



V. S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*: Disillusionment with the Metropolis, Cosmopolitanism and Colonial Education

Weiwei Xu

College of International Studies, Southwest University

2 Tiansheng Road, Chongqing 400715, China

E-mail: xuww1125@163.com

Received: 19-09-2015

Accepted: 10-12-2015

Advance Access Published: December 2015

Published: 01-03-2016

doi:10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.5n.2p.108

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.5n.2p.108>

The research is financed by Chongqing Social Science Planning Fund Program. No. 2014QNWX30 and The Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities. No. SWU1509173, SWU1409348.

Abstract

This paper aims to identify the disillusionment with metropolitan-centred cosmopolitanism in Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*. The immigrants are chosen as the focal point to reveal the dissociation between them and the metropolis. Examining Naipaul's description of the immigrant population's metropolitan life, I contend that the cosmopolitan ideology is in stark contrast with the reality of coexistence, intermingling and hybridisation. Mere coexistence of people of heterogeneous cultural, national, religious or other identity formations cannot guarantee the uptake or expression of cosmopolitan openness. Making use of cosmopolitan theories in marketing and sociology and taking subaltern and third world experiences as forces of intervention and interruption into account, the fraudulence and infeasibility of cosmopolitanism as hedonistic consumption of global products and luxurious stylisation of metropolitan life in the novel is highlighted. This study reveals that it is colonial education that builds unreal colonial fantasy of the metropolis and cosmopolitanism on the one hand and leads to disillusionment on the other.

Keywords: colonial fantasy, disillusionment, metropolis, immigrant, cosmopolitan openness, consumption, colonial education

1. Introduction

V. S. Naipaul said in an interview that although his 1967 novel *The Mimic Men* shuttles back and forth between the Caribbean and England, it is "more about London than anything else" (Rouse, 1997, p. 10). Indeed, the novel's tripartite structure illustrates this point clearly. Though the narrator/protagonist Ralph Singh's reminiscence on his childhood and political career in Isabella (a fictional Caribbean island resembling Trinidad) in the second and third sections are the longest, he begins the book with his first experience in London as a college student and ends it with his final exile there when all the separate strands of his life are brought into a concluding perspective.

Since it is by now common sense to associate cosmopolitanism with the **metropolis**, a site for circulation, transit, exchange and interaction, *The Mimic Men* becomes the perfect text to identify how Naipaul constructs the relations between the metropolis and cosmopolitanism within the postcolonial context. In the perpetual oscillation between the utopian and dystopian representation of London, *The Mimic Men* challenges the normative conception of cosmopolitanism rooted in the metropolitan culture by inviting subaltern and third world experiences as forces of intervention and interruption.

2. Disillusionment with the Metropolis

Naipaul's 1963 novel *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion*, his only novel set entirely in England, dealing with exclusively English characters, has already dramatised "the fraudulence of the big city, the irrelevance of its apparent order" (White, 1975, p.133). *The Mimic Men* further reinforces Naipaul's shattered colonial fantasy of London, epitome of European high culture and cosmopolitanism.

2.1 *The Immigrant's Irrelevance to the Metropolis*

At the opening of *The Mimic Men*, during his first sojourn in London shortly after the war with all the compulsions and hopes driving him away from his native island of Isabella, Ralph Singh portrays his experience of all the insecurities and uncertainties as an immigrant. The Kensington boarding-house where he stays is owned by a Jewish landlord Mr Shylock, "the recipient each week of fifteen times three guineas, the possessor of a mistress and of suits made of cloth so fine I felt I could eat it". These seem to speak of Mr Shylock's financial, sexual and social fulfilments in the metropolis. Ralph Singh even imagines Mr Shylock looking "distinguished, like a lawyer or businessman or politician" (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 3). Nonetheless, his admiration and aspiration are very quickly destroyed by the reality in England—the "secrecy and swiftness" (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 4) of Mr Shylock's death. Even now that once embodied

purity and perfection, order and civilisation for Ralph Singh becomes a threatening element, when he sees it for the first time at Mr Shylock's attic:

Snow. At last; my element. And these were flakes, the airiest crushed ice. More than crushed: shivered. But the greater enchantment was the light. Then I climbed up and up towards the skylight, stopping at each floor to look out at the street. The carpet stopped, the stairs ended in a narrow gallery. Above me was the skylight, below me the stair-well darkening as it deepened. The attic door was ajar. I went in, and found myself in an empty room harsh with a dead-fluorescent light that seemed artificial. The room felt cold, exposed and abandoned. The boards were bare and gritty. A mattress on dusty sheets of newspapers; a worn blue flannellette spread; a rickety writing-table. No more. (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 4-5)

This selection of Ralph Singh's observation emphasises the tensions: his feeling of expectation is coloured by the awareness of disillusionment, and his mood shifts from the ecstatic to the morbid. He even realises "an analogy between the wandering, displaced Aryan and the homeless Jew, both cosmopolitans rejected by the societies in which they attempt to settle" (King, 2003, p. 78). Looking out from the attic, he sees "the thin lines of brown smoke rising from ugly chimneys", and the plastered wall of houses next to the "wholly white", "tremendously braced and buttressed" bomb site. There is a contrast between the beauty of the snow and the ugliness of the buildings and the bomb site. The tension of Ralph Singh's experience lies in the minute observation of the dinginess and shabbiness of the setting within which the perception and hope of absolute beauty occur. It predetermines his decisive failure in London later. He begins to question his irrelevance to the metropolis: "Yet what was I to do with so complete a beauty?" He "felt all the magic of the city go away and had an intimation of the forlornness of the city and of the people who lived in it" (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 5). The mood of *The Mimic Men*, Ralph Singh's memoir, is thus established—the fusion of the moment of expected fulfilment and celebration with the knowledge of loss and desolation on both communal and individual levels.

