

BHABHA'S NOTION OF 'MIMICRY' AND 'AMBIVALENCE' IN V.S. NAIPAUL'S A BEND IN THE RIVER

Dr. Sanjiv Kumar,

Assistant Professor

Institutional affiliation: Department of English,
Central University of Haryana, India.

ABSTRACT

The paper is an attempt to study V.S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* through the lense of Homi K. Bhabha's concepts like 'mimicry', 'ambivalence' and 'in-betweenness'. The entire postcolonial diasporic literature exhibits mixed feelings through the essential dichotomies marking the lives of émigrés. Love-hate relationships, contradictions between 'self' and 'other' native-alien clash of cultures, hybridity, creolisation, nostalgia, mimicking tendency, sense of alienation and ultimate disillusionment prevail throughout the novel in one way or the other. Here, the paper discusses the relevance of Bhabha's perception to understand the typical postcolonial 'halfness' which gets a fair handling in the hands of Naipaul. Seemingly commonplace postcolonial jargon makes it convenient to penetrate deeper into the predicament of the people living their lives in flux. The absurdity of so called civilizing mission is exposed in the novel by satirizing the concept of 'white man's burden'. The natives feel perpetually trapped and shipwrecked in their native land for the destined wretchedness making them embrace borrowed culture, language, fashion and style only to experience ever-prevailing and ever-tormenting ambivalence which destabilises their lives in entirety. The research paper intends to explore the theoretical nuances which may be applied in the reading of the novel with special focus on one of the most prominent postcolonial thinker Homi K. Bhabha.

Keywords: 'Mimicry', 'Ambivalence', 'hybridity', 'self', 'other' and 'civilising mission'.

INTRODUCTION:

In general connotation, '*mimicry*' refers to the imitation of one species by another. Webster's New World College Dictionary further defines the term as "close resemblance, in colour, form, or behaviour of one organism to another or to some object in its environment ... it serves to disguise or conceal the organism from predators." The disguising of the organism in the process of mimicry brings the term closer to the warfare device of camouflaging which, according to Webster's Dictionary, implies "the disguising of troops, ships, guns, etc. to conceal them from the enemy, as by the use of paint, nets, or leaves in patterns merging with the background." Jacques Lacan establishes the relation between *mimicry* and *camouflage* in his essay 'The Line and Light':

Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage.... It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled— exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare. (Bhabha 1994: 121)

Bhabha's analysis of mimicry in his essay 'Of Mimicry and Man' is largely based on the Lacanian vision of mimicry as camouflage resulting in colonial ambivalence. He sees the colonizer as a snake in the grass who, speaks in "a tongue that is forked," and produces a mimetic representation that "... emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge" (Bhabha 1994: 122).

In postcolonial studies '*mimicry*' is considered as unsettling imitations that are characteristic of postcolonial cultures. It is a desire to sever the ties with 'self' in order to move towards 'other'. Salim, the hero of Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*, expresses his penchant for colonial mimicry when he wishes to desert his roots. He says: "I wanted to break away. To break away from my family and community also meant breaking away from my unspoken commitment...." (Naipaul 1980: 31)

For Homi K. Bhabha, "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable 'Other', as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 1994: 122). He is the foremost contemporary critic who has tried to unveil the contradictions inherent in colonial discourse in order to highlight the colonizer's *ambivalence* with respect to his attitude towards the colonized *Other* and vice versa. He continues:

The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority. And it is a double vision that is a result of what I've described as the partial representation/ recognition of the colonial object. (Bhabha 1994: 126)

However, most of the postcolonial critics agree that it is precisely mimicry that disrupts the colonial discourse by *double vision*, *double articulation* or the *forked tongue*. Bhabha finds mimicry to be characterized by indeterminacy and a sign of double articulation. The dichotomy between 'self' and 'Other' being most striking feature of colonial discourse, he justifies mimicry of the 'Other' because, for a colonial, 'Other' visualizes power. Salim acknowledges the significance of powerful 'Other' for the denizens of decolonised African colony when he asserts:

