

Identity Crisis in V.S.Naipaul's a House for Mr.Biswas and the Mimic Men



S.Shunmugapriya, M.Thamizhmani,
M.Phil. Student^{#1}, Research supervisor^{#2}
Department of English
PRIST University, Madurai Campus, India

ABSTRACT- Literature is one of the fine arts that employs “language” as a medium of expression. It is an essentially an expression of human feelings , emotions, joys and sufferings. In India there are different languages and common literatures. Among them common wealth literature plays an important role. One of the best-known writers in English today is Vidyadhar Suraj Prasad Naipaul, himself a product of post-imperialist society.V.S.Naipaul, one of the greatest Caribbean writer's in English, has been a great novelist and travel-writer. He wrote many splendid and excellent novels and collections of essays. Fragmentation, alienation, and exile are common terms associated with postcolonial literature. Identity crisis is a period or episode of psychological distress, often occurring in adolescence but sometimes in adulthood, when a person seeks a clearer sense of self and an acceptable role in society. It is further personal psychological conflict especially in adolescence that involves confusion about one's social role and often a sense of loss of continuously to one's personally. A House for Mr.Biswas tellsthe story of its protagonist. Mr.Biswas From birth to death, each section dealing with different phases of Mr.Biswas life. Here Naipaul has a more subjective approach towards the problem ofidentity crisis than the objective one a reader finds in his travelogues, especially in India. *The Mimic Men* is a beautiful work which deals with the theme of isolation, frustration and negation in a colonized society – a society that turns cruel and callous to the aspiration of the protagonist, Ralph Singh. The novel is presented to us in the form of a fictional autobiography. In the novel, Ralph Singh, a political exile in London, mediates on the fragments which form his Life; there is much in his wrecked life to reckon with: an uneasy childhood a painful youth, a broken marriage and an abortive political career. Both the novel deals with the identity crisis of the protagonist.

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature is one of the fine arts that employs “language” as a medium of expression. It is an essentially an expression of human feelings , emotions,

joys and sufferings. Good literature is never outdated and knows no bounds of place and time. It is permanent. It is also universal, in the sense that it appeals to readers across national or linguistic boundaries. Language or culture maybe different but human sentiments remain essentially the same in all literatures of world.

In India there are different languages and common literatures. Among them common wealth literature plays an important role. c Common wealth literature includes literatures of such varied countries and their cultures as India, Africa, West Indies, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. All of them share a common heritage, that is colonialism. The emergence of writers from these countries marks a transition not only in political terms but also in cultural terms.

The term ‘common wealth’ has a long history. It was first used by Oliver Cromwell, after establishing the republican government in England, in 1649.Literally it implied common good, a body politic in which power rests with the people. Literature written in English by the writers of Africa, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, India, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Nigeria, Singapore, Sri lanka and the West indies can be considered as the common wealth literature. Ideas, beliefs, notions, prejudices, presuppositions mould man's behaviour, sometimes nations of vast differences in flora and fauna and in climate have shown amazing similarity in outlook, temperament or attitude. Though diversity, in the sense composed of black, brown and white, rich and poor, democracies and dictatorships, aligned and non-aligned, the great similarities among the common wealth countries overwhelm the diversity in the association. These similarities encompass similar background, working methods and institutional traditions in several important fields of operation, and the use of English language.

The homogeneity of British cultural dominance in the empire gave way to English-speaking national culture. The characteristics, problems, themes, and context of each literature have an applicability to the writing of other nations,

beginning with the dissolution of the British empire, the emergence of common wealth literature is primarily a twentieth century phenomenon. The growth of English began at almost the same time, followed similar courses of evolution and reflected somewhat similar human experience.

The *Mimic Men* is a beautiful work which deals with the theme of isolation, frustration and negation in a colonized society – a society that turns cruel and callous to the aspiration of the protagonist, Ralph Singh. The novel is presented to us in the form of a fictional autobiography. In the novel, Ralph Singh, a political exile in London, mediates on the fragments which form his Life; there is much in his wrecked life to reckon with: an uneasy childhood a painful youth, a broken marriage and an abortive political career.

Naipaul's sixth Novel *The Mimic Men* (1967) marks as significant phase in his fictional career. The novel gives the clearest expression to the various philosophies that are embodied in Naipaul's novels, namely the escape of the Third world into fantasy on being poverty –sticking and isolated on the environs of power and the sprouting up of various political and religious movements that offer a sense of empty excitement ending up in disorder, the novel, according to N.Ramadevi, talks about.