2.2 *The Immigrant's Lack of Cosmopolitan Openness*

Mr Shylock's boarding-house is a world of immigrants from different parts of the world. The christening party for the illegitimate child, mothered by the boarding-house's Maltese housekeeper Lieni and fathered by an Indian engineer, gives a clue about the "forlornness" of London and its inhabitants:

Other boarders came down. The girl from Kenya; her man friend, a blond, vacant alcoholic incapable of extended speech and making up for this with a fixed smile and gestures of great civility; the smiling, mute Burmese student; the Jewish youth, tall and prophetic in black; the bespectacled young Cockney who had as much trouble with his two Italian mistresses, according to Lieni, as with the police; the Frenchman from Morocco who worked all day in his room, kept to Moroccan temperature with a paraffin stove, translating full-length American thrillers at speed—he did one or two a month. (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 13)

Here, a tableau of ethnic diversity is painted. The heterogeneity and intermixture of immigrants with different cultural backgrounds instantly rise in visibility, suggesting a major demographic shift in the post-war metropolis.

Although Naipaul makes the hybrid experience in the historical context of transnational migration the primary ground for the intermingling of cultures and identities, he does not naively contend that mere coexistence of people of heterogeneous cultural, national, religious or other identity formations guarantees the uptake or expression of cosmopolitan openness. He is sceptical about people's cosmopolitan disposition—a conscious attempt to become familiar and engaged with others, and to be receptive to cultural outputs of others. Whereas *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion* presents the insularity and prejudice of the metropolitan society that eludes immigrants, *The Mimic Men* discusses from the perspective of the immigrant how and why they restrain themselves from the mingling and fusion of the cultures of others. The immigrants in London in *The Mimic Men* are not enthusiastic about experiencing joy or stimulation through immersing themselves in cultural differences. There are only fear, suspicion and exclusion in their engagement with others. This seems to be an irony—the global migration has "contaminated" the larger world, while the immigrants themselves are not in praise of cosmopolitan contamination. In the novel, at the christening party for Lieni's baby, Lieni's Maltese friends "came in together and talked glumly in English and their own language" (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 12). Among the disparate elements of the boarding-house, the Maltese, enjoying immediate contacts with different cultures, encapsulate themselves in their territorial language and culture. Ralph Singh observes: "Conversation, apart from that conducted by the Maltese group, was not easy. We sat and waited for Lieni, whom we could hear in the kitchen." (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 13) But Lieni is virtually left in despair: she and her baby are abandoned by the engineer who has a wife and children in India. The abandonment ultimately undercuts and mocks the christening of the hybrid baby, a seeking for official sanction.

Compared to the Maltese who do not step out of their ethnic clique, Ralph Singh seems more "cosmopolitan". He always picks out the Continental girls (Norwegian, Swedish, French and German Swiss) in his sexual encounters in London. However, he confesses:

Both of us adrift in London, the great city, I with my past, my own darkness, she no doubt with hers. Always at these moments the talk of the past, the landscapes, their familiar settings which I wished them to describe and then feared to hear about. I never wished even in imagination to enter their Norman farmhouse or their flats in Nassjo, pronounced Neshway, or their houses set atop the rocky fiords of geography books. I never wished to

hear of the relationships that bound them to these settings, the pettiness by which they had already been imprisoned. I never wanted our darkness, our auras, to mingle. (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 24)

Obviously, Ralph Singh's involvement is superficial. Like the Maltese, he refuses an open stance toward others. His random interracial sexual liaisons, which show "his inability to be part of or to lose himself in someone or some group beyond himself" (King, 2003, p. 74), force upon him alienation, bewilderment and corruption. He even secretly feels relieved when they fail. Ironically, among all his sexual relationships, only his incestuous relationship with his Aunt Sally in Isabella brings him the strongest sense of purity and security:

I could not conceive of myself with a girl or a woman of another community or even of families like my own. Here for me was security, understanding, the relationship based on perfect knowledge, in which body of one flesh joined to body of the same flesh, and all external threat was diminished... There would be nothing again like this mutual acceptance, without words or declarations, without posturing or deceptions; and no flesh was to be as sweet as this, almost my own. (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 168)

This indicates that what restrains Ralph Singh's cosmopolitan impulse is his inborn, enclosed Hindu system of racial and cultural purity alerting him to the potential danger of hybridity. It demonstrates the finding of Zlatko Skrbis and Ian Woodward (2007) that "globally-derived cosmopolitan openness is counterbalanced by various allegiances, anxieties and self-interests" (p. 736).

