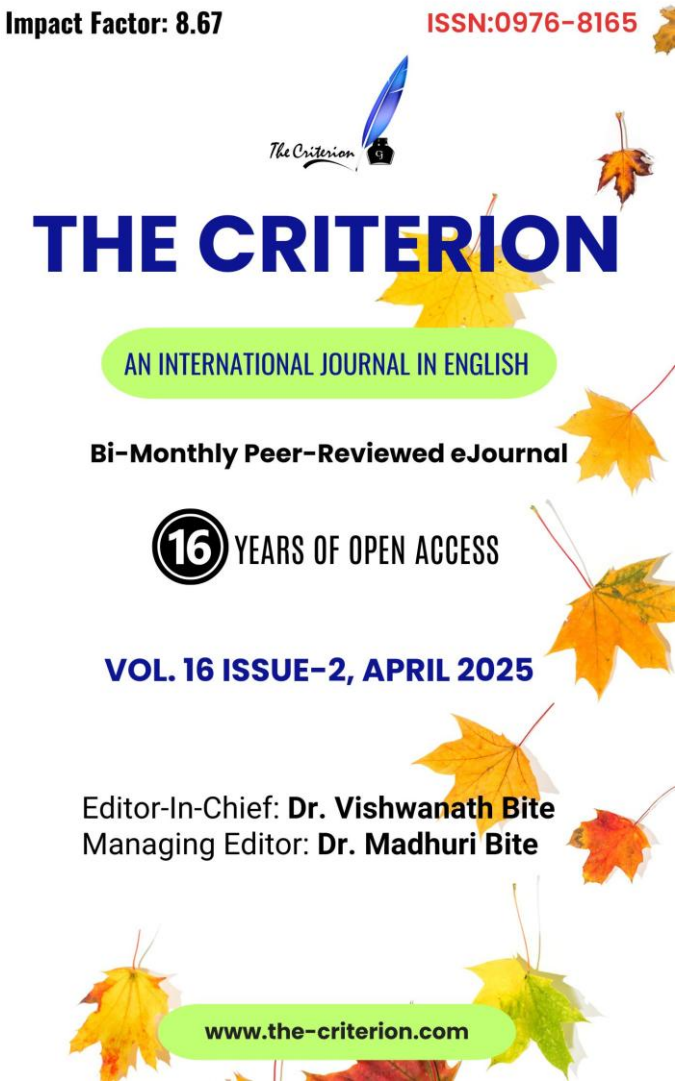

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Mimicry Unveiled: Asserting Agency through Mimicry as a Form of 'Resistance' in V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*

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Abstract:

The concept of identity is central to contemporary Race and Ethnicity studies, particularly in the multicultural and diasporic Caribbean context, where no singular notion of "Caribbeanness" exists. In such a liminal space, immigrants experience displacement and the erosion of both identity and homeland. Postcolonial discourse challenges fixed and monolithic identities, replacing them with pluralized and hybridized constructs. Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry becomes a crucial means through which diasporic individuals navigate their marginalization, transforming it into a site of resistance rather than assimilation. This paper elucidates how 'mimicry', rather than serving to reinforce authority, unsettles rigid constructions of identity and cultural purity. By reading Naipaul's novel through postcolonial theory, it brings to the fore the nuances of identity construction in liminal spaces, where mimicry ruptures colonial hegemony and facilitates new possibilities of discovering the 'self'.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, identity, mimicry, diaspora, liminality.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of 'identity' is a particularly pertinent issue in the contemporary domain of Race and Ethnicity studies. In the multicultural, pluralistic, immigrant Caribbean community, where there is no one sense of "Caribbeanness," the endeavor to develop an 'independent' cultural and literary identity is likely more ambiguous and dangerous than in other Postcolonial societies. The immigrants lose both their identity and their home country when they become trapped in such 'limbotic' circumstances. They try a variety of alternatives to obtain prestige and fixity in order to establish some identity by setting roots in a culture that is culturally foreign to them. The idea of identity as 'fixed' and 'monolithic' is replaced in the Postcolonial world by a 'pluralized' and 'hybridised' one. In such circumstances, the notion of 'identity' gets closely intertwined with the notion of 'mimicry' and leads to the formation of a 'liminal space'. As Bhabha states, "It is the indeterminate spaces and in-between subject positions that disrupt and displace established patterns and hegemonic cultural practices" (Bhabha 127). This space challenges essentialist conceptions of identity as well as concepts of cultural purity and originality and leads to the emergence of new possibilities.

