

34. The Postcolonial Narrative in V. S. Naipaul's Novel Entitled *The Mimic Men*¹**Sırma ARSLAN² & Erden EL³**

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Abstract

Postcolonial Literature conveys the influence of colonialism on both colonised and coloniser groups. On this issue, V. S. Naipaul's novel entitled *The Mimic Men* exhibits various cases that have emerged due to these relations. Therefore, his work is significant in dwelling upon social relations between the coloniser and the colonised in the Modern world order. Furthermore, Naipaul depicts the isolation and alienation of the colonised within the society where colonisers are the majority. At this point, Naipaul merges the protagonist's memoirs with his autobiographic motifs. More importantly, as well as it is understood from the novel's title, Naipaul demonstrates how colonised groups' obsession with mimicry damages the society's culture and how their submission to the oppressor forces diminishes the state's political and economic power in the meantime. Concerning this, Naipaul draws attention to the conflicts among the minority groups that undermine the nationalist consciousness. Hence, Naipaul emphasises the importance of establishing a resilient community to overcome enmities within a country. Apart from this, imperialism is another obstacle that impairs the colonised country. The author clarifies the imperialists' malevolent practices under the mask of charity movements in his work. Therefore, ideological impositions not only dominate colonised people's lives but also, manipulates their behaviours. This article aims to analyse various types of Postcolonial discourses and occurrences in the novel and how Naipaul constructs his criticism from the protagonist's point of view.

Keywords: Postcolonial Literature, Mimicry, Colonised, Coloniser, Imperialism

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V.S. Naipaul'un *The Mimic Men (Taktitçiler)* Başlıklı Romanındaki Sömürgecilik Sonrası Anlatı⁴

Öz

Sömürgecilik Sonrası Edebiyat sömürgecilik hem sömürgeci hem de sömürgeleştirilmiş gruplar üzerindeki etkisini aktarmaktadır. Bu konuda, V.S. Naipaul'un *The Mimic Men (Taktitçiler)* başlıklı romanı bu ilişkiler sonucunda ortaya çıkan çeşitli durumları sergiler. Bu yüzden, Modern dünya düzenindeki sömürgeci ve sömürge arasındaki sosyal ilişkileri ele alması açısından bu eser önemlidir. Üstelik sömürgecilerin çoğunluk olduğu bir toplumda sömürgeleştirilmiş olanın soyutlanması ve yabancılaşmasını tasvir eder. Bu noktada, Naipaul başkahramanın anılarını kendi otobiyografik motifleriyle birleştirir. Daha da önemlisi, romanın başlığından da anlaşıldığı gibi, Naipaul sömürgeleştirilmiş grupların taktitçilik takıntısının toplumun kültürüne nasıl zarar verdiğini ve baskıcı güçlere karşı boyun eğmelerinin devletin siyasi ve ekonomik gücünü nasıl azalttığını göstermektedir. Bununla alakalı olarak, Naipaul azınlık gruplar arasındaki ulusalcı bilinci zayıflatan anlaşmazlıklara dikkat çekmektedir. Bu yüzden, Naipaul bir ülkede düşmanlıkların üstesinden gelmek için dirençli bir topluluk kurmanın önemini vurgulamaktadır. Bundan ayrı olarak, emperyalizm sömürgeleştirilen ülkeyi zayıflatan diğer bir engeldir. Yazar, eserinde emperyalistlerin iyilik hareketi maskesi altında kötü niyetli uygulamalarına açıklık getirmektedir. Bu yüzden, ideolojik dayatmalar sadece sömürgeleştirilmiş insanların hayatına hükmetmekle kalmaz, aynı zamanda onların davranışlarını manipüle eder. Bu makale romandaki çeşitli türlerden Sömürgecilik Sonrası söylemleri ve olayları ve de Naipaul'un başkahramanın bakış açısından eleştirisini nasıl inşa ettiğini analiz etmeyi hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Sömürgecilik Sonrası Edebiyat, Taktitçilik, Sömürgeleştirilmiş, Sömürgeci, Emperyalizm

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Introduction

Mimicry is one of the most significant themes in Postcolonial Literature. Although Naipaul's primary concern seems to be the theme of mimicry, he also includes an evaluation of the social, national, and political aspects of colonialism. Therefore, Naipaul employs a complex and comprehensive narrative style that covers crucial issues within this concept. Hence, this article aims to reveal Postcolonial discourses within the narrative as well as Naipaul's arguments regarding the complete liberation from colonialism.