2.3 *The Immigrant's Isolation in the Metropolis*

In his confession of the anxious nature of his interracial sexual failures, Ralph Singh forms a new connection—his pursuit of sex and his disillusionment with London. His awareness of the social isolation within which he exists is evident:

How right our Aryan ancestors were to create gods. We seek sex, and are left with two private bodies on a stained bed. The larger erotic dream, the god, has eluded us. It is so whenever, moving out of ourselves, we look for extensions of ourselves. It is with cities as it is with sex. We seek the physical city and find only a conglomeration of private cells. In the city as nowhere else we are reminded that we are individuals, units. Yet the idea of the city remains; it is the god of the city that we pursue, in vain. (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 17)

As Peggy Nightingale (1987) observes, the god of the city that Ralph Singh searches for is "the god who would unite individuals in a common order" (p. 100). Rather, he experiences London as a private nightmare of intensified alienation and loneliness:

Here was the city, the world. I waited for the flowering to come to me. The trams on the Embankment sparked blue. The river was edged and pierced with reflections of light, blue and red and yellow. Excitement! Its heart must have lain somewhere. But the god of the city was elusive. The tram was filled with individuals, each man returning to his own cell. The factories and warehouses, whose exterior lights decorated the river, were empty and fraudulent. I would play with famous names as I walked empty streets and stood on bridges. But the magic of names soon faded. Here was the river, here the bridge, there that famous building. But the god was veiled. My incantation of names remained unanswered. In the great city, so solid in its light, which gave colour even to unrendered concrete—to me as colourless as rotting wooden fences and new corrugated-iron roofs—in this solid city life was two-dimensional. (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 18)

Here, London, "the great city, centre of the world" (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 17) and the symbol of colonial hope and promise, is shown as a scene of lost and abandoned individuals, lonely and helpless in distress. The physical greatness of the metropolis that has nothing to do with the colonials/immigrants only reminds them of their powerlessness. In the words of John Clement Ball (2004), the phantasmic metropolis that Ralph Singh experiences "highlights the dissolution of community into atomized individuals" and "dissolves individuals into nothingness" (p. 145-146). Ralph Singh's feeling of rootless isolation is a common experience shared by ethnically-segregated immigrants: they are shunned by the host society, have no community to fall back on, and at the same time are afraid of stepping out of their home culture to get involved with others. Similarly, Naipaul (2002a) writes about his early London life in *An Area of Darkness*: "Here I became no more than an inhabitant of a big city, robbed of loyalties, time passing, taking me away from what I was, thrown more and more into myself... All mythical lands faded, and in the big city I was confined to a smaller world than I had ever known. I became my flat, my desk, my name." (p. 38) The dissociation between the metropolis and its immigrant population illustrates Naipaul's shattered colonial fantasy that entering the idealised metropolis can guarantee the individual's personal achievement.

In *The Mimic Men*, the immigrant's forced status of being unattached in their two-dimensional metropolitan life provides an "advantage" for them: they can invent their identity as they wish. As Ralph Singh tells the reader, "there was no one to link my present with my past, no one to note my consistencies or inconsistencies. It was up to me to choose my character" (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 19). To compensate for their anonymity in the metropolis, the immigrants offer "simple versions of themselves" (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 13) by reference to upper-class, European respectability. For

example, an Italian woman is addressed as the Countess; it is said that she is “‘in society’ in Naples; in Malta she had once been to a ball which Princess Elizabeth had attended” (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 10). Duminicu who steals incessantly from shops and stores claims his noble birth in Malta. Ralph Singh himself chooses “the character that was easiest and most attractive”: he becomes “the dandy, the extravagant colonial, indifferent to scholarship” (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 19). With the help and encouragement of Lieni who tries to fit the image of a “smart London girl” (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 10), he exudes an air of affluence typical of “the rich colonial” (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 20) with an affectation of casualness and style. He wears a cummerbund, frequents the dances held at the British Council where he frivolously exaggerates his dancer’s movements and tries out his French with the Continental girls, takes a taxi to the college a couple of times a week, enjoys the admiration from his Isabellan fellows for his stylish fashion taste, and travels about England and the Continent. The dandy persona that Ralph Singh plays in his mimicry is, in the words of Steph Ceraso and Patricia Connolly (2009), “a hip, British elegance—a feminized version of hegemonic masculinity” (p. 114).

3. Disillusionment with Cosmopolitanism

3.1 *Self-Definition, Consumption and Cosmopolitanism*

Ceraso and Connolly (2009) further point out that “Ralph’s performance of upper-class British masculinity is blatantly strategic” (p. 114). I would argue that it is more a cultural strategy of self-definition and self-maintenance. In Isabella since his childhood, Ralph Singh knows that “it was a disgrace to be poor” (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 89). Although he sympathises with his alienated father (a poor schoolteacher), he prefers to lay claim to his mother’s family. His mother’s family are “among the richest in the island” and belong to a small group known as “Isabella millionaires” (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 89). They own the Bella Bella Bottling Works, and are the local bottlers of Coca-Cola; they sponsor two popular radio programmes, and organise schoolchildren to visit their factory, distributing free Coca-Colas at the end of these educational tours. From the perspective of consumerist cosmopolitanism, the roving commodities of a global brand like Coca-Cola are vehicles for defining one’s place in the world. Jonathan Friedman (1990) argues that “consumption within the bounds of the world system is always a consumption of identity, canalized by a negotiation between self-definition and the array of possibilities offered by the capitalist market” (p. 314). Certain consumers are said to buy global brands to enhance their self-image as being cosmopolitan, modern and sophisticated. Friedman (1990) uses the consumption of coke imported from Holland in Brazzaville as an example—“to be someone or to express one’s position is to display the imported can in the windshield of one’s car. Distinction is not simply show, but is genuine ‘cargo’ which always comes from the outside, a source of wellbeing and fertility and a sign of power” (p. 315). In *The Mimic Men*, the wealth and importance of his mother’s family as “agents for external capitalists” (Nazareth, 1977, p. 143) set an ideal pattern of elitism for Ralph Singh. He sees the association with Coca-Cola as a demonstration of privilege: “In Coca-Cola therefore I at an early age took an almost proprietorial interest. I welcomed gibes at its expense and liked to pretend they were aimed at me personally, though I could not find it in myself to go as far as Cecil, who offered to fight any boy who spoke disrespectfully of his family’s product.” He is bothered on his tour to the factory of the Bella Bella Bottling Works by his anonymous position. He envies Cecil, the heir to the family’s business who “prowled around everywhere, Mister Cecil to everybody” (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 90). In London, he no longer has to live under Cecil’s shadow. His intentional promotion of his lineage as the bottler of Coca-Cola wins respect from his Isabellan fellows. It further wins Lieni’s willingness to help to create his dandy persona, “a performance of certain race and class norms (white, bourgeois)” (Ceraso and Connolly, 2009, p. 114). Without the help of the widely-known cultural image of Coca-Cola, Ralph Singh’s dandy persona will not seem to be convincing or admitted in the metropolis.

