



Crisis of Colonised Subjects and Colonial Modernity in *A House for Mr Biswas* and *The Mimic Men*

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<https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n3.6>

Abstract:

This paper explores the crisis of colonised subjects and colonial modernity in postcolonial literature focusing on *A House for Mr Biswas* and *The Mimic Men* by V.S. Naipaul. This paper foregrounds the politics of colonialism. Rather than showing progress, it yields cultural alienation, psychological displacement, fragmentation of identities and homelessness.

Through the protagonists like Mohun Biswas and Ralph Ranjit Singh, Naipaul displays that colonial societies are trapped between Western imitation and loss of indigenous roots. Leveraging postcolonial and subaltern theories of Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, this paper attempts to display that Naipaul's novels reflect profound crisis of colonised subjects and colonial modernity marked by instability, imitation and quest for identity. The paper concludes that Naipaul's novels remain pertinent in figuring out the impact of colonialism over colonizers and colonised subjects.

Keywords: Colonialism, Colonial Modernity, Identity, Displacement, Imitation, Resistance.

Introduction

The legacy of colonialism continues to shape the psychological and cultural truths of postcolonial nations. V.S. Naipaul is one of the significant postcolonial writers who explore the legacy of colonial rule. His works explore how colonial rule shapes identity, civilisation, and culture. His novels often display that countries have gained independence, but culturally they are unstable. This paper attempts to examine how *A House for Mr Biswas* and *The Mimic Men* represent clash in the crisis of colonised subjects and colonial modernity. Colonial modernity refers to western models imposed by imperial power to serve colonial government not for the empowerment of colonised subjects. In this way, colonial subjects are caught between traditional system and western system. Traditional system is devalued while western system is imitated but does not belong to colonised subjects. Colonised subjects imitate western models but they are not considered as modern. In *A House for Mr Biswas*, Mohun Biswas strives between inherited culture and colonial realities, resulting in uncertainties and vulnerability. In *The Mimic Men*, Ralph Ranjit Singh endeavors to imitate western political system, resulting in alienation and disconnection. The colonial encounter brings profound effects on political, psychological and cultural structures of postcolonial nations.

Moreover, the theory of colonial modernity divulges a profound inconsistency within the colonial project. While it affirms to bring consistency and advancement, it simultaneously defiles indigenous traditions and churns out a sense of alienation among the colonised subjects. Postcolonial theorists like Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha and Ngugi wa Thionio give us an insight into importance of challenging through resistance the western imperialism in favour of indigenous culture of the colonised people. The term 'postcolonial' came into existence when the colonised country gained independence from colonial rule. The colonised country established its own government and

revised the colonial rule for the upliftment of the country after the prolonged subjugation. Although the countries enjoyed political freedom, they continued to experience the clout of imperial power. The legacy of colonialism turns out to be a burden due to discrimination based on language, religion, caste and community. As Ania Loomba writes, "Perhaps the connection between postcolonial writing and the nation can be better comprehended by better understanding that the nation itself is a ground of dispute and debate, site for competing imaginings of different ideological and political interest" (207).

Struggle for Dignity and Existence in *A House for Mr Biswas*

While *The Mimic Men* is replete with political and psychological crises, *A House for Mr Biswas* highlights impact of colonial modernity on everyday life. Mohun Biswas's desire to purchase his house epitomises his struggle for identity, stability, dignity and independence. Mr Biswas' life is marked by social and economic hardship, particularly his dependency over Tulsi family. His fight displays the condition of colonised subject who has dearth of control over the condition. The life of Mohun Biswas is an insightful portrayal of the everyday struggle of identity and dignity with colonial society. Mr Biswas is shown as an ordinary colonial subject who desires to achieve identity, stability, self-respect and independence. His perennial desire to purchase a house becomes the central emblem of his pursuit of personal space and recognition. The house is more than a building, it signifies Biswas's effort to establish his identity that debilitates his independence. In the end, he manages to own his house which is not complete and perfect. It reflects the shattered nature of the characters in colonial and postcolonial novels. Here, V.S. Naipaul presents disruption in the life of Mohun Biswas due to social, economic and cultural pressures. He experiences humiliation and disappointment because of his six fingers throughout the journey. He is considered inauspicious since his birth. He has a burden of misfortune throughout the novel. His

rootlessness from his indigenous cultural roots and his life in Trinidad intensify his deep insecurity and alienation.