The uprooted, marginalized, diasporic Caribbean people take recourse to the idea of 'mimicry' as a means of escapism from their dispossession and exile. V.S. Naipaul's highly acclaimed novel, titled, *"A House for Mr. Biswas"*, published in 1961, utilizes this trope of mimicry as a tool for disruption and as a method to reclaim Mr. Biswas's selfhood. While Mimicry frequently connotes an effort to fit in and integrate with the prevailing culture, Naipaul reverses this notion and instead utilizes it as a 'subversive' tactic to maneuver and question the established hegemonic power structures. Mimicry hence emerges as an act of resistance against the oppressive

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colonial order. This paper attempts to understand and highlight the complicated dynamics of social and cultural mimicry as a form of 'resistant site', where colonial authority, rather than being reinforced, gets fractured and disrupted.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND THE NOVEL

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul transports the reader into the cavernous interior of the dimly lit Caribbean world. He carries three conflicting, interacting components in his personality of being a Trinidadian colonial, an English metropolitan, and a person of Indian ancestry (Chakroberty 45). His novel titled, *"A House for Mr. Biswas"* emerges as an exemplary specimen of cross-cultural creativity. The life of Mr. Biswas can be presumed to be synonymous with Naipaul's own life. Biswas materializes a product of the same decadent culture as Naipaul. Estranged from his historical and cultural roots, he wanders from one house to the other in search of freedom and security.

The story of the 'Tulsi family' is a representation of the consolidation of the Indian diaspora in Trinidad, a Caribbean Island, as well as of its continued existence and eventual collapse in the face of Western cultural waves. Naipaul outlines the predicament faced by Indian immigrants, their issues, and their struggles in a rapidly evolving world. Ardently believing that no balanced or comfortable acculturation is possible in such a picaroon culture emerging from slavery and colonialism, he emphasizes on the notion of 'mimicry' as a site of disruption. The Tulsi family in jealously attempting to protect the ancient Indianness and Hinduism from any contamination and hybridization with an alien culture, resorts to 'mimicry' and ultimately cause a split and negotiation in the colonial system (familial relations). Stressing on the hollowness of a 'mimic man' who has lost his originality, creativity, and thinking ability by imitating the colonial

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authority, the novel provides us with a 'space' where the 'mimic man' appears to 'follow' the white man's authority (here the hierarchy of the house) to show the power of colonial discourse, but in effect, ruptures and shatters it. Initially, Mr. Biswas grasps desperately for an identity, a place of his own, a 'cultural home', but eventually stoops to the position of a 'mimic man'. The pain and displacement of his own history and the eventual realization that he can never become hierarchically equivalent to the 'Tulsis' enable him to treat his own alienation as an instance for reclaiming his identity. He defies the limitations imposed on him by colonial society and challenges the prevailing narrative that establishes his place as a marginalized and subordinate individual. In this sense, 'mimicry' can be understood as a strategy for survival and a means for Mr. Biswas to forge his own identity within the confines of the colonial system. In Naipaul's rich body of writing which enrich diasporic literature, it hence reveals the breaks in the colonial discourse: where the native represents himself rather than being 'represented'. As one of the most prominent Postcolonial scholars Homi K. Bhabha, in his work, *"The Location of Culture"* (1994), puts it, "The menace of mimicry is the double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (Bhabha 126).

THE HOUSE AS A MINIATURE VERSION OF AN IMPERIAL SOCIETY

"Hanuman House (Tulsi House) was a timber and corrugated-iron building in the High Street at Arwacas and it stood there like an alien fortress" (Naipaul 12).

Mr. Biswas spends a significant portion of his life in the Hanuman House, which is a tiny representation of an Imperialist Authoritarian regime where power is paramount and inescapable.