In London, Ralph Singh is attracted to Sandra, a white, English schoolmate. Sandra’s Englishness outweighs Ralph Singh’s Indo-Caribbean identity; her cosmopolitan taste outshines his dandy persona. Ralph Singh reflects on the austerity of post-war England: “The war had also left its mark. No one was more sensitive to anything that savoured of the luxurious; no one had a greater capacity for creating occasions. A bottle of wine was an occasion, a meal in a restaurant, a seat in the dress circle.” (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 46) Sandra, however, displays her cosmopolitan taste through consumption to rise above and to reject the crudeness of the lower class into which she was born. She has “a cruel eye for the common” and passes Ralph Singh “the word and the assessing skill”. She is “determined to fight her way up” by conducting witty conversations, consuming expensive food, and diligently reading approved contemporary authors like George Bernard Shaw. She even expresses her wish to be either a nun or a king’s mistress! Ralph Singh’s attraction to her is grounded in her power and strength “to be free of the danger of that commonness which encircled her”. He confesses: “To me, drifting about the big city that had reduced me to futility, she was all that was positive. She showed how much could be extracted so easily from the city; she showed how easy occasions were.” (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 46) Sandra’s enjoyment of consumption satisfies Ralph Singh’s colonial fantasy of how cosmopolitanism should exist in the metropolis. He views his alliance with her cosmopolitan taste as an alliance with the metropolitan attributes of ambition, spirit and an avid celebration of life. But the fact that Ralph Singh overlooks is: when Sandra asks him to marry her, she is uncertain about her future in London. Having failed a qualifying examination, the route of escape from the commonness through education is no longer available to her. Returning to the colonial milieu of Isabella where she can enjoy a privileged position with Ralph Singh the dandy, she at least can still play her persona as a cosmopolitan. The marriage has nothing to do with love or respect from the beginning.

3.2 *The Infeasibility of Cosmopolitanism in the Third World*

If London is the testing ground for Ralph Singh’s colonial fantasy, Isabella is the testing ground for Sandra’s cosmopolitanism. Upon the couple’s return to Isabella, they soon find it easy and comfortable to operate in a “neutral,

fluid” group of people similar to themselves:

The men were professional, young, mainly Indian, with a couple of local whites and coloured; they had all studied abroad and married abroad; on Isabella they were linked less by their background and professional standing than by their expatriate and fantastically cosmopolitan wives or girl friends. Americans, singly and in pairs, were an added element. It was a group to whom the island was a setting; its activities and interests were no more than they seemed. There were no complicating loyalties or depths; for everyone the past had been cut away. (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 57)

These self-labelled cosmopolitans build up what Marylouise Caldwell, Kristen Blackwell and Kirsty Tulloch (2006) term as “expatriate enclaves as desirable milieus” (p. 136). Seeing themselves as superior to the Isabellan locals, they show little enthusiasm for immersing themselves in the local culture. They only accept experiences offered by their own social contacts and networks that retain an element of cosmopolitan elitism in opposition to the old world from which they feel they have escaped. As Caldwell, Blackwell and Tulloch (2006) find out that most of their informants are “happy to embrace the expatriate lifestyle, seeing it as a site for a desirable constellation of consumption choices” (p. 136), the cosmopolitans in *Isabella* in *The Mimic Men* see their hedonistic consumption as a display of their cosmopolitanism, which separates them from the locals. Lacking openness and adaptability to Isabella, they favour maintaining a global lifestyle and international consumption patterns, which can persist across environments. They consume quantities of caviar and champagne “for the sake of the words alone” (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 58), have picnics on the beach, barbecue around the illuminated swimming-pool, or build a Scandinavian-style beach-house with a fireplace that might never be used on the tropical island. This is in accord with the finding of Amir Grinstein and Luc Wathieu (2012) that cosmopolitans are “likely to seek global consumption patterns that they carry with them wherever they reside” (p. 337), even though their persistence with their previous choices is “dysfunctional or suboptimal with respect to the new environment” (p. 338). For Ralph Singh and Sandra, consumption interests and activities, via embodied preferences for familiar tastes in dressing, food, literature, music, interior décor and special possessions, provide an important means of constructing friendship networks and stabilising their everyday life. Ralph Singh observes that Sandra is “at her most avid and most appreciative” (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 58). Not caring about money, she savours brand names of French wines, shows off her fashion taste by wearing Indian sandals, London stockings and shoes together, and boasts the glamour of her London accent, her interest in literature and music. For the first time, Ralph Singh’s feeling of anonymity disappears. He feels like a real cosmopolitan in a way he never has while living in the metropolis. He proclaims: “We celebrated our unexpected freedom; we celebrated the island and our knowledge, already growing ambiguous, of the world beyond; we celebrated our cosmopolitanism, which had more meaning here than it ever had in the halls of the British Council.” (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 58)