Another struggle comes in his life after his marriage to Shama Tulsi. After marriage, he is brought into Tulsi's household. He is totally dependent upon the Tulsi household. The Tulsi house represents dislocated Indian social order in non-native land, restricting Biswas's independence and individuality. His everyday life turns into a incessant negotiation for autonomy as he tries to oppose dominance of the Tulsis and maintain his dignity. Biswas's struggle is not courageous in the conventional sense, but is rooted in mediocrity like getting job, struggle for self-respect, having a house of his own. His incessant struggle to escape from oppressive household reflects the desire stability and dignity. The Hindu community of Trinidad strives to keep traditional practices intact by forming cohesive communities. Both Tulsi and Hanuman households are places of religious and social interaction. Although, the Tulsis household outwardly sustain distinctively Hindu way of life, their cultural recognition is slowly transformed through interaction with the local colonial atmosphere.

Cultural ambivalence becomes clear as long-established Hindu beliefs mingle with Christian influence prominent in colonial Trinidad. Symbolically, this is seen in characters like Ovad who attends Hindu rituals, but at the same time, he wears cross. Such amalgamation of traditional practises display the weakening of indigenous cultural identities and surfacing of ambivalent religious consciousness.

The growing impact of Western imperialism and religion steadily displaces traditional practises as expatriates adopt Western culture for social acceptance and economic viability. The practises of Hinduism are crucial to identity, are transformed to align with actuality of Trinidadian settlement. Mohan Biswas is torn between self-perception and how he is perceived by others. Mr Biswas considers himself as a dignified and respectable man, but

society considers him as an outsider, poor and lacking status. This gap brings frustration to life of Mohun Biswas. Despite having a profound desire for name and recognition, the conditions around him fail to fulfil his ambitions. As a result, Biswas is rootless, fragmented and dependent upon Western models. He strives to find a meaningful life in the colonial society. Moreover, Tulsi family's habit of administering their son-in-law displays how traditional practises like marriage are limited to tools of financial gain instead of sacred bond. The refusal to be submissive in front of Tulsis shows the rebellious nature of Mr Biswas. This resistance keeps him alienated as he is not respected as a Brahmin. He is considered inferior by the Tulsi household. His helplessness to get stable job and wandering from one occupation to another like serving in a rum shop, colouring signboard and ultimately becoming a journalist, displays his continuous struggle for survival. Mohun Biswas's relation with the Tulsi household enriches his condition of dependency and servitude. He makes attempts to get his independence by building his house at Greenvale, but it goes in vain. The lack of materials, financial problems and hostile circumstances continue to hinder in his ways. The struggle of everyday life for getting a house becomes a metaphor for the crisis of colonial subjects. This insecurity displays the consequence of colonial modernity where individuals adopt modern styles, but lack scaffolding to support them.

Thus, Biswas's action is not personal, but extremely illustrative of crisis of civilisation of displaced Indo- Trinidadian community. His incompetence to secure a well- constructed house and identity displays the demerits of colonial structure to provide significant progress, leading to a life marked by disconnected and incomplete fulfilment. N. Sharda Iyer states:

“The career of Mr Biswas in roughing out the obstinate substance of life in the West Indies is a testimony to an inheritance which is lost but not overcome. *A House for Mr Biswas* looks at the almost impossible task for the Indian immigrants in the Caribbean in trying to integrate into its society while keeping hold of their roots” (134).

Frantz Fanon writes that colonialism generates a shattered consciousness among colonised subjects who go through a sense of inadequacy and dislocation. Mr Biswas's constant struggle for a house shows this psychological condition. He is always neglected in Tulsi household and colonial society of Trinidad. His desire for house is symbolic for his search for autonomy and self-respect. Through Biswas, Naipaul shows the psychological effects of colonialism that Fanon identifies in colonised societies.

The term hybridity was introduced in postcolonial theory by Prof. Homi Bhabha. It gives a useful framework for understanding Mr Biswas's condition in *A House for Mr Biswas*. Mr Biswas follows indigenous culture inherited from his family, yet his life is full of colonial domination. His identity is shaped from the intersection of cultural influences rather than unified tradition. His job as a journalist and his dream for independent house shows his movement inherited tradition and opportunities given by colonial modernity.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of subalternity gives a new perspective for understanding Mr Biswas's marginalization. Within Tulsi household, he is considered inferior. From the perspective of Spivak, Mr Biswas's uphill struggle for economic independence can be seen as a symbolic effort to defeat marginalization and build a space where his identity and voice can be recognized.

