



Representation of Mimicry, Cultural Displacement and Exile in The Mimic Men

Naipaul'un The Mimic Men (Taklitçiler) Adlı Eserindeki Taklitçilik, Kültürel Yer Değişim ve Sürgün Kavramları

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ÖZET

Marjinal kişiliğiyle tanınan Naipaul, hayat boyu sürgünlük ve kültürel yer değişim kavramlarıyla ünlenen bir yazar olmuştur. Trinidad'ın coloni atmosferinde yetişen yazar, insanların özgür bireyler olarak bütünlüklerini koruma çabalarını tarihi ve ulusal bilinç eksikliğini eserlerine konu etmiştir. Naipaul evsiz bir kişilik olarak yer değişime ve kültürel kaymaya eserlerinde o kadar fazla yer vermiştir ki, bundan edebi çıkar sağlar gibi görünmüştür ve marjinal bir kişilik olmasına rağmen, ilgi odağı olmayı başarmıştır. 1967'de yayınlanan *The Mimic Men* (Taklitçiler), bölgesel, tarihi ve kültürel bilinç eksikliğini yok edici etkilerini incelemektedir. Bu nedenle, Naipaul'un *The Mimic Men* (Taklitçiler) adlı eserindeki taklitçilik, kültürel kayma ve sürgün kavramları bu çalışmanın temel amacı olacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Naipaul, taklitçilik, sürgün, yer değişim, *The Mimic Men* (Taklitçiler)

ABSTRACT

Gaining a reputation of a marginalised figure, Naipaul is popularised as a writer of cultural displacement, who is in a perpetual state of exile. The problems of individuals struggling to establish and maintain their integrity as independent people, and the lack of construction of a historical and national consciousness, naturally and quite significantly are the prevailing issues of a writer who has grown up in the colonial atmosphere of Trinidad. Naipaul's personal displacement as a homeless figure is so much continually re-enacted in his works and so much celebrated that he seems to be taking a literary advantage as a marginalised figure who is re-pushed into the centre of public attention as twentieth century writer. *The Mimic Men* published in 1967 deals with the damaging effects of the absence of a regional, historical and cultural consciousness. Therefore, the representation of mimicry, cultural displacement and exile in *The Mimic Men* will be the major concentration of this paper.

Keywords: Naipaul, Mimicry, Exile, Displacement, *The Mimic Men*

Gaining a reputation of a marginalised figure, Naipaul is popularised as a writer of displacement, who is in a perpetual state of exile. The problems of individuals struggling to establish and maintain their integrity as independent people, and the lack of construction of a

historical and national consciousness, naturally and quite significantly are the prevailing issues of a writer who has grown up in the colonial atmosphere of Trinidad. Naipaul's personal displacement as a homeless figure is so much continually re-enacted in his works and so much celebrated that he seems to be taking a literary advantage as a marginalised figure who is re-pushed into the centre of public attention as twentieth century writer. *The Mimic Men* published in 1967 deals with the damaging effects of the absence of a regional, historical and cultural consciousness with an entrapment in "pre-independence mentality" (Weiss 99). David Dabydeen depicts *The Mimic Men* as a "drama of the historical, racial barriers against true freedom and nationhood" (33), while Bruce King considers *The Mimic Men* as one of Naipaul's "pessimistic essays on the difficulties of the colonized in becoming truly independent" (67). Similarly, Peggy Nightingale describes the novel as an "investigation of human individuality caught in a conflict between reality and unreality, order and disorder" (98).

Therefore, the representation of mimicry, cultural displacement and exile in *The Mimic Men* will be the major concentration of this paper.