Naipaul further explores the infeasibility of cosmopolitanism marked by hedonistic consumption in the Third World in *The Mimic Men*. The biggest problem of cosmopolitanism is that it transplants the idealised Western cultural forces of authenticity to shape the non-Western society, defining it as a second-rate imitation without a close contact or involvement with the local milieu. Grinstein and Wathieu (2012) find in their study that the expected duration of sojourn is a crucial moderator of cosmopolitan behaviours. In long-duration sojourns, cosmopolitans tend to retreat into a global lifestyle, as they “progressively come to view adjustments as a loss of their identity, a costly confinement away from their preferred international consumption patterns and global lifestyle standards and expectations” (p. 338). With the passage of time, the cosmopolitans in *Isabella* in *The Mimic Men* more and more eschew the local people and culture in favour of the perceived global standards of excellence. Ralph Singh and Sandra grow apathetic to the beauty of Isabella after listening to their friends’ pastoral odes to the West (the sunset in Mississippi, the snow in Prague, and the English Midland landscape at dusk). The sense of place and community, an assemblage of fragments and a shared fantasy, of the cosmopolitans in *Isabella* is forged through their sense of themselves as the elite, as travellers, as touched by the charm and magic of worldliness and metropolitan life. The power of the myth of the metropolitan centre further displaces the periphery. Later, when all the consumption activities in self-repetitions become boring, the cosmopolitans begin to complain about “the narrowness of island life: the absence of good conversation or proper society, the impossibility of going to the theatre or hearing a *good* symphony concert” (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 69). Thomas F. Halloran (2007) comments: “The pastorals of the centre—the cosmopolitan voice that critiques Isabella’s lack of centres of national and cultural arenas—exemplify the power of Western writing to influence the imagination of the colony and create a hierarchy of culture, whereby the colony defines itself on the colonizer’s terms. This construction is particularly powerful because it is the colonized who lust for Western commodities and traditions.” (p. 124) The cosmopolitans perennially complain about the cultural sterility of Isabella that cannot even provide them with satisfactory diversions. They even go to the airport to listen to the names of foreign cities, viewing it as an entertainment. This is because their values are framed around the cultural specificity that only originates in the West. In the analysis of Craig J. Thompson and Siok Kuan Tambyah (1999), expatriate professionals incorporate cosmopolitanism as a system of ideological discourses into their idealised identity project. They thus emphasise that the personalised uses of cosmopolitan discourses such as consumption are all situated within sociologically-defined class and status positions (p. 217). Jan Nederveen Pieterse (2006) concludes: “The strange double life of conventional cosmopolitanism is that while claiming universality it reflects a regional, parochial order.” (p. 1252) In *The Mimic Men*, Naipaul similarly places great emphasis on the historical legacy of colonial meanings and cultural ideals encoded in cosmopolitanism and the ways that these ideological structures are subtly reproduced through the consumption of cultural diversity. The cosmopolitans in *Isabella* live in their own bubble, ignoring the contradiction between their celebration of cosmopolitanism that is

supposedly about openness to other cultures and the distance that they intentionally keep from the local milieu. As they are completely embedded in the self representation of the Western power, the kind of cosmopolitanism that they represent is only featured by narcissism, cultural monotony and historical parochialism. Against the indefiniteness of Isabella, it becomes a form of appropriation whereby cultural difference is consumed, subsumed and ultimately dominated.

3.3 *The Fraudulence of Cosmopolitanism*

Sandra's ethnocentric, illiberal attitude toward race further exposes the fraudulence of cosmopolitanism. When the cosmopolitan charm wanes in Isabella and commonness engulfs her again, Sandra begins to assert a higher view of herself through a contemptuous labelling of others, according to their national or racial background. She pejoratively calls her Swedish friend "common little Lapp", a Dutch girl who marries to a Surinamese "subkraut", and a Latvian girl "sub-Asiatic" (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 68); among all, Isabella is "the most inferior place in the world" full of "inferior expats" (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 71). Sandra's high self-concept does not go beyond the anxiety of pettiness, and easily dwindles into the most common form of racial snobbery, the same defensive measure adopted by her cosmopolitan friends to shore up the pride of their elitism and privileges. Even Ralph Singh feels more and more uncomfortable with her "fixed judgements and attitudes" (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 68). In his eyes, when the metropolitan certainty that he seeks in Sandra is shown to be nothing more than emptiness and ennui, she becomes as vulnerable as himself in London; when the desperate self-defence behind her fake cosmopolitanism becomes clear, she becomes superfluous. Sandra soon leaves Ralph Singh for Miami with her American lover. The quick failure of their marriage (a pattern of dependence and pretension) symbolises the infeasibility of the metropolitan, elitist model of cosmopolitanism in the Third World.

