern is most artfully reflected in Lord Stockwell's refusal to deliberate seriously about labour problems. Instead, both he and the English minister condescendingly treat Ralph like a child commenting flippantly on his physical features: "'[y]ou'll never grow bald... your father never did.' And left me [him] to ponder afresh the name I carried. For a long time after that he said nothing at all" (p. 246-47). The absurdity writ large in such conversation magnifies the island politician's feeling of being exploited as a political stooge by the superpowers. Zohreh Moghimi observes, the brief humiliating meeting clearly evinces that "...by refusing to consider Singh as a political figure or acknowledge the importance of his task" the representatives of imperial power "push Singh to an inferior status and finally to a sense of political dislocation" (2006). Ralph's consciousness of the hiatus between his dwarfed political status and that of his English counterpart finds apt expression in the following passage:

[h]is manner indicated clearly that our game had gone on long enough and he had other things to do than to assist the public relations of colonial politicians. In about forty-five seconds he painted so lively a picture of the consequences of any intemperate action by the government of Isabella that I felt personally rebuked...I said, 'How can I take this message back to my people?' ...He said: 'You can take back to your people any message you like.' And that was the end (p. 245) (my emphasis).

By reducing Ralph to a subservient relationship with the colonizer, the text clearly emphasizes the alienating forces of identification that seek the total effacement of his being.

The ambivalent interaction of the colonized with the mother country has further been foregrounded in Ralph's vulnerability to the seductive charms of Lord Stockwell's daughter, Lady Stella. Significantly enough, Stella's impulsive act of lending Ralph a copy of *The Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book* is insinuated with a strong colonial accent. To Ralph it appeared to be "...a link with the past, with the city of magical light" (p. 250). It equally connotes that Lord Stockwell uses her daughter as a conduit to make Ralph feel that he is still a subject of and subjected to the romances of imperialistic discourses, and by extension, to the beneficiary of the master's largess. Ralph's exhilaration as he receives the book soon subsides when he reads it at his hotel. It at once perplexes him with "...that limpid, direct vision of the [colonizer's] world, neither of which had been mine [his], neither vision, of delight, nor world, of order" (p. 251). The subtle admonition contained in that vision of the fairyland now fails to lull Ralph into his former utopian self. Instinctually, he realizes Lady Stella's imposition of a Eurocentric vision where the innocuous idiom of the nursery verse evolves itself into a discourse of power, controlling even the sexuality of the subaltern:

But when they are clean
And fit to be seen,
She'll dress like a lady,
And dance on the green (p. 251).

In analyzing Ralph's eventual plight of being politically disgraced, Vivek Dhreshwar seems to be contesting that Ralph fails here "...to take up the challenge of self-fashioning" which would involve "reconceptualizing and renegotiating his relationship to the island" (1989, p. 80). Till the end therefore, Ralph remains a sensitive expatriate who criticizes the pitfalls of colonial mimicry and yet sceptically accepts that he is largely a product of a specific socio-economic formation.

The Mystic Masseur while providing us with a scathing condemnation of Ganesh's chicaneries also reiterates such existential crisis and the anguished perception of Ganesh's amorphous identity. These have been neatly summed up in the Governor's Dinner party for the newly elected members of the Legislative Council. Even Ganesh, the greatest bluffer in Naipaul's fiction, is forced to come up against situations to which he must succumb. This scene permeated with elements of black humour has been virulently censored for its direct denunciation of West Indian table manners, particularly, in the confrontation between the uncouth Creole members and the hyper-sophisticated Governor's wife. For the newly elected politician that Ganesh is, such introduction to Western formalities, constitutes his first cultural shock and "only superficially of table manners" (White, 1975, p. 66). According to R.H. Lee, the famous dinner scene contains "double-edged satire" which assigns "...the right balance of irony to the ignorance of the members and the absurdity of the colonial dining ritual" (1979, p. 69-70). The M.L.C.'s are presented as frivolous mimics of imperfectly understood elites. Yet Naipaul's satire does not spare the condescension behind the hostess's presiding over an occasion unfamiliar to everyone except herself: "[t]he Governor's lady moved with assurance and determination among the members and their wives. *The more disconcerting the man or woman, the more she was interested, the more she was charming*" (p.195) (my emphasis).

