

# Cultural Identity, Colonial Discourse and Ambivalence: Conundrum of Estrangement and Expulsion in V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*

Nawal Kashif \*, Muhammad Afzal Faheem \*,

\* Graduating in English Literature at the Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan.

\*\* Lecturer at Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan.

**Abstract-** The paper deploys the theoretical tools of cultural identity, colonial discourse, and ambivalence to scrutinize the existential impasse surfaced through the inner discordance of Ralph Singh in V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*. The protagonist configures cultural identity as an essence, whose discovery is only a matter of unearthing what colonial experience has buried, and overlaid with its subjectifying and appropriating discourse. The system of interpellation, a reform of manners — Master's discourse, in its visualization of power, normalises the fixation of colonial subjects as metonymies of presence, evoking the desire for a reformed, recognizable other through colonial mimicry. Shedding the persona of other constructed under regularization and conformity of imperialist discourse, Ralph takes up a veneer of Mimic Man. The excess or slippage produced by the ambivalent mimicry of the Masters — at the cost of relinquishing his cultural roots — dismantles his urge for neutralization, propelling him into an in-betweenness. His botched endeavour of negotiating between the disparate socio-cultural milieus and reformation of identity ensnares him in the labyrinthine structure of liminality. Capitulating to his repudiation of imaginary Indian ancestry, Caribbean indigenous culture, and assimilation into the three-dimensional solid city of London, he terminates all emotional baggage with landscapes and communities only to find seclusion in an isolated suburban hotel.

**KEYWORDS:** Cultural Identity, Colonial Discourse, Ambivalence

## INTRODUCTION

V.S. Naipaul is an acclaimed and intellectual Trinidadian-British writer known for his insightful explorations of postcolonial narratives, cultural hybridity, and incisive scrutiny of identity, and displacement. Naipaul's work is marked by a rich tapestry of hybridized cultural negotiations, autobiographical elements, and a multifaceted milieu. His work reflects upon the sufferings of the colonized, their struggle with enduring colonial legacy and cultural dislocation and presents a more nuanced critique of colonial societies instead of one-directional simplistic portrayals. His works delve into the social and psychological intricacies of post-colonial societies and the emergence and sustenance of political structures in the wake of colonial rule. Naipaul has also been criticized for his Imperial bias as "his authorial genius implicates into comprador intellectuality" (Faheem and Ishaque

596) and a "furious love-hate ambivalence characterizes his relationship to his public [native Trinidadians]" (Angrosino 1) who cannot "forgive him for the vehemence of his vow to *escape* Trinidad" (1). His perpetuation of stereotypical confinement to the post-colonial societies as inherently flawed and chaotic and undermining their achievements reflect his Eurocentric inclination. Naipaul's wide array of novels explores the diasporic presence, especially in the Caribbean, Africa, and the Indian subcontinent. Renowned ones among them are *A Bend in the River*, *A House for Mr. Biswas* and *The Mimic Men*. The dissection of the latter's "Caribbean hero" incriminates Naipaul of his psychological dilemma and of "being an elitist escapist" as "the colonial [hero] can do better than *mimic* the models of reality and in doing so he makes himself ridiculous and impotent" (Angrosino 7).

*The Mimic Men* is an autobiographical narrative of Ralph Singh; a Trinidadian of Indian descent who in his forties during his exile in a London suburban hotel writes his memoirs to reconstruct or more accurately *re-present* his early life; his missionary schooling in the fictitious Caribbean Islet of Isabella, his higher education in London and then being a "colonial politician as a play-actor" (Bhabha 129). Throughout the narrative, he employs a fragmented non-linear structure with an amalgamation of memories, dreams, and introspective reflections that delve into the profound sense of alienation, disintegration, and socio-psychological ramifications of colonization on his characters and the societies they inhabit. His early life in post-independence Isabella marks his cultural dislocation and inner turmoil to come to terms with his presence on the island as he continuously navigates back to his Indian Heritage of Aryans, "the picturesque Asiatic born for other landscapes" (Naipaul 225) Grappling with his desire to *escape* he pursues his Education in London, whose landscape is perfect and fascinating to him but remains unable to negotiate with the city and its people. "There was no one to link [his] present to [his] past, no one to note [his] consistencies and inconsistencies" in London (19). In his feeling of rapid integration, he marries Sandra; a white woman, who "had the gift of the phrase" and hates her origins; the "commoners" (Naipaul 49). He returns to Isabella, starts and simultaneously fails his political career resulting in his exacerbated struggle to find his individual identity and position in the world, only to find himself in the "position of double exclusion

which is the result of his *double failure*” to come to terms with either: London or Isabella. (Dhareshwar 80).