Despite the failure of his marriage, Ralph Singh becomes a successful real-estate man in Isabella. Inheriting his grandfather's derelict citrus plantation, he builds a highly sought-after housing development called Kripalville (soon corrupted to Crippleville). Whereas he cannot be "happy spending without earning" (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 19) due to his small income in London, he now as a young millionaire who "worked hard and played hard" (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 59) no longer has that concern. However, Ralph Singh gradually sees that within the unanchored group of his cosmopolitan friends, relationships are artificial, insincere and stained. He senses envy, jealousy and suspicion beneath the self-congratulatory surface of their hedonistic consumption; their cosmopolitanism turns into a petty rivalry. When they crazily damage his newly-built Roman house, he drives to the ruins of a famous old slave plantation to calm down, immersing himself in the pain and rage of Isabella's history and reality. Later, at the time of writing the memoir when he is more concerned with his sense of self, he records his business success as a pure fact giving him no sense of achievement or satisfaction. He is aware that the outward prosperity is only a smoke-screen that hides his alienation from himself. He reminds his readers more than once that his prosperity is owed more to his instinct or intuition than true foresight in doing business. This is an implication that Ralph Singh is alienated in a consumer society, in which "capitalist cosmopolitanism" in the form of overconsumption is "the dominant variant of cosmopolitanism" (Pieterse, 2006, p. 1247).

Ralph Singh's business success leads him into the local politics for Isabella's independence. Unlike his cosmopolitan friends, he actually participates in the local milieu. But this involvement further dehumanises him, and eventually confirms his disillusionment. Ralph Singh argues that politicians on the whole are hollow people clinging to some form of artificial power to create the illusion of success through manipulation:

Politicians are people who truly make something out of nothing. They have few concrete gifts to offer. They are not engineers or artists or makers. They are manipulators; they offer themselves as manipulators. Having no gifts to offer, they seldom know what they seek. They might say they seek power. But their definition of power is vague and unreliable. Is power the chauffeured limousine with fine white linen on the seats, the men from the Special Branch outside the gates, the skilled and deferential servants? But this is only indulgence, which might be purchased by anyone at any time in a first-class hotel... The politician is more than a man with a cause, even when this cause is no more than self-advancement. (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 37)

The politicians only care about whether what they sell will be bought by common people. They sell their creation of an illusion of their elitism through playacting. It is about consumption again. Ralph Singh observes that colonial politicians, in fear of losing the abstract power, push their bluff further in frenzy. In Isabella, colonial politicians are puppets manipulated through the Queen's representative, the Governor, numerous English expatriates who "virtually monopolized the administrative section of our civil service" (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 228), and higher technical experts on short-term contracts. They cannot stand on their own in the "fragmented, inorganic" society where real powers "come from the outside" (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 224); their unstable foundation rests with the metropolitan centre. Their utter powerlessness drives them away from the poor people whom they claim to represent, but closer to "the richness of the world" suddenly revealed to them "in trips abroad at the invitation of foreign governments, in conferences in London, in the chauffeured Humbers and in the first-class hotels of half a dozen cities" (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 223). In their contact with the mother country, they are irresistibly drawn by the glamour of "the trappings of power" (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 229) in the same way that Ralph Singh used to be attracted to Sandra's cosmopolitan orientation in the form of consumption. In fear that "the rich world so wonderfully open to them might at any moment be withdrawn", the colonial politicians try hard to "turn that airy power...into a reality" (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 223). Bribery, assets transferring overseas and political scheming run rampantly in Isabella. In a dream-like, hallucinatory tone, Ralph Singh

recounts the corruption and impotency of the colonial politicians in Isabella's futile political sphere. Nevertheless, Ralph Singh himself refuses to go along with the squalid stream of the endemically corrupted. After his experience in London and his failed marriage with Sandra, he is aware of the naivety of his colonial fantasy. After his five-year political career, he voluntarily chooses to retire, when he is sacrificed during a difficult attempt to nationalise sugar-cane estates. Though disgraced, his withdrawal is somehow ennobling rather than irresponsible.

4. Disillusionment with Colonial Education

The biggest development that Naipaul makes in *The Mimic Men* is that he for the first time reflects on the corrosive, damaging effect of colonial education on the sensibility of students like Ralph Singh and colonial politicians, who enter the elite strata of the society. Colonial education brings about escapism and fantasy, and leads them to hollow mimicry and a denial of their environment and of themselves.

4.1 Colonial Education vs. Alienation

In the essay "Jasmine", Naipaul (2004) criticises the built-in alienating effect of the formal practice of studying English literature: it divorces a reader from relating literature to real life and breeds experiential separation. English literature, he says, comes to him as "an alien mythology", and "books came from afar; they could offer only fantasy" (p. 45-46). An important theme of this essay is students' inability to associate the word that they have read with the object that they have never seen. Literature's combined appeal rests with the fantasy that it provides for an imagination that only has the word as reference. Naipaul recalls that as a young colonial in Trinidad growing up reading English novels, he has developed the habit of imaginatively transposing the stories into a Trinidadian setting, thereby engaging in literature without the interference of knowing about England or its parochial, national concerns. The exposure to and familiarity with the reality subsequently gained by residence in England, nonetheless, has taken the deceptive colonial fantasy out of his readings in the English literary tradition, substituted by local knowledge instead. The article's final coda where Naipaul (2004) recounts an incident in British Guiana describes the moment when he learned the name of a flower (jasmine) that had remained nameless since his childhood. After his initial exhilaration, he concludes: "But the word and the flower had been separate in my mind for too long. They did not come together." (p. 52)