Naipaul observes the hollowness of this empty ritual through the labelling of characters in terms of clothes and animal images in such remarks as "the men looked like penguins" (p.194). Such blatant revelation of confusion of values extends equally to Ganesh who gets unnecessarily fussy about the use of knives and yet displays his misfit self by wearing "*dhoti, koortah and turban*" (p.194). Other guests with their idiosyncratic modes of attire like the blackest Negro Mr. Primrose with "a three-piece blue suit" and racially aggressive about his monocle, "a third in jodhpurs" and a fourth "in short trousers and open shirt" (p. 194), caricature the cultural hybridity that the neocolonial societies will continually be subjected to.

The narrator's impish remark illustrates it: "[t]he meal was torture to Ganesh. He felt alien and uncomfortable. He grew sulkier and sulkier and refused all the courses. He felt as if he were a boy again, going to the Queen's Royal College for the first time" (p. 197) (my emphasis). Although one can accept this as farce intended, it encourages other interpretations as well. Some intriguing questions naturally continue to puzzle us, such as - do the M.L.C.'s have the necessary exposure to behave otherwise, particularly when the natural self has been stifled to make place for a borrowed culture? In fact, the reality that lies embedded in the surface discomfiture of the characters is the failure of the British colonial rule to provide a suitable role model for the transition to democracy. The dinner episode thus metaphorically foregrounds the reluctance of the masters, both in politics and at mealtime, to offer concessions or guidance to the habitually dependent society it has manufactured.

Ganesh being situated on the cultural threshold of the Western world naturally yearns for transportation from the margin to the metropolitan centre of London. He eventually transforms himself so thoroughly from the West Indian Ganesh Ramsaymuir to G. Ramsay Muir M.B.E that he becomes: "...a complete colonial even more philistine than the white" (Naipaul, 1969, p. 89). Ganesh's refusal to acknowledge the narrator in London bears testimony to the veracity of the statement. The satiric underpinning is unmistakably clear as we see that Naipaul employs almost Swiftian irony to belittle Ganesh's assumption of a new national identity. It is reminiscent of John Clark's satiric persona, whose "enormous bustle, stir and sterile achievement" (1946, p. 92) have been categorically inscribed: "[a]s the passengers got off I looked among them for someone *with a nigrescent face. It was easy to spot him, impeccably dressed, coming out of a first-class carriage*" (Naipaul, 1957, p. Epilogue) (my emphasis). When the narrator warmly greets Ganesh with a sense of we-feeling as 'Pundit Ganesh Ramsaymuir', the island politician exhibits his typical suppression of all sense of loyalty to the Caribbean past in a desire to enact a particular role whose significance he has not yet grasped.

In *The Wretched of the Earth* Fanon comments on this precarious position of the alien elite of Third World countries:

[i]n under developed countries, we have seen that no true bourgeoisie exists, there is only a sort of little greedy caste, avid and voracious ...only too glad to accept the dividends that the former colonial power hands out to it...It remembers what it has read in European textbook and imperceptibly becomes not even the replica of Europe, but its caricature (1990, p. 141).

Bruce King also examines Naipaul's subtle use of grotesque caricature to embody this spectacle of complete amnesia of one's ethnic bearings. Naipaul foregrounds as King opines, "...how individuals sought to assert themselves in changing circumstances and how the limitations of their environment produced frustrations and self-defeating behaviour" (1998, p. 219). Ganesh's snobbish gesture of non-recognition affords us a cynical representation of the marginalized subaltern's relation to his colonial society and his awkward yearning for the centre which necessarily requires a negation of the self. It is Naipaul's conviction that characters like Ganesh, Ralph and others being at the receiving end of global politics would invariably be motivated towards a zealous appropriation of standards of pseudo-whiteness.