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Naipaul seems to advocate that traditional institutions like the extended family are more inhibitive to the growth of personality and are equally liable for maintaining passivity and reliance by stifling individuality. Mrs. Tulsi occupies the topmost echelon of the hierarchy and controls her daughters and sons-in-law while granting her sons Shekhar and Owad certain privileged rights. Her strategy revives Orwell's maxim that, "Everyone is created equal, but some are more equal than others" (Orwell 4).

Naipaul states, "The organization of Hanuman House is typical colonial one: The organization of the Tulsi House was simple. Mrs. Tulsi had only one servant, a Negro woman …. The daughters and their children swept and washed and cooked and served in the store. The husbands, under Seth's supervision, worked on the Tulsi land, looked after Tulsi animals, and served in the store. In return they were given food, shelter, and a little money; their children were looked after, and they were treated with respect by people outside because they were connected with the Tulsi family. Their names were forgotten; they became Tulsis". (Naipaul 97)

Mr. Biswas is doomed to failure in such a discriminatory system. His marriage into the Tulsi family obligates him to be obedient to it, but his true 'self' repeatedly keeps asserting itself. Bruce King adds: "Biswas's condition is that of the colony, his own attempts at independence are limited by the condition of the society into which he is born; frustrated self-assertion turns into self-destructive rage, the tempest that temporarily disorders Biswas's mind" (Siamardi & Deedari 37). Having grasped that the Tulsi family is a microcosm of the slave society, Biswas protests against Tulsidom as he discerns that in exchange for security, it demands the abandonment of his identity. By adhering to mimicry, he seems to reject the feudal-capitalist system and establish his own unique identity. His innate rebelliousness forces him to be labeled as a troublemaker who obviously needs more subtle but strict forms of discipline (Naipaul 156). Mimicry, through his

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eccentricities, takes on the form of a rebellion that fosters his self-individuality, assisting him to craft an untainted, fresh identity. As Kumar claims, "As the inherited order passed away, the self evolves into a new entity which is more viable to the new environment" (Kumar 119).

MIMICRY

The inherent instability of the Colonial discourse and the potential for resistance leads us to what Homi K. Bhabha, one of most the prominent Postcolonial scholar, terms as "mimicry". Influenced highly by the likes of Derrida, Lacan, Freud and Foucault, Bhabha's works focus on cosmopolitanism, cultural change, and power in order to expose the veiled intentions of the 'West' towards the East. The term originally coined by Lacan in the book *"The Line and Light",* was utilized by Bhabha in his essay titled, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" published in the *"Location of Culture"*, 1994 (Nayar 127). Bhabha defines 'mimicry' as the exaggerated copying of language, culture, manners, and ideas (Bhabha 129). By coining the term, Bhabha "captures a fundamental ambivalence that characterizes the construction of the colonial subject in certain forms of stereotyping" (Bhabha 130).

"The effect of mimicry is camouflage.... It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled - exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare."

-Jacques Lacan, "The line and light', Of the Gaze

(Bhabha 125)

Bhabha stresses on the deceptive Lacanian nature of 'mimicry' and states that it ultimately

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results in 'colonial ambivalence and poses an imminent threat to both normalized systems of knowledge and disciplinary powers (Bhabha 126). The core of his theory is that it can unintentionally subvert mechanisms put in place by the colonizer, even though the colonized rarely realises that he is undermining powerful hegemonic structures while mimicking. By replicating these structures, the hollowness of them is exposed. Mimicry hence emerges as "one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge". Stating so, Bhabha, illustrates the powerful nature of colonial mimicry, but leaves it ambiguous to whom it gives power, hence employing it as a tool for subversion. This becomes clearer when he asserts that when placed between "the demand for identity, stasis" and "change, difference—mimicry represents an ironic compromise" (Bhabha 128). Adhering to the notion that there is always an ongoing conflict between the imperial power's goal for perpetual dominance and control (Mrs. Tulsi's quest for dominance) and the course of history, which produces an unexpected outcome: 'mimicry'.