Colonial Imitation and the Quest for Identity in *The Mimic Men*

Colonial imitation is a postcolonial term, most prominently described by Prof. Homi Bhabha. He interprets colonial imitation as mimicry of colonizer's culture, language and institutions by colonised subjects. However, imitation of colonised subjects is always imperfect. The colonised subjects appear to be same as colonizers but with discernible difference. In *The Mimic Men*, Ralph Singh's alienated life and his marriage to Sandra make him imitate western culture. He is rooted to Indian ancestry, but born and raised in Isabella and later

migration to London describes that he has psychological alienation. This reflects internalization of colonial values too. As a result, he finds himself torn between multiple cultural identities, neither belonging to Indian roots nor to colonial world. Ralph Ranjit Singh is the representative of marginalised individuals who strive for identity, stability, independence and existence within a colonial society that gainsays these fulfilments. The colonised subjects are vulnerable to social, economic and political compulsions due to their subalternity. The colonial system imposes authority and knowledge politics that limit the freedom of colonised subjects to express themselves. Ralph Ranjit Singh is displayed as facing fragmented and disillusioned life. He reminisces his past while living in London boarding house which discerns his profound insecurity and impermanence. As a colonised individual, he faces dark and dejected environment that reflects his inner condition. His life is characterized by incessant struggle and endurance due to stiff structures imposed by colonial government which leave him feeling excluded and subjugated. The interpretation of the government cold, empty and abandoned displays alienation and isolation of protagonist. Ralph Singh is represented as dislocated individual who experiences deep confusion. The uneven structure of a society reduces him to a marginalized figure. He aims to get fame and recognition, but societal limitations restrain him from making a stable identity. Here, Naipaul gives more attention to the experience of Ralph as a student, householder and recluse. He attempts to preserve dissimilar perspectives of the colonised subjects towards independence. The first is that order can be preserved in colonial society by keeping the foreign cultures and values that have framed it. He indicates that Isabella was a colonial plantation based society during the time of Ralph's grandfather, shaped by social, economic and political control. Browne, the folk leader, represents opposition to inequalities created by colonial rule. He does not directly imitate colonial system. He tries to eradicate traditions and values which persist colonial bondage. He uses newspaper and journalism shaped by colonial influence.

Browne does not follow colonial imitation, but his activities to eradicate colonial system shows indomitable effects of colonial modernity. As an exiled protagonist, Ralph attempts to establish his fragmented identity and make sense of his disenchanted life. He strives to understand his own psychological condition which is shaped by displacement. The identity of Ralph is completely divided. He has Indian ancestry, born in Isabella, but later migrates to London. This multifaceted identity produces a nagging sense of rootlessness. His abnegation of actual name “Ranjit” in favour of “Ralph” displays an initial act of colonial mimicry, indicating his desire to mingle into western culture. However, mimicry fails to impart a strong identity, giving rise to a permanent identity crisis. His persistent dream of an “Asian horseman” reflects his longing for ancestral past showing the psychological tension between original homeland and dislocated land. Ralph gets success as a real estate developer and politician, he remains sentimentally unfulfilled and disconnected. His venture into politics highlights mimicry of western political system, a vital feature of colonial modernity. However, his adopted systems prove to be ineffective in the context of Isabella, resulting in political instability and subsequently his collapse and exile. Colonial modernity keeps his married life loveless which displays his inability in imitation of western system. His father, Gurudeva, highlights the crisis of colonial modernity. His transformation from one profession to another reflects his search for identity. His life remains unsuccessful as well. His life shows the failure of traditional and modern system to provide stability. Ralph Singh tries for an escape route in this novel:

“I abolished landscapes from my mind. I abolished all landscapes to which I could not attach myself and longed only for those I had known. I thought of escape from, and it was escape to what I had so recently sought to escape from” (Naipaul, *Mimic Men* 27).

This novel shows the loss of distinctions and persistent disarrangements connected with origin of different layers. The presence of various versions of things, people and events also

joins this notion of reality, as several versions co-exist on several levels of reality. Finally, *The Mimic Men* displays incorporation of melodrama of various forms of communication, including the utilization of objects and landscapes to be interpreted as ways of articulation of meaning. Ralph Ranjit Singh remains a wandering soul who lacks completeness and perfection in his life:

The politician is more than a man with a cause, even when this cause is no more than self-advancement. He is driven by some little hurt, some little incompleteness. He is seeking to exercise some skill which even to him is never as concrete as the skill of the engineer”(Naipaul, *Mimic Men* 37).

The state of disorder can be seen in his words when he states “...to be born on an island like Isabella, an obscure New World transplantation, second-hand and barbarous, was to be born to disorder” (Naipaul, *Mimic Men* 118).