Singh’s double failure of negotiation emerges from his struggle for reconciliation with his hybridized cultural identity that centres upon the imposition of his “imaginary coherence” with his Indian heritage that was *subject-ed* to enforced marginalization and his “desire to emerge as *authentic* through mimicry” (Bhabha 129). Ralph who is estranged from his ancestral roots grapples to find his true identity, an identity that he dreams of — linked to Aryans and Rajput — and to that essence to which he tries to return. He perceives himself to be an “intruder” on the “shipwrecked” Caribbean island abandoned on the rim of the New World and a misfit in the “solid city [where] life was two-dimensional [London]”, to a community he does not belong to and can only assimilate through his act of mimicry (Naipaul 18). His multifaceted identity mirrors his blended experience of the hybridized milieu of several diasporic presences detached from their fixed origin and their subsequent struggle to assimilate into the Imperialist setup of the British Colony. His dual experience of two diverging socio-cultural landscapes: progressive London and the regressive Caribbean Island, elucidates the formation of the crucible which simmers Ralph’s identity crises. This crisis underlying the intricate web of affiliations highlights Ralph’s preconceived notion of belongingness to “an imagined community” and failure to acknowledge identity as an ever-evolving *positioning* rather than “an already accomplished fact” (Hall 222). As Stuart Hall defines it, “Cultural identity, in the second sense, is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past” that is not an already established and accomplished fact (225).

The inability to negotiate between the binary opposition of identity as “past/present” is a quintessential representation of the apparatuses of colonial power and stereotypical conformation to the norm implied by the colonial discourse on the subjects as “the discourse of the post-Enlightenment English colonialism often speaks in a tongue that forked, not false” (Bhabha 126). The subjectification of the stereotypical other can be traced down from the colonial ethos of the protagonist where in the private hemisphere of his school, he finds himself straggling the chasm between his longing for Aryan chieftainship and an appropriated version of reality in the guise of Western education. The intricacies of double vision or impaired vision can be traced down from Ralph’s first memory of school whilst writing his autobiographical work, the memory of presenting an apple to his colonial teacher, denying the fact that Isabella has the production of oranges instead of apples. This willing fallacy mirrors the indelible marks of colonization on his consciousness fostering an exposition constructed “from the perspective of a subject whose identity is produced by a kind of asymmetric power implied in the substitution of an *apple* for the *orange* — the metropolitan object/practice for the colonial one” (Dhareshwar 75). The fixating gaze, the gaze of otherness that has the “power to make us see and experience ourselves as *Others*” (Hall 225) stems from the civilizing mission of the colonizer; “interpellation — a reform of manners” and appropriates the inappropriate objects by providing the colonised with “a sense of personal identity” that translates itself into mimicry; the interditory colonial desire (Bhabha 127).

Ralph’s act of mimicry is both a reconciliation with his own self to counteract his victimization as a colonial subject and his capitulation to colonial discourse. The dichotomy of his identity serves as a vessel of deep-seated ambivalence as he assimilates into the macrocosm of colonial lifestyle, shedding his own cultural markers in the process while looking for his authentic cultural identity. As Bhabha delineates, “Mimicry rearticulates presence in terms of its *otherness*, that which it disavows” (132). He paradoxically models the customs, values, and behaviors of the colonizer during his stay in England and reconstructs and repositions the residues of colonial subjugation during his political career in Isabella as “the ambivalence of colonial authority repeatedly turns from *mimicry* — a difference that is almost nothing but not quite to *menace* — a difference that is almost total but not quite” (132). Ralph’s ambivalence is intertwined with his identity crises and mimicry, which also serves as a resistance rather than a unidirectional acceptance of colonial authority and stereotypical representations of partial presence. The metonymy of presence — the picturesque Asiatic; intruder between master and slave, or the character of a dandy; the extravagant colonial — paves the way for his fiasco to negotiate his true sense of self and leads him to escape reality. “Like any true colonial. He cannot fit in the *great world* outside; but like any man of accomplishment, he no longer fits in the colonial society he should have left permanently behind” (Angrosino 6).

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The article, “V.S. Naipaul and The Colonial Image”, traces Naipaul’s translation of vivid introspective reflections of a complex social dilemma into substantial expressions through the portrayal of “psychological and cultural adaptations of the colonial” diasporic presences (Angrosino 10). For Naipaul, the critical discrepancy between the genuine and the speculatively postulated quintessential culture of the freshly incorporated migrant communities of the New World predicts their inherent flaw and incapability to negotiate between reality and fantasy and poignantly exemplify themselves as a victim to the Imperial power devoid of any cultural anchorage. “Once they stop fantasizing that they *really* belong elsewhere, and begin to come to grips with what they [colonizers] have done ..., they will come to an acceptance of their own unique worth and position in the world” (9). The colonial, entrapped amidst the colonizer’s dominant culture continuously formulates imaginary ties with his ancient tradition and paradoxically seeps deeper into the colonizer’s framework of unattainable and irrelevant standards through his only available option, mimicry. The mimicry thus redefines his pathway through an erroneous navigation to a state of disillusionment, displacement, and dislocation. Naipaul’s Caribbean Hero in *The Mimic Men* also finds himself stuck in limbo following his abandoned search for self and reality leading to the “[abolishment of] landscapes from [his] mind” (Naipaul 30) Elucidating his oscillatory journey between past and present, he confesses the bipartite expedition made between “two landscapes of sea [reality] and snow [fantasy]” (31).