6.

Naipaul's novels like *The Mimic Men* and *The Mystic Masseur* are therefore scathing explorations of the multiple social fragmentations and cultural dichotomies culminating in a frenzied quest for both western fetishes as well as for the nostalgia of a circumscribed ethnic identity. Even while rendering the comedy of their marginal existence, they evoke an unremitting despair since to the fractured colonized subject 'hybridity' or 'creolisation' is not offered as a comfortable outcome of colonial dislocation. It is but a serious impediment to know oneself. Indeed, the metaphysics of presence/permanence in which "...the self is regarded as whole, stable and rational" (Mishra, 1995, p. 24) has been problematized in Ralph's narration of homelessness. The mimic man becomes an embodiment of polyvalent identity. Fanon too has extensively deliberated on this psychic damage associated with a mottled cultural existence: "[t]he black Antillean is the slave of this cultural imposition. After having been the slave of the white man, *he enslaves himself*. ...to come back to psychopathology, let us say that [the black man] lives an ambiguity that is extraordinarily neurotic" (1967, p. 192). The only viable strategy to counter this corrosive sense of identity crisis and cultural alienation is through an unabashed proclamation of the finality of his displacement. Ralph's writing of his autobiography thus turns out to be an epiphanic act of defining the self. It is a retrieval of a blighted individual from the shadows of marginalization, alienation and external disorder to that of a personal harmony.

Carole Davies further identifies this urge in her book *Black Women, Writing and Identity*: “[m]igration creates the desire for home, which in turn produces the rewriting of home. Home can only have meaning once one experiences a level of displacement from it” (1994, p. 113). Here the fictional trope of ‘exile’ is fused to a quintessentially modern notion of transcendental homelessness. For the Caribbean subject this much needed profound consciousness becomes an assertion of one’s syncretistic identity, no longer governed by the politics of belonging and not-belonging.

Notes

¹The ‘Girmitiya’ ideology may be comprehended as a form of home-building and place-making. Home-building is the building of a feeling of being at home based on four ‘affective building blocks’: ‘security, familiarity, community and a sense of possibility. Similarly, ‘place-making’ involves three strategies of naming, rituals and institutions so that the ‘mythologized world’ of the girmitiya appears in the form of fossilized memories of the old places.

² The East Indian community of Trinidad is characterized by a close family structure and a sharp hierarchical division compounded by the absence of social mobility. However, the dissolution of feudalism also saw the gradual dissolution of these relations. The indentured Indian who was so long “...structurally Indian rather than West Indian” (Klass, 1961, p. 3) began to be influenced by individualism, competitiveness, social mobility and an intensification of wage labour that capitalism nurtured. In a 2004 interview given to Patrick French, Selby Wooding, who was at the Queen’s Royal College a few years senior to Naipaul, also articulated the same opinion that the few lucky students from the tropics were expected to behave like English schoolboys as a pre-requisite of being socially integrated. He therefore endorses that “one ...[has] to wear the mask of the master in order to advance” (2008, p. 42).

³ An exact parallel of this brutal slaughter has been recorded by Patrick French in his biography of Naipaul. The manner in which Naipaul’s father was cajoled by his family members to escape social ostracism by sacrificing a goat is equally weird. Seepersad’s unbiased journalistic account of the ‘superstitious practices’ of rural Indians in Trinidad “...who interpreted outbreaks of smallpox and rabies as an unmistakable sign of the wrath of *Kali*” (French, 2008, p. 20) and purchased a goat to propitiate the deity sound almost sacrilegious. The barbaric attitude of the religious fanatics to punish him for vilifying such long established beliefs soon manifests itself as French recounts: “[u]nder intense pressure from his wife and her extended family, he agreed to execute a goat. The rationalist, the reformer, the Arya Samajist,...the modern man, the scorned of ju-ju, succumbed to a Hindu tradition linked to sacrifice that even in India was associated with the more extreme Tantric practitioners” (2008, p. 22).

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