“ Politics dominated by appeals to race and colour, the absence of real power, myths, culture or competence which have resulted in a tendency to mimic, and a peeling of homelessness and Identity crisis”.(1996:69)

The novel also provided a reply to criticism that charges Naipaul with being an exponent of the metropolitan values and ideologies. In concern with the colonial individual's life of rootlessness depicted in the novel and the homelessness that Naipaul experience in his life, landeg white aptly remarks.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A House for Mr. Biswas is an individual's fight for a place in the world and his struggle to claim his authentic selfhood which is fulfilled (in a way) with the owning of a house at the end of the novel. The “House” is the heart and soul of the novel and Naipaul is always ready with one reference or the other hinting at the idea of the house. This novel has been declared an epic novel or tragic-comedy defining the dilemma of all Indian immigrants, the exile's desire to claim a portion of land or strike roots. Gordon Rohlehr searches universal implications in the struggle of Mr. Biswas, the protagonist of this novel:

Biswas is everyman, wavering between identity and nonentity, and claiming his acquaintance with the rest of them... If Biswas represents all the things, I feel he does, I tis because he is fully presented as a person whose very quirk and idiosyncrasy we know, in a world whose every sight, sound and smell is recorded with fidelity and precision.(Rohlehr 137-38)

Hall (1996) views the question of identity under the colonial pressures. There is always something wrong with the identities of such people who seem to be oscillating between the past and present, attraction and revulsion:

Identities are constructed within representation: they arise from the narrativization of the self, but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectiveness, even if the belongingness, the v suturing into the story through which identities arise is, partly, in the imaginary ... and therefore, always, partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within a fantasmatic field. (p.4)

In such a narration that is used for self-definition categorized by Hall earlier, the aspects of real and unreal often intertwine with each other. The story that Naipaul records can be described as tracing Ralph Singh's transition from innocence to experience and his passage from external disorder to personal harmony. K.I. Madhusudana Rao, an eminent critic says, “The writing of his story becomes the very means to endure the terror, shipwreck, abandonment and loneliness of his situation” (126). By analyzing and interpreting his own experience he hopes to find some order within the chaos of the present and the uncertainty of the future in the contemporary colonial society.

Naipaul hands over the challenge to Mr. Biswas to claim his identity in the form of building a house: a spatial, material and psychological concept for defining one's own self. Stuart Hall highlights:

To say that the individual is culturally constructed has become a truism. We are accustomed to hearing that the person in Bali or among the Hopi or in medieval society is different – with different experiences of time, space, kinship, bodily identity from the individual in bourgeois Europe or in modern America. We assume, almost without question, that a self belongs to a specific cultural world as much as it speaks a native language: one self, one culture, one language. (Hall 92)

Boehmer (2005) believes that Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* can be more appropriately characterized as post-colonial in its attempt to show the difficult situations resulting. Since his arrival in Britain all his effort has been

to stay as far as possible from the West Indies. His works, however, are rarely set in Britain. Most of his novels and travel writings are dedicated to reducing divisions of the cultural splits and the double standards of a colonized nation.

According to Fanon (1963), Naipaul is in a state of evolution and confusion: If we wanted to trace in the works of native writers the different phases which characterize this evolution we would find spread out before us a panorama on three levels.

In the first phase, the native intellectual gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power. His writings correspond point by point with those of his opposite numbers in the mother country. His inspiration is European ... In the second phase we find the native is disturbed; he decides to remember what he is ... Past happenings will be brought up out of the depths of his memory; old legends will be reinterpreted in the light of borrowed aestheticism ... Finally in the third phase ... thenative, after having tried to lose himself in the people and with the people, will on the contrary shake the people ... returns himself into an awakener of the people. (p.178-179)

In *The Mimic Men*, readers can definitely realize these three phases, mainly in the three-part division that Naipaul had set his novel to. Singh, in the first part was trying to identify himself completely with the British culture and learn about the life system of the colonizers. However, in the second part he gets back to his childhood and origins, the past that needs clarification to understand the present happenings and how it is related to the way things go. Then, readers find Singh undergo a change in the third part to reach new decisive resolutions that make him a new man. No doubt such evolution in Singh's character follows the dialectical process; thesis, antithesis and synthesis.

III. IDENTITY CRISIS

The Mimic Men is a beautiful work which deals with the theme of isolation, frustration and negation in a colonized society – a society that turns cruel and callous to the aspiration of the protagonist, Ralph Singh. The novel is presented to us in the form of a fictional autobiography. In the novel, Ralph Singh, a political exile in London, mediates on the fragments which form his life; there is much in his wrecked life to reckon with: an uneasy childhood a painful youth, a broken marriage and an abortive political career.