One of the most important and devastating results of colonial domination is its ability to disrupt the cultural life of the colonised people. The cultural elimination of the colonised is made possible by the negation of a national identity, assimilation to the dominant culture and obliteration of the native customs. Amilcar Cabral states that:

A people who free themselves from foreign domination will be free culturally only if, without complexes and without underestimating the importance of positive accretions from the oppressor and other cultures, they return to the upward paths of their own culture, which is nourished by the living reality of its environment, and which negates both harmful influences and any kind of subjection to foreign culture. Thus, it may be seen that if imperialist domination has the vital need to practice cultural oppression, national liberation is necessarily is an act of culture. (56)

Colonialism, in Frantz Fanon's words, "is not satisfied merely with hiding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the

oppressed people-, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" (379). Hence, it is important to be conscious of one's own national culture because the liberation of a nation should be based on the knowledge of the culture and being able to appreciate the elements of that culture. Therefore, the main concept of being a nation goes beyond the political independence to a more encompassing idea of the construction of economic, social, and cultural liberation. Edward Said emphasises the impact of cultural imperialism and states that:

What I want to examine is how the process of imperialism occurred beyond the level of economic laws and political decisions and –by predisposition, by the authority of recognisable cultural formations, by continuing consolidation within education, literature , and the visual and musical arts-were manifested at another very significant level, that of the national culture. (Said 12)

Within the framework of these debates, Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* depicts the results of economic domination, the defeat of the colonized culture of Trinidad, taken over by the coloniser's culture. The food, clothing, customs, and values of Europe begin to replace those of the economically subordinate culture, and in the end, the colonized culture turns out to be an imitation of the colonizer. Therefore, the novel deals with the problems of cultural identity of Isabelle island, a modern Caribbean island which is created out of European domination. Demonstrating the outcomes of cultural colonisation, *The Mimic Men* brings forth the issues of hybridity and mimicry as the products of this cultural colonisation. The multi-racial structure of Isabelle Island is significantly expressed by Singh:

We drove through Carib areas where the people were more Negro than Carib. Ex-slaves, fleeing the plantations, had settled here and inter-married with the very people who, in the days of slavery their great tormentors, expert trackers of forest runaways, had by this marriage become their depressed serfs. Now the Caribs had been absorbed and had simply ceased to be...The scale was small in time, numbers and area; and here just for a moment, the rise and fall and extinction of peoples, a concept so big and alarming, was concrete and close. (146)

The concept of the extinction of people which is an inevitable consequence of the cultural colonialism is projected in the novel with a dedication to the exploration of colonial experience and historical process of the community of people living in Isabelle island which in fact a former British colony. Singh's remembrance of school days clearly shows the process and the strategy of the ideological impositions of Western culture as Singh pinpoints that "the slaves were frequently given the names of Anglo-Saxon kings or Roman generals" (Naipaul 177). He further continues to depict the elimination of the national culture and its replacement with the dominant culture in the way that:

It was an honour not to me but to Isabelle Imperial, the famous school, where a poor boy who behaved well and was attentive to his books could win a scholarship: this meant studies abroad, a profession, independence, *the past wiped out*. (Naipaul 177 italics are mine)

The writer implies that in order to survive in a white dominated society, the colonised people have to adopt values, education, history, morals and culture of western world and subsequently the succeeding generations of natives forget their origins and further begin to regard white culture as superior to any other cultures. For this reason they strive to ape the white man with a desire to be like him. Regardless of struggle to be accepted as their the members of the white community, there will always remain a racial and cultural division between them. The natives are so accustomed to be perceived as an inferior race that they are no longer offended by the humiliation. Singh expresses the passive acceptance of colonised people as follows:

Our traditions at Isabelle Imperial were brutal. Neither masters nor students in those days worried about wounding anyone's racial or political susceptibilities; the curious result was that almost no one was offended. A Negro boy with an extravagantly jutting head could, for instance, be Mango to everyone. So now I became Guru. Major Grant gave the name and popularized it. He taught us Latin and wore a monocle, partly I believe as a comic prop; he was a great manufacturer of names. (Naipaul 155)