Bhabha argues that colonial mimicry is "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 127). The colonizer (in the novel the familial structures of the Tusli household) seeks to enhance the other (Mr Biswas) and make him more like themselves while still upholding a distinct feeling of difference. In that regard, the Other becomes "almost the same" as the colonizer, but never 'quite' fits in with the dominant cultural and political structures that control both of them (Mr Biswas's state). Colonial mimicry must continue to exhibit its difference, which he refers to as "ambivalence". "The *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (Bhabha 130). This ambivalence implies that the civilizing goal crumbles and shatters since it only permits 'Anglicization' and does not result in the complete conversion of 'natives' into 'Englishmen'. For ex- Mr. Biswas (colonized), coexists with the colonial power

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(Tulsis), yet never gets fully recognized as a member of the family and ultimately preserves his uniqueness to some extent by defying them.

"In order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference […] mimicry is therefore stricken by indeterminacy: [it]emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal" (Bhabha 126). Ultimately, because mimicry requires this "slippage" to function, it gives power not only to the colonizer but becomes the subversive tool of the colonized leading to ruptures in the dominant structure (Aniemeka 11). By stating, "It is from this area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double, that my instances of colonial imitation come" (Bhabha 128), he advocates for the creation of a 'third space' where the hegemonic structures get threatened (elaborates on Charles Grant' Observations[1]). Mimicry hence does not merely destroy narcissistic authority through the repetitious slippage of difference and desire, but raises the question of the authorization of colonial representations (Bhabha 131).

INSTANCES IN THE NOVEL

V.S. Naipaul's groundbreaking novel, "A House for Mr. Biswas" examines certain intricacies of human existence. Throughout the novel 'mimicry serves as a means for survival, assimilation, and even rebellion, ultimately highlighting the complex dynamics of social and cultural mimicry in the pursuit of selfhood (Chakroberty 45). The titular Mr. Biswas, immerses himself in this practice in order to assimilate into the British-influenced society of Trinidad. Yearning continuously for acceptance and social mobility, he believes that acquiring Western education, wealth, and a house would eventually foster him with the respect that he desires and uplift his socioeconomic status. He aspires to break out from the cycle of imitation that has

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characterized his life since being born into poverty and being marginalized by his own family. His unwavering dedication to 'learning' is one instance of this practice. He enrolls in classes, finds employment as a journalist, and then joins a sign painter's apprentice programme. His efforts demonstrate his desire to acquire information and abilities consistent with colonial societal values.

Even though he encounters numerous setbacks and disappointments due to certain unfavorable circumstances, he doesn't falter and continuously struggles to assert his identity. Mimicry for him is a survival tactic, which he presumes is employed by those who lack agency in a highly colonial society. He witnesses his father, Raghu, feverishly imitating his wealthier relatives in the hope of gaining acceptance and validation. Raghu's mimicry, however, only serves to emphasize his own inadequacies, leaving a lasting impact on Mr. Biswas. Mr. Biswas himself initially inadvertently falls into the trap. He becomes caught in a web of mimicking and imitation after getting married into the Tulsi family. Biswas first aspires to belong to the cultural and social elite represented by the established and prosperous Tulsi family. He mimics their behaviours, mannerisms, and language in an effort to blend into their culture and win their regard. But as he never completely blends in with them, this mimicry simply serves to further alienate and degrade him. It is after acknowledging that as Bhabha claims, "One can never truly become white" (Bhabha 132), he begins to refute social conventions and expectations that compel him to mimic the behavior and aspirations of the more affluent Tulsis (Mrs. Tulsi, Owad, Seth). He struggles against Hanuman House's traditionalism, rigidity, and community life because he is fixated on his freedom and identity. As Kumar posits, "The plot progression which captures Mr. Biswas' dogged attempts at the construction of his own house away from Tulsi's abode is a journey away from a repudiation of, and dependence on another, to a reconfiguration of an identity that is untinctured in the unwitting cosmetics of a renewed selfhood" (Kumar 121). He finds immense pleasure in