V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a beautiful work which deals with the theme of isolation, frustration and negation in a colonized society - a society

that turns cruel and callous to the protagonist. It tells the story of its protagonist, Mr. Biswas from birth to death, each section dealing with different phases of Mr. Biswas's life. The novel also deals with the clash of cultures between the old and the new in a multi-racial society; a quest for self in a conservative framework.

The Mimic Men opens with Ralph Singh's residing in a hostel room in London for the past eighteen months as an exile and homeless. He had come there as a failed politician. He opened his memory blank and put his thoughts and experiences in his book. Ralph Singh memoirs come to us in three parts and surprisingly the author has kept the name of the protagonist a secret until the beginning of the second part. In the first part Singh records his disillusion with London, his marriage with Sandra, an English girl, their return to Isabella followed by Singh's rise in business and finally the breakdown of his marriage. In the second part, Singh reverts back to his childhood, while in the final section of the novel he gives an account of his political career.

V.S. Naipaul's magnum opus, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, can rightly be called a work of art that deals with the problems of isolation, frustration and negation of an individual. *A House for Mr. Biswas* tells the story of its protagonist, Mr. Biswas from birth to death, each section dealing with different phases of Mr. Biswas's life. Here, Naipaul has a more subjective approach towards the problems of identity crisis than the objective one a reader finds in his travelogues, especially on India.

A House for Mr. Biswas traces the story of a man's struggle to claim his position in a confined and restricted environment. Although the novel primarily focuses on the community of Hindus from India, this society is seen as apart of the larger society of a colonial Caribbean island. The constant struggle to claim a portion of the earth in a colonial setting as a pertinent question linked with the question of survival.

Biswas's dying accommodated at the age of forty-six is shown as the big question in the novel. His individual quest for selfhood identity and coherence in his life terminates with the owning of a house of his own. Though the multiple defects and drawbacks of the house lessen his charm, he is excited because he has now found some meaning in his existence in the world. He exclaims: "How terrible it would have been ... to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated." (54)

The darkness, decay, death, horror and disasters recurrent in Biswas's life represent his nothingness and also the nothingness of his surroundings. The unsettled life of an expatriate poses a serious challenge before them like Biswas. In the epilogue, Naipaul shows the depth of this inherent darkness: "This was a darkness that

seemed to come from within, as though the skin was murky but transparent film and the flesh below it had been bruised and become diseased and its corruption was rising” (A House for Mr. Biswas 587-88).

A House for Mr. Biswas depicts the making of an individual's and family's cultural and social identity. Biswas' story is about his alienation, about belonging to a particular society yet living in 'exile' from it in his unrealized ambitions. Mohun Biswas is a Trinidadian Indian who dies at the age of forty-six in a house in Port of Spain where he has been living with his wife and four children. He was born in a country village, surrounded by ill omens. His birth is considered inauspicious as he is born 'in the wrong way' and with an extra finger. A pundit prophesies that the newly born Biswas will be a lecher and a spendthrift. Possibly he will 'eat up his mother and father.' And a few years later, his family is scattered after his father's death. His sister is sent to live with a wealthy aunt and uncle, Tara and Ajodha, while Biswas, his mother, and two older brothers go to live with other relatives.

Mr. Biswas is withdrawn prematurely from school and apprenticed to a pundit, but is cast out on bad terms. Ajodha then puts him in the care of his alcoholic and abusive brother Bhandat which also comes to a bad result. Finally, Mr. Biswas now becoming a young man decides to set out to make his own fortune. At school he discovers a talent for lettering, and later becomes a sign writer. Initially, however, he is sent by his aunt Tara to the household of a pundit to learn to be a Hindu priest; but he leaves in disgrace after eight months and works in a rum shop run by Tara's drunken brother-in-law. After being wrongfully accused of stealing he joins a former school friend in the sign-writing business, in the course of which he goes to Hanuman House, the home of the Tulsis. He is then trapped into promising to marry Shama, the sixteen-year-old daughter of Mrs. Tulsi, as he is of the right Hindu caste. No dowry is offered and he is expected to join the family work force by working on the land with the other husbands. He immediately rebels, but without any money or position of his own he finds himself dependent on the Tulsi household from then until shortly before his death.