The Mimic Men, as its title suggests, portrays the relationship

between self and others in which the identity of the self is masked or distorted or rendered invisible by imitation. The mimic men of the colony have a divided sensibility and a divided social identity. Singh who is the central character in the novel attempts to understand his relationship to the colonial experience through an exploration of his own self and identity by trying to connect it to sense of history. As a middle-aged West Indian businessman and politician, Singh tells narrates his memoirs of his life on Isabelle, his political career and his exile in England. During his brief political career he fails to satisfy the expectations of the newly independent people of his country, and is removed from his governmental position and is sent to London. He points out the difficulty of becoming a politician as follows:

Given our situation, anarchy was endless, unless we acted right away. But on power and the consolidation of passing power we wasted our energies, until the bigger truth came: that in a society like ours, fragmented, inorganic, no link between man and the landscape, a society not held together by common interests, there was no true internal source of power, and that no power was real which did not come from the outside. (Naipaul 246)

What is quite significantly emphasised in this quotation is the continuation of the western domination of Trinidad even after its independence. The writer actually accuses his own nation which is in perpetual need of being controlled by an outside force so that it could easily fall into a chaos in the absence of that outside power of Western domination. Through the end of the novel, Singh contemplates his exile from Isabelle, and from the metropolitan English society, which once he saw as the centre of the real world beyond the shipwreck of his life in Isabelle. Ironically, England becomes for Singh, the greater shipwreck. For him, neither his former West-Indian colony, nor the English metropolis can be home. He considers the colonial West-Indian societies as fundamentally flawed because they are not formed upon an authentic culture but constructed upon a western culture which is imposed upon them as the passive receivers of an artificial culture. Duncan Ivison comments on the unifying effect of culture and states that:

Culture is a process of ordering, not of disruption. It changes and develops like a living organism. It does not normally survive abrupt alterations. It may

accommodate internal diversity and change, for it must if it is to survive, but not too much. Thus, along with it come expectations of roots, of historical continuity, or at least of non-radical discontinuity. Culture is thus associated with a continuous and integrated set of practices and beliefs held by a particular people occupying a distinct territory. (35)

Without any hope of going home, Singh lives in exile, cut off from others looking at London with disgust, feeling the “alarm of homelessness” (Naipaul 299). His relationships illustrate an exile’s isolation, his split or fragmented identity. The story of his own life and the story of Isabelle Island are closely interrelated; the turmoil of his exile goes parallel with the decolonisation of Isabelle. His life and career manifest the restlessness and disorder that have come out of the imperialism and decolonisation. At the roots of the gradual disintegration of the colonised society lies an absence of a national consciousness. Always aware of the fact that it is the British Empire and its rule in India that created Isabelle Island so that it lacks a history of its own. Depicting the colonials which could not form their own history, *The Mimic Men* demonstrates the failure of a shattered society to provide its individuals with a coherent self-concept. This lack of awareness prevents people from understanding their past and looking into the future. They get trapped between the impositions of western culture and native culture. A sense of being lost in the total meaninglessness of the world is voiced by Singh as “I felt I had no past. Nothing had happened that morning or yesterday or the last eleven days” (Naipaul 299). The writer tries to demonstrate how the individuals of society can fall into a kind of meaninglessness and helplessness when they lose their commonly shared consciousness of history and culture. For him the native people living in Trinidad are not the producers of their own culture, instead they aspire to gain a new identity by imitating whites. As a result, they build their identity upon a borrowed culture which does not reflect their own true nature. For this reason the novel declares that they no longer exist since they try to be someone that they are not:

We, here on our island, handling books printed in this world, and using its goods, had been abandoned and forgotten. We pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the

New World, one unknown corner of it, with all its reminders of the corruption that came so quickly to the new. (Naipaul 175)