In his works, Naipaul's analyses are mainly based on his own experiences (King, 2003, p. 4). His fictions are autobiographical as he repeatedly utters his "anxieties of homelessness", therefore, his narratives overlap with his biographical patterns (King, 2003, p. 6). In addition to this, his works also record many historical and political incidents such as decolonisation in India, Africa and the Caribbean, racial relations in the United States and so on. In *The Mimic Men*, the protagonist writes down his recollection of memories. These scenes from the protagonist's memories enable the author to employ his reflections on various matters such as social, political, and historical issues (Mustafa, 1995, p. 100). Thus, the protagonist reflects the sociological, political and historical incidents that he has witnessed and has gone through. The "shipwreck" is a metaphor that exhibits "post-colonial panic" of the condition of the Caribbean (Mustafa 1995, p. 102). Mustafa defines the protagonist "as an embodiment of a postcolonial dyslexia", which means that the protagonist, Ralph Singh has the opportunity to articulate the unequal treatment of the West and raise his voice on behalf of the exploited people, he cannot fulfil this quest since he is unable to offer suggestions for this issue (1995, p. 102).

"Mimicry" Theory and Postcolonial Discourses in the Novel

The title of the novel, *The Mimic Men* (1969), draws attention to the notion of "mimicry". "Mimicry" is described as the imitation of the coloniser's habits, ideology, institutions and values. The colonial practice facilitates the imposition of the colonisers' doctrines on its subjects. According to Homi Bhabha's theory, the result is not a simple reproduction of these exercises, the result is a "blurred copy" of the coloniser (Ashcroft et al, 1998, p. 139). At this point, Bhabha suggests that "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognisable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite" (86). From the very beginning, Naipaul expresses how this notion of mimicry is illogical and absurd stating that: "Mr Shylock looked distinguished, like a lawyer or businessman or politician. He had the habit of stroking the lobe of his ear and inclining his head to listen. I thought the gesture was attractive; I copied it" (2002, p. 11). One can easily deduce that mimicry is an indispensable feature for the colonised as it emerges from the need to gain the acceptance and recognition of the coloniser. Dr Aziz from E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* can also be considered a suitable example of this notion. Dr Aziz wears European clothes and speaks formal English to impress his coloniser British "fellows". In its essence, mimicry is a destructive force for the colonised people's own identity and a big obstacle in front of their forming a nationalist consciousness. Naipaul emphasises this issue and exhibits it with examples to the reader. The protagonist of the novel, Ranjit Kripalsingh, is a supporter of colonialism. In order to adapt to the coloniser's environment, he changes his name to Ralph R. K. Singh (Naipaul, 2002, p. 113). The problem is getting more serious since it indicates the scale of the inferiority complex that the protagonist is undergoing. Regarding this issue, Frantz Fanon argues that colonised people who develop an inferiority complex and scorn their identity inflict damage to their original culture and they confirm living their lives under the yokes of the civilising nation (1967, p. 18).

The postcolonial interaction in a colonised country results in the exposition of the degradation of the subjects. In relation to this, the subject has a strong desire to approximate the coloniser's level. For instance, as the protagonist states: "There was my sense of wrongness, beginning with the stillness of that morning of return when I looked out on the slave island and tried to pretend it was mine." (Naipaul, 2002, p. 225). The easiest way to fulfil this wish is simply to yield and imitate them. Fanon puts forward various examples from human relations and concludes that it is impossible to achieve equal treatment since the white European will never admit this equivalence no matter how hard a non-white person tries. Instead, s/he will become a curiosity in the social space. "She is looked at with distaste. Things begin their usual course... It is because she is a woman of color that she is not accepted in this society" (Fanon, 1967, p. 44). Again, in the novel, the protagonist narrates another incident about this issue, in which, the father of a French girl accepts the marriage with the non-white but in return, he is decisive to send him for a proper education (Naipaul, 2002, p. 232). Nevertheless, mimicry is also a powerful element for a postcolonial writer since it is a medium for strong criticism for colonial practices.

As a result, mimicry is fundamental for the colonisers' establishment of hegemony over their subjects. As Bhabha indicates, it is a menace for the coloniser since this will result in a mockery, a parody of the coloniser (1994, p. 86). In postcolonial literature, this mimicry reveals how practices of colonialism are groundless and justifications for these inhuman actions are far away from being persuasive. Likewise, in Naipaul's novel, one can come across many examples from the text for this issue and conclude that mimicking the coloniser is something futile since this will never change the colonised person's status, that individual will remain as the oppressed one.