After successfully disrupting the smooth running of the house, Mr. Biswas is sent to a small rural village. The Chase, to act as manager of a Tulsi food shop. During the six years he spends there with his growing family, the shop continually loses money, and his family spends an increasing amount of time at Hanuman House. Finally he joins them there, and is then sent to Green Vale to act as overseer for Mrs. Tulsi's powerful brother-in-law. He is wholly unsuited to such work and feels persecuted by the labourers under him. He suffers a mental breakdown and has to return to Hanuman House to convalesce after a

storm destroys the ram shackle house he has built. Forced to earn his living again, he leaves the Tulsis and goes to stay with his sister and her husband in Port of Spain. He finds work as a journalist on the Sentinel newspaper, and this leads to reconciliation with the Tulsis. He goes to live with his family at Mrs. Tulsi's house in the city which she shares with her younger son, Owad, until he is sent abroad to study medicine.

Mr. Biswas takes a growing interest in the education of his son Anand and a close relationship develops between them. Meanwhile the Tulsis move to an estate at Shorthills and Mr. Biswas is persuaded to join them. The Tulsi family begins to disintegrate under new social and economic pressures and Mr. Biswas leaves after the house he builds there is destroyed by a fire. He returns to Mrs. Tulsi's crowded house in the city and remains there until he moves to his own house in Sikkim Street after a fierce quarrel with Mrs. Tulsi and Owad. His job at the Sentinel has changed to that of social investigator of 'Deserving Destitutes' which leads to a new lease of life when he is given a government post in a Social Welfare Department. His hopes, however, increasingly centre on Anand, who wins an exhibition to the prestigious Queen's College in the city.

But the final responsibility for order lies with the individual and not with the society. The individual must face his own reality instead of escaping and only failure comes when “moving out of ourselves, we look for extension of ourselves” (17). With this realization, Ralph Singh feels impelled to create for himself a self-crisis in order to overcome his fear of life, to make sense of his exile.

The novel charts a journey of self – discovery in which the crippling effects of colonization on the colonized are recognized. Ralph concludes. “it is only during the climb back up that we can see how far, for all the continuing consciousness of wholeness and sanity, we had become distorted” (26).¹

IV. LANGUAGE

A writer's style may be regarded as an individual and creative utilization of the resources of language, which his period, his chosen dialect, his genre, and his purpose within it offer him. To understand and to make explicit his linguistic creativity, to appreciate in full the alchemy by which he transmutes the base metal of everyday language into the gold of art, it is first necessary to recognise and where possible to specify the ranges of language within which he is working, and upon which he is able to draw. (Spencer)

When an artist chooses a language as the medium of expression, he has to make it an effective means to convey what he intends to communicate. The idiom that they employ for their West-Indian and Indian themes and experiences is innovative and experimental. It manifests the strength and newness of the twice-born English language in West Indies and in India.

A novelist to tell what happens to people and what they do in the story uses the point of view of narration. The first device, as Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* relates, is the use of different kinds of characters (75). It is in this connection, he divides characters into flat and round. Plot, characterization and narrative point of view are the three important aspects to which they have paid great attention. Naipaul's opinion that the nature of the theme and subject matter determines whether the work attempted would be a novel or a short story.

Naipaul's novels are remarkable for his personal outlook and experience. In his early novels, he is indebted to Dickens though he later shows his disapproval of Dickens in many ways. It was from Dickens, he learnt the art of exaggeration and caricature. Later, he learnt from Conrad the art of writing about a world. However, Naipaul is not in favour of documentary novel. Naipaul demands a comprehensive personal illumination. V.S. Naipaul is, beyond doubt, a great master of fiction and literary device, a craftsman of style and imagery. His art consists in reducing complexities to simple images and creating original descriptions that are pregnant with suggestive possibilities. The author tries constantly to understand human condition. He appears to be worried about man's inclination towards lying and self-deception in his works.

Naipaul's achievements outstrip his inadequacies. Few writers match his literary skill. The simplicity, grace and dignity of his prose, the eye for concrete detail, the humour and charm of his early novels, the fine sense of irony, the neatness and clarity of his exposition and above all, his ruthless honesty, all taken together, make him perhaps the most lucid witness of a world in the throes of moral and spiritual uncertainties.

In all his writings Naipaul has focused on individuals attempting to escape fate. For Naipaul, fate belongs to a world of magic, myth and ritual where only the past exists but not history. According to him, it is history that provides a sense of wholeness and belonging to both people and nation. As such his heroes beginning with the boy-narrator of *Miguel Street* up to Willie Chandran of *Half a Life* wade through different phases of life and experiences in search of their non-existent histories. The boy-narrator in *Street* is only too. The

Swedish Academy praised Naipaul's distinct style in which the customary distinction between fiction and non-fiction are of subordinate importance.