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forging his individual identity. He reads works by authors like Marcus Aurelius and Samuel Smiles to set himself apart from the other Tulsi members. This idea is recorded in these lines: "He read the novels of Hall Caine and Marie Corelli. They introduced him to intoxicating worlds" (Naipaul 374). These books provide him with comfort, relief, escapism, and solace and alleviate his pains in the harsh real world. His adherence to mimicry becomes a metaphor for his own battle for autonomy and freedom. Mr. Biswas, by resorting to 'mimicry' as a form of defiance emerges as an advanced rendition of 'everyman', who fights valiantly to obtain a home battle against an unbending social framework that make him insubordinate. There is a bit of a courageous quality (Siamardi & Deedari 127). He maintains his aloof personality and distinctive individuality in an effort to carve out a fresh social niche for himself despite his need for family social steel. In his awareness of his desolation and his predicament, he tells his son, "I am just somebody. Nobody at all" (Naipaul 292). By retaining his "nobodiness" Biswas challenges the dominant colonial authority as he separates his identity from the identifiable 'indentured' labourers. This is a sign of repression and eruption of stored energies of unfulfilled desires to achieve an identity that is whole and rooted.

Seth, the Tulsi's servant, also resorts to 'mimicry' for assimilation and upward mobility. In an effort to overcome the enormous social and cultural gap between himself and his employers, Seth, a member of the lower class, uses mimicry to replicate their speech patterns and mannerisms. His imitating is motivated by a desire to elevate himself and break free from social constraints. The personality of Mr. Biswas's wife, Shama, is another illustration. She imitates European traditions and etiquette in an effort to become a decent British woman. She imitates the colonizer's way of life by taking on their attire, eating habits, and social customs. Her relatives and friends, on the other hand, find her mimicking to be arrogant, pretentious, and unauthentic, and they

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criticize her for it. However, the irony lies in the fact that those members themselves wish to partake in her mannerism and be a part of Tulsi's household. For her, mimicry offers a form of protection against the uncertainties and hardships of her upbringing, allowing her to create a sense of belonging and stability (Smith 5). Mimicry, for Shama challenges the expectations placed on her as an Indo-Trinidadian woman, disrupting societal norms and asserting her own desires and ambitions. 'Mimicry' here transcends the basic idea of 'imitation' and instead seeks to explore the intricate interplay between one's identity, social pressures, and the pursuit of personal fulfillment. Mimicry turns into a strategy for surviving, assimilating, and rebelling. It highlights the vulnerability of identity in a setting where cultural norms and social hierarchies determine one's value and position in society.

The Tulsi household's disintegration is accompanied by certain members bit by bit assimilation and approach to solidarity. The breakdown of Hanuman House's cohesion and harmony gives everyone the opportunity for leading a straightforward, whole life. Everyone seeks to take advantage of the riches for himself, and each man is just concerned with himself. The family splits up without the center, creating a new unit that longs to find its place outside of Hanuman House's protective walls. Owad clearly aberrates the strict Hindu code when he travels to England to investigate drugs and medical procedures. The influence of mimicry of the "Western culture" also extends to other members of the family. Govind breaks away from the family's harmony to become a taxi driver and live on his own. Similarly, W. C. Tuttle leaves the Tulsi House in order to further his own interests. Some of the daughters-in-law and young females also secure and protect their various residences. All the characters venture to find out safe and secure spots. It is the feeling of the deficiency of personality that constrains the characters to meander all around. There is a route before them either to acclimatize to the new culture by mimicry or to live

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as an outcast and exile, and choosing the former enables them a method of self-assertion.

MIMICRY OF THE 'ENGLISH LANGUAGE' AS A SITE OF RESISTANCE

Braj Kachru states, "The English language has been widely accepted as lingua franca around the world because of its relatively neutral nature since its effects in everyday use are far less inflammatory than those stemming from the contention between one or another minority language" (John 3).

"Mimicry" in the linguistic discourse can be a kind of resistance, 're-making' and the creation not of a simple copy but of something subtly but distinctly new (John 4). Naipaul while impeccably mimicking the language of English, appropriates it in such a way so as to reflect both his ideas as well as the local realities. By imitating and manipulating the dominant language, the legitimacy and hegemonic power of the colonial language gets challenged. Naipaul utilizes various language plays, irony, and satire in order to undermine accepted conventions and ideas. Employing English as a means of expression also helps him in cultural preservation while navigating the pre dominant linguistic landscape. Naipaul produces a 'hybridized' language by fusing regional idioms, and cultural references, that reflect his distinctive viewpoint. He disrupts the linguistic hierarchies by appropriating, transforming as well as subverting the English language and thereby also asserts the legitimacy and validity of his own linguistic traditions. As he states, "For me there is no other choice. I have been given this language and I intend to use it. I feel that English will be able to carry the weight of my Caribbean experience. But it will have to be a new English still is full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new surroundings" (Naipaul 320). By appropriating the language, Naipaul utilizes it to 'bear' the burden of his own Indo-Carribean

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experiences. As Raja Rao puts it, “one has to convey in a language that is not one's own. One has to convey the various shades of omission of creation through movement that looks maltreated in an alien language” (Nayar 128).