When I was a child Europe ruled my world... Europe no longer ruled. But it still fed us in a hundred ways with its language and sent us its increasingly wonderful goods, things which, in the bush of Africa, added year by year to our idea of who we were, gave us that idea of our modernity and development, and made us aware of another Europe—the Europe of great cities, great stores, great buildings, great universities. To the Europe only the privileged or the gifted among us journeyed. (Naipaul 1980: 246-47)

It is in this context that Bhabha finds the simple presence of the colonized '*Other*' within the colonial discourse as sufficient indication of the ambivalence of the colonial text— an ambivalence that destabilizes its claim for narcissistic authority through the repetitious slippage, excess or difference. Bill Ashcroft elaborates the destabilizing effect of postcolonial mimicry as: "The mimicry of the post-colonial subject is therefore always potentially destabilizing to colonial discourse, and locates an area of considerable political and cultural uncertainty in the structure of imperial dominance." (Ashcroft 2005: 142)

In his essay "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," Homi Bhabha locates '*mimicry*' as one of the most elusive and effective strategies in colonial discourse which centres around *civilizing mission* based on the notion of 'human and not wholly human'. In the pretext of this civilizing mission Charles Grant propagates "evangelical system of mission education conducted uncompromisingly in English language" (Bhabha 1994: 124) in his "Observations on the state of Society among the Asiatic Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain" (1792) and Macaulay visualizes the bright future for the colonial rule in his "Minute on Indian Education" (1835) through "a class of interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern—a class of persons Indian in blood and colour but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect," (Bhabha 1994: 124-25) in other words the mimic men.

The elusive reformatory zeal among the colonials referred as "mimic men" by Bhabha and V.S. Naipaul is misleading and fatal. These postcolonial mimic men, Bhabha asserts, are authorized versions of otherness, and

thus part-objects of a metonymy of colonial desire emerging as inappropriate colonial subjects. They face the trauma of the colonial ambivalence resulting from 'mimicry' marked by "a difference that is almost nothing but not quite—to *menace*—a difference that is almost total but not quite" (Bhabha1994: 131). The 'self' vs. 'Other' dichotomy results into perpetual uncertainty, fluidity and permanent disillusionment among the colonials. Their situation has become all the more shaky and wavering like that of a pendulum. Salim admits that his ambivalence and love-hate relationship with the 'Other' has ultimately made his life more meaningless. He observes:

I was in Africa one day; I was in Europe the next morning. It was like being in two places at once. Both places were real: both places were unreal. You could play off one against the other; and you had no feeling of having made a final decision, a great last journey. (Naipaul 1980: 246)

Bhabha refers to the works of Rudyard Kipling, E.M. Forster, George Orwell and V.S. Naipaul whose works trace the origin and emergence of postcolonial mimic men who are ambivalent due to the effect of "a flawed colonial mimesis in which to be Anglicised is emphatically not to be English" (Bhabha1994: 125). The problematics of mimicry lies in the fact that it 'repeats rather than re-presents' which further leads the mimic man to realize his nothingness and insignificance in Naipaulian terms. Ralph Kripal Singh, the ambivalent hero of *The Mimic Men* remarks: "We pretend 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 1967: 416)

The enigma of the colonials lies in the very act of repetition which mars originality, and further decenralise the centrality. Ganesh, Ralph Kripal Singh, Jimmy Ahmed and Willey Chandran in Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur*, *The Mimic Men*, *Guerillas* and *Half a Life* are typical colonial figures lost in the world of oblivion because they sever their ties with their roots in the process of mimicking the 'Other'. They are so obsessed with the idea of mimicking the Other that Indar, a native of Indian descent realizes: "for someone like me there was only one civilization and one place—London, or a place like it" (Naipaul 1980: 163). Disenchanted by their native conditions, they hide their identity under the garb of borrowed culture and hence start "assuming the lies of white men" (Naipaul 1980: 23). Bhabha reveals that the Janus-faced love-hate attitude of the mimic men of the world gives birth to the mimicry that presents itself more in the form of a "menace" than "resemblance"; more in the form of a rupture than consolidation. He states that:

Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation... The effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing ... It is as if the very emergence of the 'colonial' is dependent for its representation upon some strategic limitation or prohibition within the authoritative discourse itself so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace. (Bhabha1994: 122-123)

The mimicking tendency is not only noticed among the colonized: rather, it is equally threatening for the colonizer i.e. the people whose fate is 'writ by finger of the Divine'. In the novel *Guerillas* by V.S. Naipaul, the characters like Jane and Roche land on the Caribbean island with a mission to reform but their enterprise ends up in disillusionment and decay. Unaware of the fact that "it is the wrong time everywhere else too," (Naipaul 1980: 256) they land in the Caribbean island to find a meaning and purpose of their otherwise insignificant lives. On the other hand the decolonized natives have started "doing what they see the big people doing" (Naipaul 1980: 256). In case of Jane and Roche, the colonial mimicry tends to be mockery as their 'doer' image is washed away in a decolonized colony where their mission is suspected by the natives who understand that "the Europeans could do one thing and say something quite different... Europeans wanted gold and slaves... but at the same time they wanted statues put up to themselves as people who had done good things for the slaves" (Naipaul 1980: 23). In this context, Bhabha rightly observes that "... civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double" (Bhabha1994: 123).

In Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*, Salim, the hero of the novel relies too much on the representation of the colony by the Europeans. Salim asserts: "All that I know of our history and the history of the Indian Ocean I have got from books written by Europeans... without Europeans, I feel, all our past would have been washed away..." (Naipaul 1980: 18). Moreover, the introduction of a Europeanized institution named Domain in the African Colony with the motto DISCIPLINE AVANT TOUT i.e. 'Discipline Above All'. On the name of Domain with shoddy grandeur, the ambivalent President "... was creating modern Africa ... He was bypassing real Africa ... wished to show us a new Africa" (Naipaul 1980: 110). With the mimicking ideology of the President, Africans were kept away from European atmosphere generated by Domain.

This excessive reliance on the colonizers, according to Bhabha, exhibits the popular colonial belief that "the black man stops being an actional person for only the white man can represent his self esteem" (Bhabha1994: 126). The perpetual distress and distrust prevailing among the colonial natives has made them become conscious of their eventual frustration. Salim rightly comments on the fate of the mimic men:

It was in the history of the land: here man had always been prey. You don't feel malice towards your prey. You set a trap for him. It fails ten times; but it is always the same trap you set. The people were malins because they lived with the knowledge of men as prey. (Naipaul 1980: 62)

The failure of the colonial mimic men is further determined by 'hybridity', which according to Bhabha, subverts the narratives of colonial power and dominant cultures. Though the ambivalence marks the lives of all colonials, hybridity and multicultural locale adds to its intensity. Ferdinand, 'an unprotected boy full of ambition' and a native of mixed heritage in *A Bend in the River* feels even more insecure as he has no cultural group where he can feel associated. Salim finds that Ferdinand's ambivalence is twice agonizing and his "affectations were more than affectations ... his personality had become fluid" (Naipaul 1980: 55). The series of inclusions and exclusions on which a dominant culture is premised are deconstructed by the very entry of the formerly-excluded subjects into the mainstream discourse. In *Half a Life*, Willey Chandran's Odysseus journey marks the movement towards empire and back as futile and senselessness not only because of indeterminacy prevailing among one culture but also because of the hybridity intensifying the anguish among the colonial expatriates.