The article, “Landscapes of Sea and Snow: V.S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*” through its recurrent motifs of Sea and Snow elucidates Ralph’s compelling sense of alienation towards the sea and his speculation of snow as his element. Sea mirrors the cultural

and psychological entanglement faced by Ralph Singh, torn between his Caribbean upbringing and Asian ancestry. He finds himself sinking in the vastness of the Sea that surrounds the Island of Isabella; his birthplace, which paradoxically separates him from his ancestral Aryan roots and obscures “the real substance of his fantasy [the Himalayas]” (Phukan 139). The ocean serves both as a metaphorical divide between him and his Indian heritage and an impediment to reconcile with his true cultural identity for he perceives himself to be an offshoot of the Himalayan martial clan thereby for him “the ocean is an annihilating entity and the landscape of snow [is] full of the promise of civilization and order. (139). His search for purity and order brings him to the multicultural society of London, where his struggle to assimilate into the unfamiliar terrain of the new culture is fraught with difficulty, constantly reminding him to be an outsider, an intruder. The snow and striking weather of London — diametrically opposed to his previous tropical setting of Isabella — are emblematic of authenticity, purity, and fantasy which later becomes a symbol of alienation and disorientation. Grappling with the questions of belongingness and authenticity, adopting a hollow façade of a dandy, he retracts from the active phase of his life — as “part of the injury inflicted on [him] by the too solid three-dimensional city in which [he] could never feel [himself] as anything but spectral, disintegrating, pointless fluid” (Naipaul 53).

The article, “The Artist in Colonial Society: *The Mimic Men* and *The Interpreters*” embodies the complex dynamics of the burdensome colonial legacy and its manifestation of psychological colonization ensnaring the colonial subjects or artists in its grip. Psychological colonial subjugation through the machinery of mimicry, operates independently of the colonizer's presence and perpetuates deep into the mindset of the subject who already finds himself swept away in the turbulent waters of decolonization. Ralph, the artist in *The Mimic Men*, a victim of the inner turmoil of failed self-negotiation, with his “perception of wholeness”, finds it impossible to develop “an aesthetic sensibility in colonial society” that through its psychological tyranny restricts the aspirations of a colonial artist (Macdonald 24). His “divided colonial sensibility” and identity dissonance are further reinforced by his perpetual search for order, leading him to escape the disorder of Isabella to London: a mirage of perfection, order, and civilization. Macdonald puts it this way, “The escape into dreams of perfection, coupled with a profound to acknowledge the Reality of the decayed society ... prevent any true and honest art from emerging” (23-24). Ralph with his internalized colonial despotism, stumbling between wholeness and partiality of his existence, authenticity and self-denial, personal affliction and systematic oppression grapples with the creation of an honest narrative. As an inhabitant of the world still haunted by the shadow of the Empire, “he [only] creates to know what to destroy” (25). The article, “The Figure of Performance in Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*” portrays Ralph’s performance in the meta-theatre of life blurring the line between fiction and reality to showcase his deliberate incorporation of theatricality and self-reflection that permeates the narrative. Wearing interchangeable cultural masks and adopting several personas Ralph's life portrays a rich array of several performative actions staged to navigate through the notion of authenticity and commodification of identity in a post-colonial framework. His role as an artist is elucidated through “the table

[that] becomes a miniature stage on which Singh displays his performing self” (Lindroth 519). The reimagination, reconstruction, and representation of his autobiographical narrative channels through “A second kind of performance analogous to the first ... [as] Singh the student, another by Singh the politician and still a fourth by Singh the lover” (519). Ralph's performance in the theatre of life dissects the complex interplay of his life's dramatical organization structured through external influences of the colonial and post-colonial world and the fluidity of his personal identity. Ralph correlates his diverse theatrical performance with the dramatic simulation of life endorsed by his ancestors, and “fulfil[s] the fourfold division of life prescribed by [his] Aryan ancestors. [He] has been a student, householder and man of affairs, [and] recluse” (Naipaul 274). Denouncing the static structure of Identity as an established phenomenon, the concept of meta-theatre homogenizes with its malleability and posits that identity is performative, dynamic, and profoundly intertwined with its sociocultural circumstances. In Halls’ rumination, “Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (Hall 225).