Naipaul’s mimicry of English language in his writing is “not a betrayal of his origins, but a discovery of one’s possibilities in an aspect of the inevitable of Caribbean and postcolonial literature” (Chakroberty 47). Naipaul appropriates and changes the English language, subjecting it to a process of syntactic and verbal dislocation, in an effort to free the language from its colonial past. In the epilogue he states, “We cannot simply use of the language in the way British did… it needs remaking of for our own purposes (Naipaul 350). In the novel, he deploys Standard English. He employs appropriation and transformation tactics by incorporating regional idioms and cultural references. He uses ‘glossing,’ such as ‘nakphul’- a nose flower (Naipaul 32), ‘roti’ (Naipaul 88), ‘maharajin’ (Naipaul 32), ‘rakshas’ (Naipaul 387), etc., as well as common rhymes like ‘rama rama sitarama'/'rama rama sita rama’ (Naipaul 291). The language of conversation dialogues in this novel show the adoption of English words into the syntax of the Hindi language: Oh! Bipti cried ‘Stop this bickering ickering’ (Naipaul 28), or ‘look, look why nobody ain’t put anything to chock up the coffin' (Naipaul 33). This mimicry involves capturing and adapting the language of colonizers to new contexts.

Another significant example in this regard is the exchange between Mr. Biswas and Alec about how he (Biswas) was able to marry Shama, the Tulsi’s daughter. He states, “How you manage this so quick? Well, I see the girl and she was looking at me, and I was looking at she. So I give she a little of the old of sweet talk and I see that she was liking me too. And well to cut a long story short, I ask to see the mother. Rich people you know. Big house.” (Naipaul 91-92) Here, Naipaul is positioning himself in connection to a European tradition, albeit from an indirect

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perspective. His use of the English language in his writing subverts the power of colonial language rather than just imitating it. Naipaul conveys the local reality, cultural identity, history, sadness, suffering, and pains of the Caribbean society by employing the master's instrument, solidifying his reputation as a postcolonial author around the world. Here, 'mimicry' serves as a kind of resistance and re-creation. According to Naipaul's scale of linguistic values, the post-colonial writer's 'mimicry' of the English language is praiseworthy. The English language, he claims, was mine, but the tradition was not. (Naipaul 350). 'Mimicry' hence transgresses from 'subservience' to 'resistance' and destroys the validity and dominance of the English language, making it his own. Hence, Mimicry of the language helps him carve an authentic selfhood within Trinidad's variegated and fractured society.

CONCLUSION

"A House for Mr. Biswas" by V.S. Naipaul provides an engaging exploration of 'mimicry' as a form of resistance. Through his desire to own a house, Mr. Biswas aspires to create a physical area that expresses his independence and individuality. The house takes on a symbolic meaning for his refusal to fit into the expectations and constraints placed on him by the Tulsi family. However, his resistance extends beyond the mere possession of a house and he utilizes the transforming power of 'mimicry' as a means of reclaiming his identity and exercising agency, serving as an encouragement for others going through comparable hardships. Naipaul effectively depicts the intricate dynamics of 'mimicry' as a survival tactic and resistance to affirm individual agency and cultural identity through the experiences of the protagonist and the other characters who turn to mimicry as a means of survival. Mimicry fuels the protagonist's desire for autonomy and self-aggrandizement. Naipaul's exceptional use of the English language also expresses

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resistance by enabling him to assert his beliefs, articulate his opinions, and oppose the established hierarchies of authority. Naipaul confronts and subverts the oppressive nature of language with his eloquence and wit, using it as a tool to create his own space and convey his uniqueness, thereby encouraging acts of rebellion and drafting his self-expression.

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