With the arrival of émigrés, the dominant culture is contaminated by the linguistic and racial differences of the native self. Belgian missionary Father Huismans' defence of the Latin words carved on the ruined monument "Misericordie probat populos et foedera jungi" or "He (God) approves of the mingling of the peoples and their bonds of union" (Naipaul 1980: 23) is taken as a threat to the sanctity of indigenous culture by the natives. The multiculturalism and hybridity are sensed as contaminating elements which endanger the purity of natives. It is in this context, that 'hybridity' can be seen, in Bhabha's interpretation, as a counter-narrative, a critique of the canon and exclusion of other narratives. To prove his concept of hybridity, multiculturalism and notion of origins, he refers to Freud who says:

Their mixed and split origin is what decides their fate. We may compare them with individuals of mixed race who taken all around resemble white men but who betray their coloured descent by some striking feature or other and on that account are excluded from society and enjoy none of the privileges. (Bhabha 1994: 127)

Father Huismans' sense of belongingness with the natives could make nothing happen as his sincere efforts to defend hybridity and multiculturalism were viewed as a plot conspired by the Europeans. Huismans' defence of *hybridity* seems to be based on the belief that the colonial ambivalence is an evident illustration of its uncertainty; and second, that the migration of yesterday's "savages" from their peripheral spaces to the homes of their "masters" underlies a blessing. Killing of missionaries like Huismans implies the resentment among the natives against cultural assimilation. However, Father's murder couldn't stop the process; rather, Salim bitterly opines:

But now we, who remained— outsiders, but neither settlers nor visitors, just people with nowhere better to go— put our heads down and got on with our business.... After each setback, the civilization of Europe would become a little more secure at the bend in the river. (Naipaul 1980: 95)

However, it further substantiates the idea that "Third-Worlding" the center or "First-Worlding" the margins creates "fissures" within the very structures that sustain them. It simply aggravates the distress of the colonials who feel that "It isn't that there's no right and wrong here. There's no right" (Naipaul 1980: 102). Meanwhile, Bill Ashcroft, prominent postcolonial critic, contradicts Bhabha and contends that culture is a dynamic force that is always in a condition of absorption and production and hence the idea of a cultural purity that existed prior to the colonial invasion is mistaken and totalitarian. Ashcroft condemns this notion of cultural purity and persuasively argues that all cultural interactions indelibly change both participants, irrespective of the nature of the relationship. He locates the anguish of the colonials in the obstinacy and inadaptability. Contrarily, V.S. Naipaul captures the colonial natives distributing pamphlets with a passionate appeal to condemn the initiative to affect the purity of African culture:

By ENEMY we mean the powers of imperialism, the multi-nationals and the puppet powers that be, the false gods, the capitalists, the priests and teachers who give false interpretations. The law encourages crime. The schools teach ignorance and people practice ignorance in preference to their true culture. (Naipaul 1980: 228-29)

The distress of the African natives in *A Bend in the River*, perhaps lies in their insistence on the intactness of their culture as observed by Salim who comments: "Once the Arabs had ruled here; then the Europeans had come; now the Europeans were about to go away. But little had changed in the manners or minds of men" (Naipaul 1980: 18). Nonetheless, Bhabha apprehends the consequences of the heterogeneity and hybridity and remarks that: "From such a colonial encounter between the white presence and its black semblance, there emerges the question of the ambivalence of mimicry as a problematic of colonial subjection (Bhabha 1994: 129).

Thus, Bhabha's perception about mimicry, ambivalence and resultant disillusionment finds best representation in V.S. Naipaul who being a sojourner and nomad himself, can better understand the colonial situation where everybody is 'trampling on the past'. He universalizes the colonial predicament of mimic men through the statement: "You mustn't think it's bad just for you. It's bad for everybody Nobody's going anywhere. We're all going to hell..." (Naipaul 1980: 291).

CONCLUSION:

No doubt, the entire postcolonial diasporic literature heavily relies upon concepts of 'mimicry' and 'ambivalence' but the exceptional handling of the diasporic sensibility in the novel *A Bend in the River* further validates the theoretical base provided by Homi K. Bhabha in his *The Location of Culture* where he defines mimicry as 'almost the same but not quite'.

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