As they adopt themselves to the western culture which is prepared by the Western world and presented to them ready made, the colonised people gradually lose their existence. Naipaul tries to emphasise the fact that they cannot create an authentic culture without the inclusion of their greater past and their past being one of “slavery, indentured servitude, colonial brutality, and colonial neglect” (Greenberg 222). He accuses his own country of becoming mimic men parroting the western cultural values. His approach into the concept of mimicry is quite significant in the way that he conceives mimicry as a revelation of the psychological distortion of colonised people showing how people behave when they feel marginalized. He takes mimicry as a superficial imitation of Western ways of life without understanding and shaping their own identity. Therefore, he sees mimicry not as a threat to the colonial power but as a self-destructing quality. On the other hand Homi Bhabha as postcolonial figure approaches the concept of mimicry from a different perspective. Bhabha points out that colonized people try to develop a self-determination to resist to the negation and alienation produced by colonizers. What is important is that they find the ways of resisting to this power from within this power. And they achieve this by mimicry. In his article “Of Mimicry and Man” he defines mimicry as:

The most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge. The discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy (85).

He emphasises the fact that in colonized nations such as India, the British authorities required native people to work on their behalf, and thus had to teach them English language. The British in India needed to create a class of Indians who are capable of taking English opinions, morals, and intellect. But at the same time they are forever alienated and always seen as the other. Having been awared of the fact that they will never be equal to white man, they adopt the white man’s language to speak up for themselves. These mimic men, Bhabha argues, are not

disempowered, slavish individuals but invested with power to threaten the colonizers because the colonizers hearing their language returning through the mouths of colonized and they endanger power and appear as a threat to the set power relationship between the self and the other. In this way, the self perception of colonizer is reflected back to them as a source of threat to power. In "Of Mimicry and Man" he explains this as follows:

I want to return to this process by which the look of surveillance returns as the displaced gaze of the disciplined, when the observer becomes the observed and the 'partial' representation inarticulates; the whole notion of identity is alienated from its essence. . . As Lacan reminds us mimicry is like a camouflage, not a harmonization of repression of difference, but a form of resemblance (86).

Because mimicry repeats rather than represents, it turns into a mockery. In that act of repetition the language of white man through which its power and authority is conveyed, loses its originality, the colonized destabilizes the power of authority, remove it from the center and corrupt its originality.

The effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing. For in 'normalizing' the colonial state or subject, the dream of post-Enlightenment civility alienates its own language of liberty and produces another knowledge of its norms. . . It is from this area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double (Bhabha 85-86).

Accordingly, while for Bhabha mimicry is an ambiguous term, dangerous for the colonisers since the colonised translate mimicry into a style of mockery undermining the power coloniser, for Naipaul, as the colonies derive their language of resistance from the west, even their rejection of Western values is inevitably dependent and imitative. Naipaul blames the colonised calling them simply parasites who are incapable of forming their own culture and thus, cannot constitute any kind of threat for the coloniser. In an interview with Charles Wheeler, Naipaul expresses his feeling of India and points out that:

A play of mind would mean opening oneself to the outside world-opening oneself to inquiry of all sorts, asking about history, getting some sense of human contract. I think India at the moment is so far from these things that its attempts to become a modern country are slightly mimic attempts. You get the impression, when you read Indian's attempts to analyse their situation, that they are mimicking other people's intellectual disciplines. (Wheeler 39)

One may argue that Naipaul is too harsh in his criticism of his native country especially when it is taken into consideration that Naipaul is a graduate of Oxford University and knighted for his services to the English literature and thus he himself is a product of colonial culture of Western world and he can be considered as a mimic man. As Rob Nixon claims that:

Naipaul, secure, esteemed, and integrated into the high culture of metropolitan England asserting his homelessness, while considerable numbers of genuinely disowned people battle to be acknowledged as legitimate members of the society, he is at liberty to reject rhetorically although he depends on it in every way. (Nixon 43)

In conclusion, whether he is too harsh or not in his judgement of his country, his book *The Mimic Men* remains as an important document in demonstrating the attempts of a community of people to become a nation with a total incorporation of the concept of freedom. Naipaul's book can be considered as a warning for Indian people to form their own original authentic culture without being under the influence of dominant cultures in order to create a national consciousness, sharing a common history and cultural history.

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