Thus, through Ralph Ranjit Singh and other characters, Naipaul strives to highlight colonialism as a strength that deranges identity culture and social order. The novel exposes how colonial modernity churns out imitation without legitimacy and genuineness, thereby results in deep crisis of civilisation.

Frantz Fanon’s description of the psychological effects of colonialism provides a powerful framework for figuring out Ralph Singh’s identity crisis in *The Mimic Men*. Fanon describes that Fanon generates a fragmented consciousness where colonised subject incorporates feeling of inferiority and alienation. His repeated reflections on chaos and personal inadequacy show psychological consequence of colonialism.

Bhabha’s concept of mimicry offers an insight into Ralph’s relationship with colonial culture. Singh follows English education, custom and political system. He is never complete in

acceptance of colonialism. His political and personal failures reflect limitations of mimicry as a way to construct identity.

Although Ralph Singh is an educated colonial subject rather than subaltern, his life is framed by colonial system that restricts his authentic self-representation. Throughout the novel, he encounters deep sense of marginalization and constantly questions validity of political authority and personal identity.

A Comparative Analysis on the Crisis of Civilisation

In *A House for Mr Biswas* and *The Mimic Men*, V.S. Naipaul gives a high-octane critique of colonial modernity and its effects on identity, culture and circadian life. Both novels give an insight into the crisis of colonial subjects. Protagonists in both the novels have different positions. Mohun Biswas is an ordinary man who struggles for survival, while Ralph Ranjit is a political subject who lives in exile.

A House for Mr Biswas displays continuous struggle of a displaced individual within the colonial framework. Mohun Biswas's life is marked by deprivation, delusion, and social dependency. From the time of his inauspicious birth to continuous movement for getting stable existence, his life displays arduous journey for self-respect and independence. His continuous fiascos like destruction of his house show merciless reality of colonial society.

In *The Mimic Men*, Ralph Ranjit Singh faces a psychological crisis caused by colonial modernity. His life is characterized by mimicry, as comprehended in his acquisition of Western name, lifestyle and political structure. Despite getting influential power as a political leader, he feels deep alienation, insecurity and instability. His exile in London and efforts to write memoir displays his wish to recover his insecurity. The cold vacant atmosphere of London reflects his inner desolation, foregrounding the demerits of colonial modernity to give consistency.

Both novels foreground the theme of rootlessness. Mr Biswas goes through the experience of physical and social displacement through continuous dislocation and subservience to the Tulsi household. Both protagonists endure an identity crisis. Their identity crisis varies to some extent- Mr Biswas's crisis revolves around circadian struggle based on practical experience, while Singh's crisis is psychological. Experience of both protagonists is contrasting and interconnected. They represent dissimilar dimensions of the same plight- one based on political and intellectual life while other based on everyday survival and dependency. Together, they disclose that colonial modernity does not bring any progress but profound crisis of civilisation characterised by insecurity, alienation, instability and imperfect identity. Finally, it highlights that colonial subjects remain stuck between ambition and reality.

A comparative study *A House for Mr Biswas* and *The Mimic Men* from the theoretical perspective of Frantz Fanon, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak shows shared dimension of postcolonial rootlessness. Fanon's description of psychological effects of colonialism reflects the fragmented identities of the protagonists. Mr Biswas strives to get rid of psychological insecurity and through the acquisition of a house which reflects stability, dignity and selfhood. In contrast, Ralph goes through psychological exile and seeks consistency by writing his memoir, using narrative as a means of reclaiming identity distorted by colonial experience.

Conclusion

Through *A House for Mr Biswas* and *The Mimic Men*, V.S. Naipaul exhibits cogent critique of colonial modernity and its interminable effect on individual and the community. Mohun Biswas and Ralph Ranjit Singh are in different social positions, reflecting displaced conditions of colonial subjects. Singh displays psychological alienation while Biswas

represents the penury of an ordinary man, striving for dignity and stability. The two novels together show that colonial modernity does not give genuine success but instead presents imitation, dependency and continuous dislocation. The longing for identity, stability, and independence is imperfect as both characters are restricted by social, cultural and economic impediments. Their ordeals display the gap between illusion and reality, uncovering the crisis of colonial and postcolonial societies.

Ultimately, Naipaul exhibits that the crisis of civilisation originates from inability to achieve stability between self and society. The colonial subjects are torn between present and past, tradition and modernity, dreams and reality leading to a life characterized by displacement, imitation, dependent on Western model and culturally unstable.

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