Isabella Imperial Island is settled by people from different ethnic backgrounds as well as the coloniser settlers in the novel. In the lands where the interaction with various races takes place, hybridity is inevitable. Furthermore, Homi Bhabha argues that the hierarchal imposition for "originality" or "purity" is "untenable" because even though "Third Space" is not represented, no one can put forward this concept as something new (1994, p. 37). Thus, Bhabha strongly defends the idea that no person on the Earth is bred purely (1994, p. 37). Gramsci reports that "[t]he subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a "State": their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, and thereby with the history of States and groups of States." (1971, p. 52). In the novel, such a unification does not exist because of the conflicts among these "subaltern" groups. In the novel, these discriminative arguments are mainly employed by the protagonist himself stating "But to me as well as to Sandra our house was something to get out of whenever we could. Into that most inferior place in the world. Where could we go? The beaches? We knew them all; we could take them 'as read'. The mountain villages, Negro or mulatto, with their slave history and slave customs?" (Naipaul, 2002, p. 72). The word "mulatto" is a pejorative and racist word that is used to describe the hybrid people. In this statement, he does not only put racist emphasis on hybrid people but also black ones. As it can be seen in this instance, the protagonist looks down on these people and associates everything about them with their slave background. Once again, the protagonist puts another racist comment on them: "We went through purely mulatto villages where the people were a baked copper colour, much disfigured by disease. They had big light eyes and kinky red hair. My father described them as Spaniards." (Naipaul 2002, p. 130). These expressions state that hybrid people are exposed to discrimination even further and they are humiliated and isolated in society as the "Third Space" as Homi Bhabha defines (1994, p. 37).

On the other hand, Naipaul stops to express hybrid people's attitude in the society:

[Spaniards] permitted no Negroes to settle among them; sometimes they even stoned Negro visitors. We drove through Carib areas where the people were more Negro than Carib. Ex-slaves, fleeing the plantations, had settled here and intermarried with the very people who, in the days of slavery their great tormentors, expert trackers of forest runaways, had by this intermarriage become their depressed serfs. (2002, pp. 130-131)

Although hybrid people and black people share the same destinies, this fact does not make them develop empathy for each other and create a notion of fraternity on a social basis, on the contrary, they hold groundless grudges against each other. Gramsci explains the formation in such societies that the practice of hegemony takes place with the medium of parties that establish the hierarchical order within the society (1971, p. 53). Thus, the order in the society is regulated through the employment of the hegemony by members of the higher class. In this case, the domination of the coloniser comes in the first place, the rich high-class people's hegemony can be counted as the latter in the novel.

Apart from this, another example can be witnessed in the protagonist's childhood memories. Singh describes one of his classmates with mixed race by saying, "His name indicated Chinese ancestry, but he was not pure Chinese. He had some admixture of Syrian or European blood with, I felt, a tincture of African. It was a happy blend; it had produced a sensitive, attractive boy" (Naipaul 2002, p. 102). The word "happy" is ironic since his classmate suffers from the state of constant uneasiness that stems from his hybrid origins. This hatred reaches its extremity when one mixed-raced classmate of the protagonist ignores his black mother and acts as if he has not seen her in the street. At this stage, the effect of mimicry emerges once again since the colonised subjects do not feel hatred for the colonising forces but for another oppressed group like themselves. In conclusion, hybridity is something unwanted and shameful by both the coloniser and the colonised sides. The in-betweenness in society creates confusion for people of mixed race because they cannot feel any sense of belonging in society. As a result of these notions and behaviours, the notion of the brotherhood of the colonised people disappears from the earliest stage.

One of the significant issues for Isabella Imperial is the government's financial and technological inadequacy. Therefore, the colony needs support for its improvement. In the historical context, industrialisation has accelerated its speed due to the developments in technology in the aftermath of the Second World War (Young, 2016, p. 49). Subsequently, it has transformed into a capitalistic competition among the coloniser countries. On this issue, Robert Young reports that Western countries promote the notion of a capitalist and rapidly growing economic system and impose this system on the world (2016, p. 49). Then, the Third World countries are given no choice but to comply with this system and adjust their policies (Walcott, 1974, p. 5). At this stage, Orientalist scholars have identified underdeveloped or developing countries as "Third World" countries. The very expression has its sub-context as the countries that are in need of help and protection of a paternal country, that is, the coloniser's according to colonialist account. Subsequently, postcolonialism has continued its presence as neocolonialism with the coloniser countries' undertaking of so-called "paternal" roles by depicting the impression that they are helping those who are in need.