4.2 Colonial Education vs. Colonial Fantasy

Naipaul's comment on his own school-day response to literature is similar to Ralph Singh's. In *The Mimic Men*, Ralph Singh sees the incubation of his emptiness and ennui in the education that he has received at Isabella Imperial and in the environmental influence of his childhood and student days. The Western-style education is imitative, predisposing the students to daydream-like colonial fantasy. The students at Isabella Imperial learn of the varieties of Canadian apples, skiing in the Laurentians, and "*la circulation*, not circulation but *traffic*" (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 157) in Liege, instead of their own culture and history. The carefully-crafted colonial education evokes cultures and values of a faraway world, creating unrealistic myths that become the focus of their unfulfilled desire and fantasy. As Ralph Singh comments, studying English, Arithmetic, Reading and Geography and writing essays about visits to temperate-zone farms, they are prepared to be "natural impersonators" (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 144). Meanwhile, the real life on the island is suppressed for the ideal, cosmopolitan life in the metropolis that only the educated elite may have a chance to enjoy, through imposition of a British curriculum. For the students, the world is split into two irreconcilable realms—the purely imaginary, conceptual world of the First World and the local known, embarrassing society that acquires the sense of a taboo. There is a distinct dichotomy in their life at school and outside of school. They choose to withdraw into the private but unreal sphere of school life, banishing actual everyday life. In doing so, they are further alienated and fragmented, as Ralph Singh combines fantasy and reality together: "In my imagination I saw my mother's mother leading her cow through a scene of pure pastoral: calendar pictures of English gardens superimposed on our Isabellian villages of mud and grass: village lanes on cool mornings, the ditches green and grassy, the water crystal, the front gardens of thatched huts bright with delicate flowers of every hue. She was as brightly coloured a storybook figure as her husband." (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 95) With the aid of colonial education, Ralph Singh's intellect becomes fascinated with anything from overseas. Quite ironically, he vividly imagines his ancestors as English villagers on the basis of the colonial hierarchy of cultures: the beautiful pastoral is represented in literature located exclusively in the metropolitan centre. Ralph Singh does not want to identify with his ancestors who look "aboriginal and lost, at the end of the world" (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 93), but would prefer to relate himself to a vision of the English countryside commonly recognised as more proper and superior. His colonial fantasy is constructed according to the idealised formula of the West. After years of such schizophrenic living, his mind becomes unable to distinguish between reality and unreality. His first memory of school illustrates the extent of his colonial rupture. Ralph Singh distinctly remembers having taken an apple to his teacher, even though it is impossible in reality because Isabella has no apples. Yet, his memory insists on the apple. His fragmented consciousness explains: "The editing is clearly at fault, but the edited version is all I have." (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 97) Vivek Dhaerswar (1989) attributes Ralph Singh's puzzlement to the damaging effect of colonial education in which the school is seen "as one of the apparatuses of colonial power, as a site of subjectification" (p. 75). Dhaerswar (1989) postulates that in the process of subjectification, Ralph Singh's identity is "produced by the kind of asymmetrical power implied in the substitution of the 'apple' for the 'orange'—the 'metropolitan' object/practice for the colonial one" (p. 75).

Through Ralph Singh in *The Mimic Men*, Naipaul reiterates the abstract quality of colonial education that reinforces colonial fantasy. Through irrelevancy and derogation filtering through colonial education, an imperialist worldview is created to dehumanise the students as ontologically inferior. Unconscious of their pawn-like role in the whole process of subjectification of the school, the students live double lives in disenfranchisement and hypocritical pretension: the

illusion and unrealism built by colonial education already tells them not only what they are but also what they should be. Since adolescence, Ralph Singh's restless fantasies and dichotomised worldview are redirected through European languages and readings of idealised lands and landscapes elsewhere. Associated with and surrounded by the rich (Deschampsneufs of French origin impressing everyone with his wealth, women leading pilgrimages to Miami to shop, and men carousing at the Turf Club), Ralph Singh directs his fantasy to a more elite, cosmopolitan level and mimicks the more privileged ones in the Western consumer society. Recognising his "shipwreck" in Isabella, he tries to deny it through escapism from reality into illusion.

5. Disillusionment in Exile

However, the knowledge of England's reality gained by residence there as an immigrant bridges the experiential separation bred by his colonial marginality and the knowledge of Isabella's reality acquired by involvement with the cosmopolitans and participation in the local politics as a returning emigrant eventually shatters his colonial fantasy. At the end of the novel, Ralph Singh is in the detached vacancy of exile in a suburban London hotel. The exile brings not the glamour of the metropolis, but the state of a man stripped of family, country and role in society, accepting banality and commonness that used to drive him into despair in his first sojourn in London. The final acceptance of exile brings an end to his previous judgement of the world by dreams and illusions. He calmly acknowledges that he "has given up the Empire" (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 268) like a lady who has lived in India, Kenya and Northern Rhodesia but ends up in the hotel alone. He starts a new life from looking for drama in minute observations of the smallest things around him. This habit, replacing the one of colonial fantasy, leads him to notice that the hotel is occupied by people in a similar situation of homelessness—"we are people who for one reason or another have withdrawn, from our respective countries, from the city where we find ourselves, from our families. We have withdrawn from unnecessary responsibility and attachment. We have simplified our lives" (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 269-270). He begins to have compassion for the shared human condition of lonely exile—"it comforts me to think that in this city alone there must be hundreds and thousands like ourselves". He even feels "grateful" and "intolerably moving" (Naipaul, 2002b, p. 270) for the inhabitants' emotion of honour and loyalty during the gathering at Christmas in the hotel. Ralph Singh's retrospective eye in the conclusion of the memoir that acknowledges the deflation of all his phantom fantasies underlying all the lesser dreams of cosmopolitanism is the opposite to the grim and contemplative tone in which Naipaul describes Mr Shylock's boarding-house.