The article, “Self-Fashioning, Colonial Habitus and Double Exclusion: V.S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*”, portrays how through colonial discourse and psychological confinement — repercussions of colonial legacy — colonizers maintain their authority on the subjects. Colonial remoulding results in the subjects’ cultural entanglement, seclusion from their community, and imbues in them a desire for escape. The stereotypical appropriation of Ralph’s ideation and orientation stems from his missionary schooling in Isabella which conforms him to a “normalized knowledge” and abstract education about the European Empire and civilization, cultural norms, literature, and geography of the West. Colonizer’s appropriated discourse not only instils a discrepancy between standard and divergence but also devalues the indigenous knowledge and distorts one’s recognition of his own community by “subjecting him to a stereotypical knowledge about them” and implants a desire of escape for “the process of dislocating oneself ... from community, [and] the attempt to *disentangle oneself from the camouflage of people* goes hand in hand with the desire for a *fresh start*” (92). Fanon explains the colonizer's vehement tendency to disfigure the present and past of the colonised: “Colonization is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying [their] brain ..., it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it” (Fanon 170). Ralph’s hazy vision of the distorted past — Anyan ancestry turned to post-indentured Indian descent — and an equally perplexed present catering to his existential crisis of being an intruder “leads him to his position of being doubly excluded” (Dhareshwar 98).

### **Cultural Identity, Colonial Discourse and Ambivalence: Conundrum of Estrangement and Expulsion in V.S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men***

#### **Cultural Identity:**

Ralph’s identity woven together by the conglomeration of disparate cultures, navigates through his multifaceted life experiences. Being a descendant of indentured laborers, living “at

the outer edge, the *rim*", of the cosmopolitical sphere, being thrust upon with a colonial education, and experiencing the cultural play between several deracinated presences on the Island of Isabella characterizes his fractured identity (Hall 228). Straddling between multiple worlds, he "think[s] of Isabella as deserted and awaiting discovery" while he yearns for a solid cultural anchorage (Naipaul 158). His disavowal of his present surroundings paves the way for his hazy vision, blurring the line between fantasy and reality. In this psychological disarray, he struggles to discover his true sense of self which to him "is only a matter of unearthing that which the colonial experience [has] buried and overlaid, bringing to light the hidden continuities it suppressed" (Hall 224). His character is emblematic of the dislocation and fragmentariness of the colossally marginalized diasporic experience. He feels like an outsider who is unable to fit in either the hybridised Caribbean culture or the fabricated Anglican milieu created by the colonizers. He disassociates himself from the indigenous populace of Isabella and later in London becomes a misfit to the English society that never truly accepted him because of his ethnicity and fixes him as the inferior other. His exclusion from both of his socio-cultural milieus makes him draw a corollary between his current disorientation and sense of belongingness to an imagined community buried and overlaid by his colonial encounter.

Ralph being a victim of the cultural onslaughts and hybridity of the diasporic milieu seeps deep into the hollowness of identity and makes him theatricalise the character of a "dandy, the extravagant colonial, [who is] indifferent to scholarship" during his stay in London (Naipaul 19). His archetypal construction of a pseudo-identity correlates his baffled sense of self with a survival tactic against the trappings of British colonial culture. His dandyism manifests his innate tendency or inner compulsion to adapt to the English flamboyant mannerisms and penchant for sumptuous and extravagant living. His adherence to the sartorial choices, metropolitan lifestyle, and fastidious attention to details allude to his desire to distance himself from his impoverished and marginalised origin of Isabella regarded by him as "our [diasporic presences with different origins] own little bastard world" (131). The extravagance of his persona is harmonious with the adaptation of a veneer of English refinement and opulence, reflecting the plurality of his identity and struggle to assimilate between the dominant colonial culture. Ralph's dandyish disposition also underscores his cultural expropriation by the colonizers and the aftermath of their enduring legacy that entraps and subjugates the colonised, psychologically. As stated by Hall, "This inner expropriation of cultural identity cripples and deforms. If its silences are not resisted, they produce, ... *Individuals without an anchor*" that can be moulded into any shape and ideology (Hall 226).

Ralph's birthplace, the island of Isabella, encapsulates his inner turmoil and the psychological dissonance he feels being torn between two disparate worlds. This polarity of identity creates a perpetual inner conflict that serves as a microcosm to the broader psycho-social entrapments faced by the inhabitants of a post-colonial world. Ralph's contemplation of Isabella as a primitive and disordered place underscores his inexplicable semblance with it, mirroring the inner disorder and fragmentation that plague him. Elucidating the link to his birthplace, he narrates, "To be born on

an Island like Isabella, an obscure New World transplantation, second-hand and barbarous, was to be born to disorder" (Naipaul 127). The word, "second-hand" illuminates the repositioning of ownership from the indigenous to the colonizers, symbolizing instability, dislocation, and disorder. The emotional and psychological disintegration he feels delves deep into the sense of disorientation where he compares himself to the island and characterizes it as a chaotic conglomeration of different cultural and identity clashes, appearing to him as a residue of colonization. Ralph's perception of Isabella as "deserted and awaiting discovery" mirrors the island's marginalised status and is allegorical to his alienation and detachment from his indigenous roots and Caribbean culture (158). Failed attempt at the reconciliation between his cultural and psychological dilemmas alongside a feeling of contempt toward the island and its dwellers foster his postulations of fraudulence, dishonesty, corruption, and withdrawal. As he narrates, "Now it felt corrupted and corrupting. I wished to make a fresh start [and], to rid myself of those relationships ... which I now felt to be tainting" (142).