In the novel, the protagonist mentions the dependency of Isabella Imperial colony. They need the coloniser forces' technological and financial support for the island's development. Nevertheless, this is not just a favour in return for no benefits, on the contrary, the coloniser country employs its citizens in administrative positions. Moreover, Isabella Island must pay twice the wage that is paid for one subject of the colony:

We had spoken, for instance, of the need to get rid of the English expatriates who virtually monopolized the administrative section of our civil service. We had represented their presence as an

indignity and an intolerable strain on our Treasury. They received overseas allowances; their housing was subsidized; every three years they and their families were given passages to London. Each expatriate cost us twice as much as a local man. (Naipaul, 2002, p. 228)

In this instance, the hegemony over the colonised can be observed. As Young defines “imperialism’ signified an ideology and a system of economic domination, identified with the USA; ‘colonialism’, by contrast, emphasised the material condition of the political rule of subjugated peoples by the old European colonial powers” (2016, p. 27). This statement exactly overlaps with the government in *Isabella Imperial*. While the colonisers occupy administrative positions, the colonised people remain as mere workers and lower classes. The colonised are obliged to comply with the order that is established and ruled by the coloniser. Thus, the importance of national freedom comes to the surface. Another notable example is the exploitation of the goods by the colonisers. As the protagonist explains: “We had committed ourselves from the outset to renegotiating the bauxite contract. It was our only major resource, and its exploitation, in the late 1930s, was perhaps the only thing that had rescued our economy from total ruin and saved our island from revolution” (Naipaul, 2002, p. 236). As it can be witnessed from Singh’s statement, he seems content with this relation as he regards it as a helping hand which saves his government from the economic crisis. Moreover, *Isabella Imperial*’s attempts at the industrialisation are meaningless and they are not useful for the local people at all. For instance, as the author states:

We encouraged a local adventurer to tin local fruit. This was a failure. It hadn’t occurred to anyone concerned to find out whether local people wanted local fruit tinned; no one else did either. The same man went in later for tinning margarine and was a success. The margarine was imported, the tins were imported. (Naipaul, 2002, p. 235-236)

Apparently, the system keeps on working for the coloniser’s benefit. Hence, once again, it is understood that there is a need for independence to take more realistic steps for the development of the country. Otherwise, even if the colonised country gains some opportunities in the field of economy and makes a profit financially; still, it is still an illusionary excitement. In fact, whatever is considered as profit or facilities are for the betterment and prosperity of the coloniser. At some point, Singh emphasises the cooperation of the colonised countries to overcome their problems so that they can announce their independence. However, he warns the reader that the menace will exist in relation to these actions since no coloniser deliberately wants its subject to be free; that would mean the end of their violation of the land. Therefore, the colonisers justify their acts by emphasising the inability and primitivity of the colonised people for they cannot rule their lands themselves, but they need a fostering hand that will provide the necessary means for the colonial government’s development.

In the novel, Naipaul dwells upon his notions on decolonisation through Singh and his father. Thus, he explores it as a colonial politician and from the perspective of a leader of a revolutionary group. Consequently, he analyses this process in a more comprehensive style with its various aspects. The resistance against the coloniser forces and the decolonisation process takes up an important place in history. These riots are carried out by the lower classes. As Althusser explains in his essay, according to Marxism, the masses give shape to the course of history (2008, p. 77) and revolution is carried out by these masses. Therefore, the triumph can be achieved by forming a powerful union of the masses. Regarding this issue, many Orientalist scholars emphasise the primitivity, superstition, and irrationality of the Eastern and non-white people. For instance, Hegel makes an irrelevant comment claiming that the sun rises first in the East, therefore, the Eastern people represent “unreflected consciousness” (2000, p. 15). Consequently, they could not form a union, but they needed a dominant ruler, which means, the white European coloniser.