Yashoda Bhat too interprets the metaphor of the 'house'. "The symbolism of the house is worked out artistically. The house stands for a rootless man's longing for a home. The expatriate Hindu's love for a home is personified in Biswas's longing for home; it is also the Third World rootlessness in general longing for home and also a universal longing for an identity and a home of one's own. The home also stands for one's identity for which every rootless person strives". (58)

The very word house is taken as a symbol, which stands for stability and permanence. From the point of view of technique, the novel seems to be a continuation of Naipaul's standard method of presenting realistic details of his protagonist's struggles and his hopes and despairs.

The subject of migration and the questions regarding identity, rootlessness, cultural difference assimilation, unconquerable static and futility, awareness about the futile existence and a constant search of locating an authentic being are dealt within Naipaul's novels belonging to the later period of his life. V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* portrays the states of psychic unease that plays out in the interior monologue of the narrator/protagonist, Ralph Kripal Singh. Singh is a retired West Indian colonial politician, who writes his memoirs while living in self-imposed exile in a private London hotel.

The Mimic Men, however, is more than a mere elaboration of Naipaul's previous West Indian novels. It is a profound re-enactment of the growth and nature of the East Indian, West Indian psyche on its reaction to the three cultures, Indian, Creole and English, which influence it. *The Mimic Men* takes the form of a memoir written by Ralph Singh, formerly a businessman and politician on the fictional Caribbean island of Isabella, who has become an exiled from his home island as the result of political turmoil, and so, the novel is structured through Singh's retrospective consciousness.

IV. SUMMATION

V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a beautiful work which deals with the theme of isolation, frustration and negation in a colonized society - a society that turns cruel and callous to the protagonist. It tells the story of its protagonist, Mr. Biswas from birth to death, each section dealing with different phases of Mr. Biswas's life. The novel also deals with the clash of

cultures between the old and the new in a multi-racial society; a quest for self in a conservative framework.

V. S. Naipaul's novel *The Mimic Men* is the fictional memoir of the protagonist Ralph Singh. Ralph admits himself that his feelings, his actions, his life fit with 'patterns.' Ralph's sense of alienation, his experiences as a colonial politician, his failure in marriage, his struggle with a sense of personal identity, and his inability to connect with others are linked as various expressions of Ralph's sense of loss and disconnectedness. These experiences and reactions also fit into general patterns of colonized persons acting within 'typical' colonial situations.

The Mimic Men proffers a view of the postcolonial subject struggling to find a sense of locality and subjectivity within a shifting political epoch. Ralph Singh writes in order to examine the way in which his subjectivity has been constituted by the colonial experience and the ramifications of that in a period of postcolonial independence. Identity crisis is a period or episode of psychological distress, often occurring in adolescence but sometimes in adulthood, when a person seeks a clearer sense of self and an acceptable role in society. It is further personal psychological conflict especially in adolescence that involves confusion about one's social role and often a sense of loss of continuity to one's personality.

The major themes that emerge from a reading of his novels are related to the problems of the colonized people: their sense of alienation from the landscapes, their identity crisis, the paradox of freedom and the problem of neocolonialism in the ex-colonies. The people who can no longer identify with a cultural heritage lose the assurance and integrity which the indwelling racial ancestor provides. In addition, the harsh conditions of colonialism have left the West Indian crippled under the burden of poverty and ignorance. Because psychological and physical conditions correspond so closely, the unhoused, poverty-stricken West Indian is so often culturally and spiritually dispossessed as well. His only alternative is to strive after the culture of his ex-colonial masters even though he is unable to identify with their traditions and values.

The story of Ralph's life becomes a powerful and gripping expression of the restlessness and deep disorder he has inherited from history. It is a much more revealing and vivid account of the consequences of empire building and exploitation than any chronological documentation of events can give. It shows, through a single member, how the physical and cultural dislocation of a people can lead to cultural, psychological and actual rootlessness. In *The Mimic*

Men, Singh succeeds in the most dramatic and elaborated fashion in telling the East Indian, West Indian tale of rootlessness and fragmentation which Naipaul sought to give expression to in each of his previous West Indian novels. This success, however, makes him no less a permanent victim than the other protagonists.

Emotional withdrawal had become a habitual way to deal with problems on his early life. Ralph Singh remains an exile not only in Isabella but also in England. He writes later that he feared the reality around him, it was the fear of the man who feels veils coming down one by one, muffling his deepest responses, and panics at not being able to tear down unreality about him to get at the hard, the concrete, where everything becomes simple and ordinary and easy to seize.

Thus Naipaul's Ralph Singh in *The Mimic Men* does not remain only Ralph of the third world. This West Indian hero becomes universal also. The social analysis that Ralph has done has universal implications. Ralph becomes 'an archetypal modern man' who has become cynical and self-destructive because of his sensitiveness. He may be called the prototype of the colonial man.