Ralph's cultural estrangement from Isabella coheres and reinforces his fanciful relatedness to an imagined community, embellishing his reverie of, "Rajputs and Aryans, stories of knights, horsemen and wanderers" (104). The imaginary link to his past brings about his illusion of chieftaincy lying elsewhere. This illusion is a symbolic manifestation of his failed attempt at the syncretization between conflicting socio-cultural influences that permeate his identity. By becoming a chieftain, he wishes to impose order and agency on his own disintegrated and perplexed frame of mind and transcend the feeling of aimlessness by fabricating a defined purpose for his life. He visualizes the spectacle of horsemen looking for their leader in Central Asian plains, regretting their heedless search for their "true leader ... lies far away, shipwrecked on an Island the like of which [they] cannot visualise" (105). The illusion of chieftaincy serves as an essence, a survival technique against the apparatuses of colonial power and the ambivalence created by cultural syncretism. Such a quest for self-determination and resolution also paradoxically illustrates the malleability of his nature in deliberately constructing a façade of a leader to provide a semblance of order and purpose to his life amidst the intricate tapestry of cultural afflictions and setbacks he faces. Hall provides an antithesis to Ralph's speculations of Identity as "cultural identity is not a fixed essence ... It is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return" (Hall 226).

Ralph's estrangement is not merely circumscribed to the diasporic presences of Isabella but he also sets himself at variance from the diversified group of immigrants settled in London, expediting the disavowal of both of his socio-cultural milieus, Isabella as well as London. Through the scrutinization of immigrants and their behaviours, he peeps into an introspective realization that correlates him to their experience of displacement, psychological incarceration, and historical deprivation of a fixed origin to return to. He elucidates his contempt for hearing about their relationship to their previous homelands and "the pettiness by which they had already been imprisoned. [He] never wanted [their] darknesses, [their] auras, to mingle" with his own (Naipaul 24). His encounter with them ensnares him with the collective experience of cultural

deracination, loss of authentic identity, the intricacies of assimilation, and the poignant fabrication of facades of mimic men as a survival mechanism while settling down in London. Entangled between the dominant colonial culture, they share a mutual feeling of being othered and marginalised, for the colonizers have always tried “to represent a diverse people with a diverse history through a single hegemonic identity”, (Hall 235). This feeling of belongingness to an “othered” community wearies him off and strengthens his sense of disparagement for them, internalising a yearning for freedom and cutting down roots from the binary community of former master and slaves, oppressors and oppressed, as he “no longer seek to find beauty in the lives of the mean and the oppressed. Hate oppression; fear the oppressed” (Naipaul 9).

### **Colonial Discourse:**

Colonial discourse poignantly effectuates the hybridity and fixation of Ralph’s character in the novel. His self-fashioning of colonial ideals stems from his encounter with the colonizer’s subjectifying discourse that affixes him as an object of colonial power and instils in him, a desire to mimic as a coping mechanism. Ralph’s disclosure of the fact that “Man was only what he saw of himself in others, and an intimation came to me of chieftainship on that island” stipulates his delusion of chieftaincy emanating from the proposition and appropriation of the colonized as a subjugated community necessitous of a messiah to extricate and liberate them from the torment and embroilment caused by the colonizers (Naipaul 107). The regulatory and appropriated knowledge or belief systems internalized by the colonial through the cultural hegemony and fixating discourse imposed by the colonizers also tamper with their representation as a whole person, dehumanising and limiting their existence to “a form of cross-classificatory, discriminatory knowledge in the defiles of an interdictory discourse” that taxonomizing them “as an *object* of regulatory power, as a subject of racial, cultural, national representation” (Bhabha 131). The depersonalizing binary restraint of object/subject of Imperial administration subjugates the colonial physically and psychologically. Meddling with their sense of self and true identity it conforms them to mere inappropriate objects that consistently try to validate and justify their selves through the colonizer’s subjectifying and “othered” lens, and remains baffled. In Ralph’s narration, “I question now whether the personality is manufactured by the vision of others” (Naipaul 199). The colonial identity thus formed is always split between the speculations about oneself and its appropriated version enforced by the dehumanizing discourse of the colonizers. The creation of a “private hemisphere of fantasy” through the missionary schooling in Isabella poignantly exemplifies the integration of colonial discourse and serves as a compelling representation of colonial authority and power dynamics in the narrative (104). Such a schooling system that promotes European superiority and denigration of local cultures adheres to the expedition of anglicizing the indigenous population of Isabella by subverting and replacing their historical conceptions of ancestry, cultural norms, and communal affiliations with an appropriated and altered version of them. The incarnation of colonial knowledge and belief system is visible through the transformation of Ranjit Kripalsingh into Ralph Singh as he “gave [himself] the further name of Ralph; and signed [himself] R.R.K. Singh” (100).