First of all, Naipaul employs the metaphor for the colonised land as a “house”. The protagonist ponders:

Was it the house? It was one of those large timber town houses of the old colonial period, slightly decaying in spite of its modern kitchen. We both thought it attractive but for some reason we had never succeeded in colonizing it. Large areas of it remained empty; it felt like a rented house, which soon has to go back to its true owner. (Naipaul, 2002, p. 73-74)

At this point, the coloniser's Orientalist approach is employed with the words “decaying” yet “attractive’. Similarly, in Forster's *A Passage to India*, the mosque is described as: “The courtyard – entered through a ruined gate – contained an ablution-tank of fresh clear water, which was always in motion (...). The courtyard was paved with broken slabs (1936, p. 41). Hence, these are justifications that the colonisers claim, for instance, that the land needs to be colonised because the society is “decaying”, “out fashioned” and “falling apart”. Therefore, the coloniser defends the necessity for the “regulation” and “improvement” of the land by the civilised coloniser. This statement is crucial for the notion of decolonisation because Naipaul emphasises that the colonisers' occupation of the land will not last forever because they do not belong to this “house”. They will have to hand it over to its genuine owners sooner or later.

In the novel, the protagonist's father is the one who initiates a decolonisation movement and tries to become the leader of a revolutionary group. His protests begin with his smashing of Coca-Cola bottles (Naipaul 2002, p. 112). Later, he gives a speech to motivate people and to encourage them to ignite sparks of revolution. However, the anger of these groups begins to fade away after a while. “At school, there was no more talk of Gurudeva or riots or burnings; we all preferred, for various reasons, to forget that frustration” (Naipaul, 2002, p. 148). The school is another space for the employment of the ideology. Althusser puts forward that “Ideological State Apparatuses” teach people the ruling class' ideology, that is, the coloniser's in this case (2008, p. 26). Through education, people are taught how to behave in the public sphere, so, the subjects are taught to be obedient to the ruling class management. Thus, they are expected to comply with the rules that the coloniser has set for them and make sure that this system's order is not interrupted. Nonetheless, Singh's father does not give up on his protests easily. The protagonist states: “But for me there was something more. Primitive, bestial, degraded: these were some of the words used by certain sections of the island. I shared their horror, but I had my own reasons. (...) The horse-sacrifice, the Aryan ritual of victory and overlordship (...)” (Naipaul, 2002, p. 152). Singh thinks that his father is a frantic man for his actions, and he feels threatened as he shares the same concerns with the coloniser as a mimic man. Apparently, Singh is a submissive subject who acknowledges his inferiority and thinks that the colony will never be able to acquire such power and unity. Naipaul gives an account of both the coloniser and the colonised with his portrayal of the protagonist. Gramsci explores the notion of hegemony and emphasises that hegemony is exercised by the ruling class and this hegemony takes place by the consent of the great masses of population. Thus, the discipline is ensured “legally” (Gramsci, 2000, p. 40). Towards the end of the novel, Browne and Singh's political struggle for their own country's sake draws attention. Nevertheless, their attempts lack determination and faith in their cause. Furthermore, their effort seems futile since the Isabella Imperial has no power to fight back their colonisers. In conclusion, Singh's statements indicate that resistance against the coloniser can take place only when the determination and the strong resilience of the subjects are achieved. Without the consistency of determination, these attempts for liberation are doomed to fail. Therefore, Naipaul suggests a wider perspective that one can observe this process from the coloniser's and the colonised one's views.

As a result, V. S. Naipaul's work is crucial in terms of postcolonial representation since the writer's

autobiographical background and fiction are intermingled in the novel. He does not only narrate a story of colonised people's struggles and sufferings but also employs his political views at the same time. Thus, he explains the hindrances and restrictions that are to be dealt in order to achieve liberation from the shackles of the coloniser. He underlines the fact that neither political resistance nor revolutionary resistance can be sufficient for the liberation movement. There is a need for belief in the cause, a strong union and comradeship as well as political and economic power. On the other hand, he points out the ideological dominance of the coloniser which results in the mimicry of the colonised. This admiration and the submission of the colonised people are the primary elements that the colonisation process feeds upon. Although Bhabha argues that mimicry is a mockery and a parody for the coloniser, this is also indispensable for the continuation of the system since it secures it by asserting the coloniser's identity and destroying the colonised one's. Apart from this, interracial relations and immigrant issues also emerge with the postcolonial discourse. Hybridity has become a phobia and people of mixed race have lived as outcasts and as minorities in the society. Even in such a case, while they have shown a respectful attitude towards the coloniser, they have kept othering the colonised side at the same time. Even though hybrid people are colonised together with people from different races, they have not managed to realise the necessity of forming a union as the oppressed groups.

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