6. Conclusion

The Mimic Men confirms Naipaul's shattered colonial fantasy of the metropolis and of cosmopolitanism. It reiterates the theme that the perceptual, lived reality of the heterogeneity of immigrants and the coexistence of their disparate cultures shatters and transforms the monolithic nature of the English society. Although Naipaul makes transnational migration in the form of hybridity the primary ground for the intermingling of cultures and identities, he does not naively contend that mere coexistence of people of heterogeneous cultural, national, religious or other identity formations in the metropolis guarantees the uptake or expression of cosmopolitan openness. Due to his own immigrant experience, he is sceptical about the immigrant's capability to float above the boundedness of their primordial communities and national fantasies. Though he shows sympathy to the rootless isolation of the immigrant robbed of loyalties in the metropolis, he is more concerned about the necessity of and difficulty in cultivating cosmopolitan dispositions at a micro, individual level in people's everyday experiences.

Naipaul explores the infeasibility and fraudulence of cosmopolitanism superficially understood as hedonistic consumption in the context of the Third World in *The Mimic Men*. The consumption of global brands and products does not necessarily associate with genuine cosmopolitan openness to other cultures; instead, it demonstrates a parochial lens or an imperialist outlook. Naipaul criticises cosmopolitanism's transplantation of the idealised Western cultural forces of authenticity to shape the non-Western society, defining it as a second-rate imitation without a close contact or involvement with the local milieu.

The most important step that Naipaul has taken in *The Mimic Men* is his reflection on the damaging effect of colonial education, which builds unreal colonial fantasy and leads the colonials to hollow mimicry of the elite. Presenting the process of Ralph Singh's disillusionment, Naipaul suggests that only the realistic knowledge of both the First World and the Third World can lead the colonials out of their colonial shell. Ralph Singh's final acceptance of exile as a universal human condition is in accord with Naipaul's criticism of the immigrant's self-encapsulation: to enact the cosmopolitan identity project, the incompatibility between nomadic ideals and the countervailing desire for meaningful connections to people and places, a sense of communal belonging and stable, comfortably familiar routines has to be overcome.

References

- Ball, J. C. (2004). *Imagining London: Postcolonial fiction and the transnational metropolis*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Caldwell, M., Blackwell, K., & Tulloch, K. (2006). Cosmopolitanism as a consumer orientation: Replicating and extending prior research. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 9(2), 126-139.
- Ceraso, S., & Connolly, P. (2009). The destabilization of masculinity in *A House for Mr. Biswas* and *The Mimic Men*. *Mosaic*, 42(3), 109-126.

- Dhareshwar, V. (1989). Self-fashioning, colonial habitus, and double exclusion: V. S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*. *Criticism*, 31(1), 75-102.
- Friedman, J. (1990). Being in the world: Globalization and localization. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 7(2), 311-328.
- Grinstein, A., & Wathieu, L. (2012). Happily (mal)adjusted: Cosmopolitan identity and expatriate adjustment. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 29(4), 337-345.
- Halloran, T. F. (2007). Politics and identity in V. S. Naipaul's third world. *Atenea*, 27(1), 121-134.
- King, B. (2003). *V. S. Naipaul*. Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Naipaul, V. S. (2002a). *An area of darkness*. London, England: Picador.
- Naipaul, V. S. (2002b). *The mimic men*. London, England: Picador.
- Naipaul, V. S. (2004). *Literary occasions: Essays*. London, England: Picador.
- Nazareth, P. (1977). *The Mimic Men* as a study of corruption. In R. D. Hamner (Ed), *Critical perspectives on V. S. Naipaul* (pp. 137-152). Washington, D. C.: Three Continents Press.
- Nightingale, P. (1987). *Journey through darkness: The writing of V. S. Naipaul*. St Lucia, Australia: University of Queensland Press.
- Pieterse, J. N. (2006). Emancipatory cosmopolitanism: Towards an agenda. *Development and Change*, 37(6), 1247-1257.
- Rouse, E. (1997). Naipaul: An interview with Ewart Rouse. In F. Jussawalla (Ed.), *Conversations with V. S. Naipaul* (pp. 10-13). Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Skrbis, Z., & Woodward, I. (2007). The ambivalence of ordinary cosmopolitanism: Investigating the limits of cosmopolitan openness. *The Sociological Review*, 55(4), 730-747.
- Thompson, C. J., & Tambyah, S. K. (1999). Trying to be cosmopolitan. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 26(3), 214-241.
- White, L. (1975). *V. S. Naipaul: A critical introduction*. London, England: Macmillan.