The creation of a pseudo-identity by giving himself an English name exposes his conformation to the dominating colonial culture and exhibits him being too deeply entrenched in fantasy taint. The Western education he receives at school is inherently infused with colonial delusions and is instrumental in the assimilation of colonial ideals along with reshaping the perceptions of the colonized, both overt and covert. Ralph and his fellows on their delusional plane of existence confined themselves to the Anglicised hemisphere of their school repudiating their real surroundings to which they had to return after school hours. They “denied the landscape and the people [they] could see out of open doors and windows” (102). Other than robbing the students of their authentic vision, the colonial discourse also creates a disillusionment of the ordinariness that cocoons Isabella and belittles its existence. “We walked through the streets of our city like disrespectful tourists, to whom everything that was familiar to the resident was quaint and a cause for mirth” (103).

The interchange between the discursive practices of colonialism and the power dynamics intrinsic to such a discourse distort and disfigure Ralph’s perception of Isabella as a primitive, mundane, and mediocre place. Unfolding the “narrowness of the island life”, he depreciates Isabella in terms of “the absence of good conversation or society, the impossibility of going out to the theatre or hearing a *good* symphony concert” (69). Ralph’s perception of Isabella indicates the colonizer’s tyrannical pervasion and penetration of its ideologies into the colonial’s mind prompting an essentialist and reductionist view in the subjects. It also underscores his Eurocentric approach of representing the colonized territories as primitive and essentially inferior as they deviate from the Western notion of modernity. For him, Isabella, in its state of underdevelopment and lack of novelty, situates and freezes itself in a pre-colonial, pre-industrial timeframe. The notion of Isabella’s monotony and mundanity reflects the consolidation of the colonial narrative that homogenizes the diversity of indigenous traditions, customs, and practices, simplifying them to mere ordinariness. The dehumanizing tendency of colonial discourse to legitimize its authoritative and dominating control over colonial spaces in terms of bringing progression and variety to otherwise monolithic and regressive societies further complicate the identity construction of the colonial as it disguises “to *civilise* its *others*, [but] fixes them into perpetual *otherness*” (Loomba 145). The “interdictory otherness” thus formed “results in the *splitting* of colonial discourse so that two attitudes towards external reality persist; one takes reality into consideration while the other disavows it” prompting the colonial to realter reality in terms of conformation and mimicry. (Bhabha 132).

The psychological integration of colonial hegemony finds its roots in Ralph’s engagement with the binary classification of Isabella’s diverse population into masters and slaves. With his ingrained colonial mindset, he delineates the Island’s community into a reductive categorization of “the descendants of slave owners” and “the descendants of slaves” excluding himself as “a late intruder, the picturesque Asiatic linked to neither” entangled in the “conflict between master and slave” (Naipaul 82). The plurality of his speech and contaminated perspective resonates deeply with the imperialist discourse that categorizes, reduces, and then fixes the

diversified existence of diasporic presences into a single stereotypical entity of inferior others. Such an oppressive colonial division simplifies complex histories and social structures into digestible narratives. Ralph's compartmentalization of the Isabellan population into "slaves and runaways, hunters and hunted, rulers and ruled" mirrors his mimicry of the colonizers as he emulates their language, ideologies, and perspectives and tries to fit in their mould (Naipaul 131). Ralph's character can be elucidated as "*Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions in morals and in intellect* — a mimic man raised *through our English School*" (Bhabha 128). The persona of a mimic man he fabricates detaches him from his indigenous culture and leads to an internal conflict of selfhood and belongingness. His use of "borrowed phrases [from colonizers] which were part of the escape from thought" also sheds light on the struggle for self-realization and the inherent weaknesses of the flawless colonial system in producing hollow structures without any anchorage or sense of self (216). His mimicry acts as an allegorical device that subverts and satirizes the contradictions and irrationalities of colonial discourse and its toll on the subjects.

### **Ambivalence:**

The intricate reciprocation between Ralph's self-consciousness and societal expectations underscores the fabrication of multifarious layers of his identity. The embarrassment he feels "to be a descendant from generations of idlers and failures, an unbroken line of unimaginative, unenterprising and oppressed" embarks him on a journey of fashioning and switching between different characters notably those of a dandy, politician, and celebrant to attain a coherent and genuine sense of self and culture (89). The superficial elegance and sartorial refinement of the character of a dandy is the manifestation of the tautness between the conformation to Western ideals of modernity and losing grip on tradition. The flamboyant affectations of his dandyism accentuate the fragmentariness and disorientation of his identity, leading to the desertion of the native culture. His foray into political activism as a perfunctory attempt at reconciliation with his native land by standing up for "the dignity of [his] indignity", reveals yet another facet of his mimicry of "borrowed phrases" (215). It depicts the paradoxical state of his disillusionment and alienation as he tries to attain fulfilment and authenticity against the power dynamics of decolonization. In another attempt to find a sense of collective identity among the immigrants settling in Isabella, he masquerades as a celebrant who is inclined towards hedonism and material excess as an embellishment to the vacuity and hollowness of his life. The ambivalence in his mimicry illuminates the juxtaposition of his constructed identities with the discordant interplay of ambition, identity, and alienation making him "understand [his] unsuitability for the role [he] had created for [himself], as politician, as dandy, as celebrant" (40).

Ralph as a "*prototypical colonial character* who is quite commonly estranged with the biased and pluralistic society he has inhaled most of his breaths in" serves as a preponderant exemplification of in-betweenness (Dizayi 920). Being devoid of a sense of rootedness he sinks deep into the vacantness of mimicry that unintentionally alludes to his psychological turmoil and yearning for a sense of belongingness and desire. The disorientation caused by the confluence of multiple antediluvian

cultures and traditions in Isabella "where accident had placed [him]" puts him in a tight spot advancing toward the fundamental rift and dissonance that trespasses his psychological framework and results in alienation and estrangement (Naipaul 127). Henceforth, all emotional baggage and connectivity to Isabella is jettisoned owing to his propensity to get allured by the Western charm searching for homeliness in a civilized land. In his confession, "My early attempt at simplification had failed, it had ended in the switching back and forth between one world and another" (167). Migration to London, a transcendental shift into his dreamy construction of perfection, further accentuates his dilemma of belongingness. Assimilating into the foreign land he tries to cast aside the persona of otherness — his Caribbean identity — by mimicking the masters. Ambivalence towards his indigenous identity delves into cultural self-negation — a fundamental attribute of mimicry — where his authentic identity becomes subservient to the external pressures of conformation. "Mimicry rearticulates presence in terms of its *otherness*, that which it disavows" (Bhabha 132).

Ralph's Western-inspired persona of a politician and revolutionist sets forth another attempt to impose order on his dismantled sense of self by subverting the colonial authority. His role as "a leader of some sort, a politician, or at least a disturber" who mimics his former oppressors in his mannerisms, political ideologies, and even rhetoric during the treacherous waters of decolonization underscores his innate conformation their dominance and supremacy (Naipaul 200). This roleplay in the treacherous terrain of post-colonial politics illuminates the nuances of his perplexed persona, where in the hope of holding onto a secure political position of power and influence he imitates the Masters by dint of drawing an analogy: "M for Minister, M for Master" (221). His mimetic tendencies poignantly exemplify the psychological toll colonization has on him prompting his disorientation whilst he stands at the crossroads of colonial legacy and the imperatives of independence. His political career also mirrors the compromises and duplicity that accompany the pursuit of prestige through conformity, westernization, and the counterintuitive motive of shedding one's authentic self. Elucidating his political persona — "as elegant in dress as in speech" — a fallacious demonstration of his previous character of a dandy he narrates "The London dandy was resurrected" (210). The narrative also resorts to the employment of mimicry as a resistive and subversive tool to destabilize colonial authority. The hollowness of the impersonation of a colonial politician alludes to the subtle subversion of the artificiality and fragility of colonial authority. His awareness of the performative nature of his role; "It was [a] play for me", accentuates his effort to expose the superficiality of the colonizer's standardization and implicit vulnerabilities of the flawed colonial system (214). In Bhabha's explication, "The ambivalence of colonial authority repeatedly turns from mimicry ... to menace." (Bhabha 132).

Ralph's character as a colonial politician is fraught with the paradoxical journey of power and subsequent withdrawal from it within the complex backdrop of decolonized Isabella. Entrapped within the labyrinthine intricacies of imposing order and grappling with the disorienting effects of decolonization, he ventures into the journey of acquiring power to climb up in the hierarchy of power

dynamics. Torn between the allures of power and the chagrin of its exercise, he grapples with the legacy of colonialism bequeathed on the newly independent state of Isabella. The power symbol serves as a paraphernalia to impose control, and agency and to assert oneself by ascending within the socio-political hierarchy. His initial yearning for power deploys his aspirations to valorise authority and structure on the island as a colonial leader who mimics the colonizers' diplomacy resulting in "an ambivalent attitude, a kind of in-between state" (Taniyan 103). The vacuity of a confabulated ideal system soon perturbs him with the corrupting political ascendancy, intensifying his urge for dismissal and withdrawal. "It was a yearning from the peak of power; it was a wistful desire to undo" what has been done in the pursuit of power (Naipaul 37). Ralph's evolving relationship with power reveals the inherent limitations, moral dilemmas, and certain challenges that arise once power is coveted. Navigating the treacherous path of power dynamics toward self-determination, he confronts the reality of power by drawing a corollary between his psychological decolonization with that of Isabella. The island's external struggles are illusionary to his internal quest for stability against the dissonance and alienation he feels, both of which end in nothingness. "The tragedy of power like mine is that there is no way down. There can only be extinction. Dust to dust; rags to rags; fear to fear" (Naipaul 41).

The inadequacies of the roles he has created to cultivate a structured existence and exclude the feeling of rootlessness lead him to a state of estrangement and exclusion from both of his socio-cultural milieus. "The deep feeling of irrelevance and intrusion, his unsuitability for the role[s] into which he was drawn, and his inevitable failure" represents the fallen structure of his narrative leading from "playacting" to disorder" (200). The disorder created through the malfunctioning of his various personas serves as a manifestation of cultural and racial identity crises. His sense of duality imbued with the hybridity of his experience of living in polyculture and heterogenous societies escalates his internal conflict of belongingness. The ambivalent tension between the reality and fantastical suppositions of his origins and identity amplifies his yearning for a fresh start along with conjuring up the realization that "a fresh start is seldom possible and the world continues our private fabrication, departure is departure" (195). The cultural ambivalence that plagues his fractured sense of self estranges him from the Caribbean society, Indian heritage, as well as the two-dimensional solid city of London. This triple severance positions him in a state of perpetual cultural and emotional liminality. In a state of in-betweenness, he turns down the presupposition of Aryan ancestry, the dominant culture of the colonizer, or Caribbean roots. Unable to fully assimilate in either world, he finds his dismissal in a secluded suburban hostel in London. Freud co-relates this exclusion with the predicament of origin "Their mixed and split origin is what decides their fate ...[individuals] who [have] taken all round [resemblance with] white men but who betray their coloured descent by some striking feature or other and on that account are excluded from society and enjoy none of the privileges" (Freud 190-191).

### CONCLUSION

The conundrum of identity, its excavation from lost origins, or the revamping of it — owing to the conformity of Imperial discourse

— to attain solidarity on the disgruntled sense of self, the text poignantly exemplifies the starry vehemence of colonial ambivalence and estrangement; liminality of Ralph's character. The struggle for a strong cultural anchorage and identity arises from his notion of cultural identity as a collective experience of "one true self" that "people with shared history and ancestry hold in common" (Hall 223). The quest for "imaginary unification" with lost origins postulates the congruency of identity counterbalanced with the inference of identity as a contingent and fluid "production" rather than a "rediscovery" (224). Identity in the latter sense does not exist in isolation rather it evolves in the paradigms of time and place. "It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture" (225). The abortive undertaking of reconciliation and redefinition of identity in terms of his present socio-cultural milieus and imaginative strings of Aryan history fixes him as a site of contestation. "There was no one to link my present to my past, ... to note my consistencies or inconsistencies" (Naipaul 19). His ineptitude in negotiating between the two sliding scales of identity construction he solicits validation and "guidance of other man's eye" (18). The willing submission to the other's gaze and adherence to external directives depict the perpetuation of psychological ramifications of confinement on the subjects through the apparatus of colonial discourse. "The normalization [of] the colonial state or subject — the dream of post-Enlightenment civility" through its appropriating discourse is a manifestation of the penetrating influence of colonial dogma on individual agency perpetuating the internalisation of otherness, subjugation, and inner turmoil (Bhabha 126). To seek liberation from the labyrinth and shambles of colonial impositions of appropriation and "the gaze of otherness" that "liberates marginal elements and shatters the unity of man through which he extends his sovereignty", he adopts a façade of a mimic man (129). Mimicry as a tool to assimilate into the dominant colonial culture is emblematic of his quest for an unmutated self. Amidst the hegemonic colonial culture, he attempts to bridge the disjuncture between his native roots and the imposed colonial influences, through mimicking the colonizers. Such assimilation — a semblance of cohesion in his identity — attained at the expense of shedding one's traditional cultural markers underscores the existential angst and internal disquiet leading to a state of in-betweenness. The "presence of conflicting and incommensurable realities" fosters the ambivalent tendencies of the colonized (Taniyan 104). Colonial imitation, "a discursive process... produced by the *ambivalence* of mimicry ... fixes the colonial subject as a *partial* presence. By *partial* I mean both *incomplete* and *virtual*. (Bhabha 127). The vacuity of Ralph's partial identity — adorned with a fanciful yearning for lost origins negotiated and renegotiated under the shadow of colonial persecutions of subjectification — leads him to a state of perpetual cultural and emotional liminality instilling in him a tenacious desire for escape. In Ralph's autobiographical recollection, "I abolished all landscapes to which I could not attach myself... I thought of escape, and it was escape to what I had so recently sought to escape from" (Naipaul 30).

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## AUTHORS

**First Author** – Nawal Kashif, Graduating in English Literature from University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan

**Second Author** – Muhammad Afzal Faheem, Lecturer at Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan.

**Correspondence Author** – Muhammad Afzal Faheem, Lecturer at Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan.