

IDENTITY AND HOME IN THREE CARIBBEAN

AUTHORS

By

HARBHAJAN S. HIRA

Bachelor of Science
Guru Nanak Dev University
Amritsar, Punjab (India)
1974

Master of Arts in English
Hamburg University
Hamburg, Germany
1987

Master of Arts in English
California State University, Stanislaus
Turlock, California
2001

Master of Arts in Education
California State University, Dominguez Hills
Carson, California
2007

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
July, 2020

IDENTITY AND HOME IN THREE CARIBBEAN
AUTHORS

Dissertation Approved:

Dr. Timothy Murphy

Dissertation Adviser

Dr. Katherine Hallemeier

Dr. Martin Wallen

Dr. Alyson Greiner

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Several persons have helped making this project successful. My thanks go to Dr. Katherine Hallemeier, who provided feedback with an unprecedented speed in the final weeks of writing. Thanks are due to Professor Emeritus Martin Wallen as well. In spite of his retirement in 2019, Dr. Wallen kindly agreed to stay on the committee and help me get across the finish line. I also enormously benefited from his course on species, race, and surveillance, where I first discussed theorists such as Du Bois and Fanon. I want to thank Dr. Alyson Greiner of Geography too, who provided all the support that can be expected of an outside committee member. A big THANK YOU goes to Dr. Timothy Murphy, however. As my advisor and chair of the committee, he has been instrumental in securing the success of the project. He meticulously read and commented on every single chapter over the past year and a half. He also provided other help in navigating the graduate school.

Finally, I appreciate the generosity of the OSU English Department that supported my studies financially by providing teaching assistantships through all these years.

Name: HARBHAJAN S. HIRA

Date of Degree: JULY, 2020

Title of Study: IDENTITY AND HOME IN THREE CARIBBEAN AUTHORS

Major Field: ENGLISH

Abstract:

The search for identity is a major theme in modern literature. It is particularly prevalent in societies that have historically been colonized where the colonizer has sabotaged the values of the colonized that are at the root of identity formation. These values, as a result, have weakened and the colonized has been obliged to partially draw upon the values of the colonizer to construe a self. The situation has foisted unequal relations on colonizer and colonized, with the former being on top of the hierarchy. The disparity has given rise to colonial difference that defines the existence of the colonized. The writers from the colonies variously employ colonial difference, and the condition of the colonized it engenders, to explore communal and personal identities in their works. Within their explorations, they may emphasize various concerns – social, political, psychological, or personal – as they go about searching for a new self. This dissertation first lays out the psychosocial base of identity as social norms and values play a decisive role in the forging of self. It then uses this base to discuss how identity and home manifest themselves in the selected works of three Caribbean writers, whereby home encompasses both a material and metaphorical entity. George Lamming uses colonial difference to explore the reorganization of a Barbadian community in *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953). He underscores a social revolution in his search for a new identity. Vidiadhar S. Naipaul traces the cultural reorientation of indentured sugar laborers from India in *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961). His emphasis falls on psychological confusion and cultural syncretism as he explores the dynamics of a new identity for his subjects. *The Mimic Men* (1967), another novel by Naipaul, concentrates on self-identity of its protagonist, who feels that colonial difference has diminished his existence to mimicking the values of the colonizer. Finally, Derek Walcott uses difference as a discrete cultural value, on which he bases a multicultural self for his characters in his epic poem, *Omeros* (1990). Social intermingling in the poem occurs along multiple axes of difference – including social, racial, and geographical difference.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. IDENTITY AND HOME.....	13
III. RESISTANCE AND REVOLUTIONARY STRUGGLE: <i>IN THE CASTLE OF MY SKIN</i> (1953)	34
IV. CULTURAL DISPLACEMENT AND CULTURAL SYNCRETISM: <i>A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS</i> (1961).....	85
V. “SHIPWRECK,” LONDON, WRITING, AND SELF-IDENTITY: <i>THE MIMIC MEN</i> (1967).....	135
VI. DIFFERENCE, IDENTITY, AND MULTICULTURALISM: THE CASE OF <i>OMEROS</i> (1990).....	176
VII. CONCLUSION	205
WORKS CITED	216-24

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

George Lamming, Derek Walcott, and Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul are all writers that hail from the Caribbean. Their work attests to an extraordinary variety that includes fiction and travel writing, political analysis and epic verse. They deal with topics ranging from cultural politics in the wake of colonization to the conditions of modern existence in Africa, India, South America and Europe. Above all, they engage the basic question of their existence in a region to which their ancestors came, for the most part involuntarily, through the historical processes of slavery and indentureship. These processes resulted in these writers inheriting a history that, as the Trinidadian historian Cyril Lionel R. James observes, is steeped in “coercion” and “exploitation” (*The Black Jacobins* 3-5).

After Christopher Columbus landed in the New World in 1492 at what is now Watling Island in the central Bahamas at the behest of the Spanish Crown, he contacted local Amerindian tribes of Lucayans and Taino in the Bahamas, Cuba and Hispaniola. In Hispaniola (modern-day Haiti), he saw a girl wearing a golden nose ornament. Given that gold was on Columbus’s mind from the outset – was, in fact, the leitmotif of his voyages ever since he had read the travel accounts of the Venetian Marco Polo about the

riches of the East – the sight of the precious metal was an encouraging sign for the Genoese sea captain. On further inquiries, Columbus was shown – as the historians F. R. Augier et al. record in their book, *The Making of the West Indies* (1960) – to the “local Indian *cacique*,” who assured the navigator that “much gold was to be found on the island” (9). Columbus took some gold from the islanders’ possessions and brought it back, along with a few natives, to Spain. The Spanish that subsequently rushed to the New World in search of more gold and wealth systematically enslaved Amerindians.

When Don Nicolas de Ovando supplanted Columbus and became the new Spanish Governor and Supreme Justice of the islands and mainland of the Indies, in 1502 – with the approval of the Spanish sovereigns, Ferdinand and Isabella – he introduced the so-called *encomienda* system. According to F. R. Augier et al., the *encomienda* system authorized that “a Spanish colonist [a number of whom traveled to the Indies with Ovando] could be awarded a number of Indians to work for him. In return, the colonist was responsible for teaching them Christian principles, paying them wages and looking after them generally” (13). The system smoothed the way for systematic enslavement of indigenous populations and in as little as half a century, “[i]n effect the Indian population of the islands was enslaved and . . . practically exterminated” (13). Of course, not all enslaved Indians died of inhumane rigors of the physical labor coerced beyond human endurance; many fell victims to fatal diseases such as small pox, too, because of their interaction with the European intruders. The bottom line is that, from the mid-sixteenth century on, the reduced presence of indigenous peoples on the islands did not stand in the way of the colonists’ reckless exploitation of the islands in the Caribbean. The colonists would replace the numbers lost in the deceased Indians in time by transporting millions of slaves from overseas.

Kenneth Ramchand, while tracing the development of the novel in the West Indies, observes that, “[w]ith the European discoveries ‘the natural and originary inhabitants’ of the West Indies were virtually eliminated; the small communities which survive in Dominica and Guyana today are regarded as marginal to society” (164). Their marginality, according to Ramchand, accounts for their non-existence in the literature of the region: “Indeed, the fiction in which the contemporary [native] Indians do appear either registers them as detribalized individuals in the towns (‘Bucks’) or portrays them as exotic groups in the interior” (164).

The other European powers – the Dutch, British, and French – that followed the Spanish in their quest for riches in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries brought millions of African slaves to the Caribbean islands through the Middle Passage to supplement the Amerindian labor and forced them to work on their sugar plantations. The slave trade flourished for more than two hundred years. During this time, as Gordon K. Lewis likes to remind us in his scholarly work, *The Growth of the Modern West Indies* (1968), “probably some ten million Africans were transplanted . . . to the American and West Indian colonies” (49-50). Lewis goes on to remark on the horrors of the Middle Passage that:

[E]ven now it is impossible to read the record . . . without a sensation of shame at the capacity of men to dehumanize themselves in the service of profit. The supreme offence of the crime could only be matched, perhaps, by the cruelty with which, earlier, the Spanish and Portuguese settlers and soldiers had systematically exterminated the original Arawak Indians by means of forced labour in the New World mines. (50)

When Slave Emancipation was declared in 1833 in the British Isles – to neutralize the threat of ever-looming slave revolts, but also to meet the demands of reform calls from goodwill individuals and organizations at home and in the Caribbean – the plantation owners turned for their labor needs to indenturing people from India and China.

Although the practice of recruiting labor force changed, the essence of labor exploitation remained the same. The indentured laborers did enjoy more rights on paper, but the life and work conditions of these workers were hardly better than those of the slaves. Again Gordon K. Lewis observes that “[t]he transplanted Indian labourer, altogether, lived a degraded life just above the poverty line, enjoying a theoretical equality but, for all practical purposes, disenfranchised because illiterate, and illiterate because denied equal access to educational opportunities” (261).

In descending from such dislocated and disenfranchised backgrounds, as modern-day Caribbean writers grapple with their existence in their works, their inquiry coalesces around questions such as: Who am I? What am I doing in a foreign landscape? What is my relationship to the region? How do colonialism and colonial legacies affect my existence? When critics on their part consider these questions, they readily detect a quest for identity and home in these writers. As the critics go on to discuss their findings, they overwhelmingly frame their thoughts in terms of postcolonial theory of the 1950s and '60s, in part because a number of the literary works the critics look at originate in the time period; and these are precisely the two decades in which postcolonial thought – thanks to Indian independence in 1947 and the struggle for Algerian freedom in the 1950s – was resurgent in metropolitan critical consciousness. It is logical that the postcolonial theory of these decades should be molded by contemporary liberatory and anticolonial rhetoric, as is evidenced in the

significantly entitled *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) by Frantz Fanon; it is understandable too that the postcolonial theory of these years should be influenced by other works of the period – the critical and theoretical essays authored by writers such as Cyril L. R. James, George Lamming, Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong’o – that emphasized social, economic and racial inequities between the colonizer and colonized.

Achebe’s anticolonial binaristic tone is readily discernible in a 1965 essay in which he conceives of his role as novelist-teacher in a postcolonial context:

The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact, he should march right in front. . . . I for one would not wish to be excused. I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them. (45)

Caribbean historian Cyril L. R. James highlights the hierarchies of rich and poor, black and white, dominant and dominated while discussing the historically exploitative nature of West Indian societies; in the “Appendix” he attached, in 1962, to his book *The Black Jacobins*, James singles out the sugar plantation – alongside Negro slavery – as the second most defining moment of West Indian life that created and perpetuated social, cultural and economic inequities:

In the first part of the seventeenth century, early settlers from Europe had made quite a success of individual production. The sugar plantation drove them out. . . . The plantation owners and the merchants lived an intense political life in which the ups and downs of sugar and in time the treatment and destiny of the slaves played a

crucial and continuous role. The sugar plantation dominated the lives of the islands to such a degree that the white skin alone saved those who were not plantation owners or bureaucrats from the humiliations and hopelessness of the life of the slave. That was and is the pattern of West Indian life. (392)

George Lamming points out the cultural and social inequities within colonialism as in 1960 he takes up the cultural politics of colonization in a series of interrelated essays, *The Pleasures of Exile*.

In the essay entitled “The African Presence,” Lamming compares and contrasts the processes of colonization with regard to two regions – North America and the Caribbean. By referring to the way race, origin, cultural heritage and skin color mattered in the process, Lamming shows how colonial politics ended up producing two regions that are distinctly separate and unequal:

An American tourist in Europe is often in search of monuments: cathedrals and palaces, important graves, the whole kingdom of names and faces that are kept alive by the architecture of history. . . . He is a descendant of men whose migration from this continent was a freely chosen act . . . [t]he West Indian Negro who sets out on a similar journey to Africa is less secure. His relation to that continent is more personal and more problematic. . . . [His] migration was not a freely chosen act; it was a commercial deportation which has left its consequences heavily marked on every level of his personal life and relations with his environment . . . [h]is education did not provide him with any reading to rummage through as a guide to the lost kingdoms of names and places which give geography a human significance. (160)

Against the backdrop of such hierarchical, anticolonial, and emancipatory rhetoric of early postcolonial thought, a number of literary works from the Caribbean have been studied before now.

The Barbadian George Lamming's 1953 novel, *In the Castle of My Skin*, has received a fair amount of critical attention in this regard – with critic after critic highlighting the high and low, rich and poor, black and white nature of the novel's world. Ngugi wa Thiong'o sets the indigent conditions of the villagers in Creighton's village in the novel against the all-powerful, feudalistic nature of Creighton Estate and goes on to explain that "[w]hat distinguishes Creighton Estate from earlier forms of feudalism . . . is its colonial setting with roots in slavery. The rights and duties are divinely willed by Creighton and Great Britain" (48). As Ngugi further analyzes the social structure and the condition of the colonized in the novel's world, he operates primarily with a class-infused, anticolonial rhetoric and emphasizes the Manichean hierarchies existing in Creighton's village:

The villagers, numbering about three thousand, live in what is, essentially, a feudal society. At the head of the Estate is Creighton, whose house appropriately stands on a hill, dominating all below it. The overseers, the police constables and the school teachers make the middle stratum. At the bottom of this social hierarchy are the peasants, who over the years have acquired customary rights to their homes and plots of land. (48)

Ngugi ultimately focuses on the social revolution that sweeps Creighton's village and the island and eventually emancipates the islanders from the status quo, giving them a new sense of identity.

The emancipatory rhetoric of early postcolonial thought determines the tone of critical commentary on another work, *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), by the Trinidadian novelist Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul as well. Naipaul treats the theme of colonial legacy and the condition of the colonized in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, as does George Lamming in *In the Castle*. In contrast to Lamming, who views colonial difference in the context of slavery and the slave past, Naipaul discusses it in terms of indenture and the Indian diaspora; and whereas Lamming accentuates revolutionary struggle in his treatment of colonial difference, Naipaul's focus is on the dissolution of Hanuman House, a symbol of Hindu social order in the novel. Within the novel, Hanuman House is described as a Hindu enclave that not only houses Mr. Biswas, but also is home to a number of other Indian migrants, all of whom are related to Mrs. Tulsi, the head of the establishment, by way of marriage to the Tulsi daughters.

Ostensibly, the house works irreproachably as a hierarchical structure, with Mrs. Tulsi and her brother-in-law Seth at the top of the social scale, doling out rights and privileges to the daughters' families according to their degree of precedence. The precision and quality of detail Naipaul bestows upon Hanuman House across hundreds of pages let the establishment take on a symbolic significance. Gordon Rohlehr acknowledges the façade flashiness of Hanuman House when he observes that “[o]n the surface the Tulsis have effected an admirable reconstruction of the clan in a strange and sometimes hostile environment. It has its leaders, its scheme of prescribed duties and responsibilities, its own law and order, its religious ritual, and it tries to provide the individual with the sort of job for which his talents equip him” (“Character and Rebellion” 87). However, he reserves his stern

judgment of Hanuman House as a cruel replica of wider West Indian slave society to keener investigative scrutiny:

[O]n closer examination, Hanuman House reveals itself not as a coherent reconstruction of the clan, but as a slave society, erected by Mrs. Tulsi and Seth who need workers to help build their tottering empire. . . . Like the West Indies, Hanuman House is constructed of a vast number of disparate families, gratuitously brought together by the economic need of a “high-caste” minority. (87)

Rohlehr literally likens Hanuman House to a miniature colonial enterprise. Mr. Biswas’s life-long struggle to free himself of the bonds of Hanuman House equals emancipating him from the shackles of a cruel and oppressive system and winning him a new and independent identity.

The dissolution of Hanuman House as a leitmotif of *Mr. Biswas*, however, also incorporates another important aspect of the migrant Hindus: these individuals must reckon with an ever-increasing threat of cultural confrontation. The more Hanuman House disintegrates, the more its members are exposed to the wider island reality and the more they have to adjust to new cultural norms. Cultural confrontation and cultural syncretism – with the concomitant tensions of disorientation and alienation, psychological bewilderment and loss of identity – determine the course of the migrant Hindus. Often cultural confrontation and syncretism give rise to new forms of cultural hybrids. Maureen Warner-Lewis studies the psycho-cultural dynamics of the dissolution; in her 1970 analysis of the cultural disintegration and syncretism, she notes how a number of opposing cultural values – of East and West, colonizer and colonized, Hinduism and Christianity, tradition and modernity –

compete throughout *Mr. Biswas*, eliciting in those concerned a range of emotional and cultural responses:

[The] religious ambiguity and syncretism and, in some cases, even neglect of traditional religion, is one of the earliest aspects of cultural confrontation with which Naipaul deals in his novel. And he progressively shows the sometimes subtle, sometimes obvious, way in which the Western-orientated Creole culture of Trinidad corrodes Hindu traditional customs and beliefs, and the shifting attitudes and psychological bewilderment this produces. (97-98)

Syncretism and psychological confusion thus characterize the cultural disintegration; the migrant Hindus in Hanuman House – along with Mr. Biswas – witness both these phenomena as they all try to redefine themselves by adjusting the values of their inherited culture to the requirements of an evolving, heterogeneous colonial society in Trinidad. Mr. Biswas – as the protagonist of the novel – epitomizes the syncretism and confusion.

As enlightening as these criticisms of *In the Castle* and *Mr. Biswas* may be, conducted within the parameters of early postcolonial thought, they are not grounded in a theoretical understanding of the terms identity and home; nor do they necessarily address the different modes of personal identity various characters adopt within the respective novels. Thus the overseer and the head teacher in *In the Castle*, who align themselves with the politics of the colonizer, go largely unmentioned upon. Employed by the white colonialist landlord to guard his property, the black overseer constantly bullies the villagers in the name of law and order. He distrusts his own people and slings racist remarks at them; “low-down nigger people” (19) is the phrase he coins for his fellow blacks. He even accuses them of being jealous and malcontent: “The villagers were low-down nigger people since they

couldn't bear to see one of their kind get along without feeling envy and hate" (18). Even G., the protagonist of *In the Castle*, whose sense of identity apparently rests on a free and independent individual self, betrays a certain ambivalence when, at the end of the novel, he leaves the island and goes to live in England.

In light of such ambivalence and duality with reference to the characters' sense of personal identity and home, and the fact that home and identity have not received adequate theoretical treatment in the criticism of the two works, I propose to examine these two novels along with two other Caribbean works that likewise betray ambiguities as regards their characters. These works include *The Mimic Men* (1967), another novel by V. S. Naipaul, and *Omeros* (1990), an epic verse by the St. Lucian poet Derek Walcott. My claim is that if we read these four works through the lens of more recent postcolonial theory grounded in the work of Bhabha and Rushdie – among others – a better, more nuanced understanding of the theme of identity and home can be achieved in these writers. It is an understanding that goes beyond the existing binaries of black and white or colonial and metropolitan and – as I shall demonstrate – accounts for the various modes of identity the characters adopt, or explains the cultural hybrids that emerge during the course of the works.

Equally important, I also highlight the various emphases – social, political, personal, or psychological – the writers adopt in their exploration of the theme of identity as they variously use colonial difference as an impetus for their undertaking: if Lamming stresses revolutionary struggle in his quest for a new identity, Naipaul's emphasis is on cultural displacement and adjustment. Of particular interest to Naipaul are the phenomena of disorientation and alienation, psychological confusion and loss of identity that cultural dislocation causes in human beings. Naipaul, therefore, substitutes psychological concerns

for Lamming's political motives. Singh in *The Mimic Men* remains largely focused on the difference originating from the conflicting values within him as these pertain to Isabella, the fictional Caribbean island of his birth, and to India, the land of his ancestors. Walcott, in comparison, manipulates the notion of difference as a cultural value along which he attempts to construe identity for his characters. Intermingling in *Omeros* occurs, as I will demonstrate, across various axes of difference – social, racial, economic, and geographical – among cultures and characters. It is my intent to complicate the understanding of identity in Walcott by interlacing it with ideas borrowed from the work of Caribbean critic, Stuart Hall, in cultural studies.

The guiding principle in choosing the writers and the four works is one of illustrative selection. I believe that the four texts form a cohesive body of work that clarifies and illustrates a theme, which – because of its currency for the Anglophone Caribbean – continues to engage the region's writers and critics to date. Nonetheless, I hope too that the writers and works I select embody literary themes in the region at large so that my discussion is useful beyond the Anglophone Caribbean, for as far as identity and home are concerned, these are issues of urgent and wide poetic concern throughout the Dutch, Spanish and French-speaking Caribbean.

CHAPTER II

IDENTITY AND HOME

Identity signifies belonging; it lays claim to be part of a group, community, race, ethnicity, region or nation-state. At its most elementary, the term denotes a sense of self that constitutes itself through various phases of life from birth onward. In psychological literature, this self – the core of one’s individuality – is understood to be a product of socialization occurring over various phases of identity formation during which an individual internalizes the norms and values of its family and environment. Although Erik Erikson, who subscribes to a psychosocial conception of identity, says that he does not have the knowledge to approach in any systematic fashion the relationship between “ego qualities, social institutions, and historical eras,” the interactions of these entities among themselves and their influences on self-identity can scarcely be overemphasized (46-50).

Hans Peter Dreitzel has discussed these influences in terms of internalizing social norms and values as he – drawing on Erikson – develops a sociological model of deviant behavior. With reference to the pre-oedipal phase of identity formation, in which the child accomplishes the separation of the ego from the alter, Dreitzel cites two cardinal influences – the family and social environment. On the one hand, the child internalizes

its relationship to the family; on the other, it strives to make sense of the relationship of the family to the outer world: “[E]inmal stehen die Kinder gegen die Eltern, einmal beide zusammen gegeneinander der nicht der Familie gehoerigen Aussenwelt [In one instance, the children face the parents; in the other, both the children and parents together face the world that is outside of the family]” (173-74). Over time, these efforts to grasp the norms and values of the family and social environment result in the child in forming an “Ich-Bewusstsein” – a consciousness of the self (174).

The role the norms and values play in the later phases of identity formation is hardly any less significant. The second phase – the so-called oedipal phase – is marked in Dreitzel by the formation of gender identity (“die Geschlechtsidentitaet”). Through identification with the parent of the same sex, the child – in the classical model of gender identity formation – internalizes the role expectations specific for its sex. Again, the gender norms play a pivotal role here in forging gender identity for the child during this phase of identity formation: “Die Folge dieser Identifikation ist zunaechst die Entwicklung der eigenen *Geschlechtsidentitaet*, also jenes Aspekts der Ich-Identitaet, der sich auf das Verhaeltnis zum eigenen Geschlecht und dessen jeweilige soziokulturelle Praegung and Ueberformung bezieht [The outcome of this identification is the development of gender identity – that is to say, the development of that aspect of self-identity that has to do with the affinity of one’s gender with the sociocultural context in which this gender is forged]” (174). The norms and values, however, continue to shape self-identity throughout life even when, as an adult, the individual engages in social action and causes. According to Dreitzel, social action consists in performing social roles

that by necessity are governed by social norms and values. In discharging these roles, the adult asserts itself and affirms its role identity (181-82).

Given the seminal role social norms and values play in identity formation throughout life, it would be logical to suggest that in all its various modes – whether it is an affinity with a clan, community or country; an association with a race, ethnicity or organization; the relationship to self – identity depends for sustenance (and construction) on the values of the entities within which it is embedded. That is to say, when we proclaim our identity, not only do we say who we are, we also express what we believe in. By saying, we are animal rights activists, we express our belief in a humane treatment of animals. In saying, I am Hindu I express a belief in the values of the Hindu faith and community. It is in this mutually integrative sense of belonging between self and its normative context that I use the term identity in this project. Furthermore, the belief in the shared values of the context – the entity or entities, so to speak – be it a cause, community, color, creed, class, clan, or country, is what signifies home in the discussion. Home thus, figuratively, represents a location of shared values from which one speaks.

This dissertation relies on these basic notions of identity and home and complicates them, where applicable, as it discusses their manifestation in the works of three Caribbean writers. The writers employ colonial difference inherent in a colonial situation, and the condition of the colonized the difference engenders, variously adopting different emphases – social, political, psychological, or personal – as they explore the theme of identity in their works. Chapter 2 examines the way George Lamming pursues the reorganization of a Barbadian community, underscoring a social revolution, as the villagers move from a state of colonialism to semi-independence in *In the Castle of My*

Skin. I complicate the novelist's notion of a new identity and home by subjecting it to the assumptions of historical materialism. Chapter 3 discusses Vidiadhar S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* as he traces the cultural reorientation of indentured sugar laborers from India to the evolving Creole values of colonial Trinidad. The novelist's emphasis here falls on psychological confusion and cultural syncretism as he explores a new sense of belonging and home for his subjects.

The Mimic Men, another novel by Naipaul, constitutes the focus of Chapter 4. If *In the Castle* and *Mr. Biswas* use colonial difference as a springboard for predominantly creating communal identities for their respective worlds, *The Mimic Men* concentrates on self-identity of its protagonist, Ralph Singh, who feels that colonial difference has diminished his existence to mimicking the values of the colonizer. As Singh tries to find a new home in the art of writing, the novelist emphasizes the dynamics of the protagonist's search for a new self. Finally, Chapter 5 scrutinizes *Omeros*, an epic poem by Derek Walcott, as the poet uses difference as a discrete cultural value on which he bases a multicultural identity for his characters. Social interaction in the poem occurs along multiple axes of difference – including social, racial, and geographical difference. I complicate Walcott's notion of a multicultural self by interweaving it with the idea of a “displaced,” diasporic self borrowed from the work of Caribbean critic Stuart Hall in cultural studies.

In the discussion above, I refer to home, figuratively, as a location encapsulating shared values from which one speaks within a context. The figurative sense of home, however, should not detract attention from the significance of the literal, material aspect of the entity. After all Mr. Biswas, the hero of Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*, stakes

his life struggle out on building a house for himself. He would laud the values associated with the materiality of a house at the end of his life when he declares that: “How terrible it would have been, at this time, to be without it [the house]: to have died among the Tulsis, amid the squalor of that large, disintegrating and indifferent family; to have left Shama and the children among them, in one room; worse, to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one’s portion of the earth” (13-14). The acquisition of a house (and real estate) as an emblem of one’s rootedness in place and, therefore, a badge of one’s independent identity – as Mr. Biswas underscores it here – is also the concern of another Caribbean character.

Pa, the oldest dweller of Creighton’s village in Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin*, regrets the fact that he and his fellow-blacks have been barred from owning a piece of land by the white English landlord Mr. Creighton. He expresses his discontent by citing the thoughts of a fellow-dweller, Mr. Slime, to his wife Ma. Pa wonders aloud that “[i]f Mr. Creighton an’ all the Creightons from time past can own it [the land], there ain’t no reason why we mustn’t. . . . It ain’t fair for you an’ me to go on year in year out for more years than anybody can remember paying rent week after week” (79). Pa definitely senses the prestige and anchorage that come with owning a piece of land. Home, thus, encompasses both the literal and figurative aspects of the entity in my discussion; it signifies the material as well as the metaphorical values associated with it.

Further, if the values undergirding identity are a seminal influence on self as demonstrated above, they are also potentially limitless. They vary from community to community and individual to individual; they may even patently be in conflict within an individual. The values of white evangelicals in America differ from those in the

Southern Baptist Church. A colored male professional of liberal, straight, middleclass upbringing may struggle to get along with another professional of the same values but of opposite sex and sexuality. Jonathan Rutherford puts this configuration succinctly when he observes that: “[...] our class subjectivities do not simply co-exist alongside our gender. Rather our class is gendered and our gender is classed” (19). I mention this fact because we will see these shifting allegiances and affiliations later give rise to an array of identities in Singh, the protagonist of Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*.

Nevertheless, despite the multitudinousness of values and the fact that they may shift and realign any number of ways, the fact remains that their primary presence makes identity possible in the first place. I should like to quote Jeffrey Weeks’s reflections in this regard as the final comment on the primacy of values in the identity equation; as he studies culture in a rapidly changing post-World War II Britain, Weeks underlines the resurgence of values in the quest for identity on personal and collective levels by noting that:

As the postwar consensus has crumbled . . . the search for more or less coherent value-systems has become rather more fevered. On a personal level some people have moved promiscuously through drugs and alternative lifestyles to health fads and religion; a number seek to be ‘born again’. . . . On the level of politics, various fundamentalisms, on Left and Right, have burst forth, each articulating their own truth, whether it be about the perils of pornography, the wrongs done to animals, the rights and wrongs of this or that religion, or the marvels of the market economy. There is a new climate where values matter [...]. (90)

If values are, thus, all the rage in the quest for identity, they have been – in the case of the colonized – subjected to erosion under the regimes of colonization. The colonizer has systematically hegemonized the traditions and values of the colonized. Patterns of Western thought inherited from Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant and Nietzsche have overshadowed philosophical thinking from the colonies. Likewise, the literary paradigms drawn from Homer, Dante, Goethe and Flaubert have marginalized colonial literary expression. In the following, I discuss some of the ways the colonizer has eroded the values of the colonized and thus adversely affected their identity. This discussion is also useful in that it informs my analysis of the books later in the project.

I begin with Chinua Achebe, who points out an inherent philosophical conflict between individual and community in African literature versus the literary tradition in the West. This conflict, according to Achebe, has been used to downplay the achievement of the African novel and of novelistic traditions elsewhere in the colonial world. In a paper originally delivered in November 1984 as the Regents' Lecture at the University of California at Los Angeles, he contends that the community in African literature, as in life, looms large because the Africans, owing to their specific history, have not made the early modern Cartesian move (*cogito ergo sum* – I think therefore I am!) from community to individual. The community, therefore, gets precedence over the individual. Yet Achebe complains that:

In the area of literature, I recall that we have sometimes been informed by the West and its local zealots that the African novels we write are not novels at all because they do not quite fit the specifications of that literary form which came into being at a particular time in specific response to the new spirit of individual

freedom set off by the decay of feudal Europe and the rise of capitalism. This form, we were told, was designed to explore individual rather than social predicaments. (“The Writer and His Community” 54)

Far too often, such Western philosophical and literary templates erode confidence in indigenous values and end up stymieing artistic expression in the colonies.

On top of Western philosophical and literary templates, the colonizer has also imposed metropolitan language on the colonized to vitiate the force of native values. Language as a medium of communication and the cohesion it provides among the members of a community are well known. The choice of language is central to the self-definition of a people. Not only does language in its spoken and written forms provide tools for communication, it also functions as a primary building block in conceiving of images and pictures that constitute literature. The uniqueness of language therefore is tantamount to the specificity of a people, its self-definition. Intervening in the native language of a people would mean undermining their self-identity as a people. Notice the self-alienation occurring in a community where the product of language, the literature, does not reflect the natural surroundings of the people; the occasion is a 1964 article “Jasmine,” in which Vidiadhar S. Naipaul questions the usefulness of metropolitan literature for a people in the Caribbean: “The language was ours, to use as we pleased. The literature that came with it was therefore of peculiar authority; but this literature was like an alien mythology. There was, for instance, Wordsworth’s notorious poem about the daffodil. A pretty flower, no doubt; but we had never seen it. Could the poem have any meaning for us?” (24). Naipaul’s concern here is obviously a foreign literature that was imposed on a colonial people from far away; what if the language was foreign too?

Ngugi wa Thiong'o examines just such a situation where a metropolitan language and literature have been imposed on a colonial people, concentrating on how the double imposition affects self and collective identities of the colonized. In his influential essay "The Language of African Literature," the Kenyan critic and novelist takes the most comprehensive view of language as not only a means of communication and conceptualization, as I have been discussing above. Language, for Ngugi, embodies culture *par excellence*. As humans communicate among themselves through the medium of language specific to their social and natural worlds, they come to grasp their reality in a certain way. The language as a tool helps them create perspectives and visions that mediate individual experience within a community, among communities, and even between individual and its natural world. Over time, these perspectives and visions consolidate themselves into sets of values, which in turn constitute the basis for a thoroughgoing narrative of a people.

This narrative, according to Ngugi, is synonymous with culture and is transmittable from generation to generation:

There is [thus] a gradual accumulation of values which in time become almost self-evident truths governing their [the individuals'] conception of what is right and wrong, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, courageous and cowardly, generous and mean in their internal and external relations. Over a time this becomes a way of life distinguishable from other ways of life. They develop a distinctive culture and history. Culture embodies those moral, ethical, and aesthetic values, the set of spiritual eyeglasses through which they come to view themselves and their

place in the universe. Values are the basis of a people's identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race. (14-15)

Language obviously is at the core of the cultural process here. Tampering with the native language or dominating it with a metropolitan one would mean striking at the root of culture; it would mean undermining the subjective and collective identities that are embedded within a culture. On the individual level, the metropolitan dominance would translate into a colonial subject not being able to mediate its human experience in a language of its choosing. The subject would have to step outside itself to negotiate its reality. Self-alienation is the inevitable result. Collectively, the imposition of a foreign language and literature means having to look at native reality with the value sets, the "spiritual eyeglasses," of a far-away culture that is centered in Europe. This activity would again inevitably cause self-estrangement in the colonized because they would experience a dissociation of sensibility from their environment. Singly or collectively, the results could be disastrous.

If Western literary tutelage and the imposition of a metropolitan language erode confidence in native values, metropolitan representation of the (post)colony also contributes to weakening the values of the colonized. Generations of colonialist critics and imaginative writers have looked at the colony from their vantage point and represented it in terms of metropolitan ideology and frames of reference. The deciding logic of this ideology consists in the assumption that there exists an originating moment of truth or immanence called the "logos." Instances of this self-certifying moment of truth or "logos" can be traced back to Plato's universal "Forms" or "Ideas" as he discusses them in *Book X* of his *Republic*. There the ancient philosopher conceives of the

universal “Forms” or “Ideas” as being the “real” originals; they function as the true references of general terms and may draw their validity from God as being their guarantor: “God realized this . . . He didn’t want to be a kind of joiner, making a particular bed: he wanted to be a genuine creator and make a genuine bed. That’s why he created a single real one” (70). Entities or terms that accord with the moment of truth or “logos” are logically truthful and authentic and are considered pre-eminent – these include the colonial power and the white race. Contrarily, the colonized and non-white run counter to the “logos” and are therefore inauthentic and inferior. This kind of logocentric thinking, which is integral to metropolitan ideology, has developed a whole vocabulary of binaristic terms – colonizer/colonized; center/periphery; reason/emotion; nature/nurture – that stabilize meaning on the polar ends of binaries, ignore the space between the polar ends, and conceal ideological structures of power relations. Deconstructive critic Jacques Derrida has described Western metropolitan ideology in dominative terms as well, except that he conflates “logos” and “Reason”: “the white mythology . . . reassembles and reflects the culture of the West; the white man takes his own mythology, Indo-European mythology, his own *logos*, that is, the *mythos* of this idiom, for the universal form of that he must still wish to call Reason” (qtd. in Selden 222). Even when critics tend to portray the colonized in a favorable light by transcending the binaries, as in some versions of postmodernism, the affirmation occurs within the cultural/ideological modes of the West.

An example of such affirmation can be witnessed in Jean-Francois Lyotard, who emphatically refutes the notions of progress and emancipation of humanity as the West pursues them since the French Revolution. According to Lyotard, these goals have often

justified dubious means for fulfillment or have coerced diverse people into one indistinguishable mass. In his “Defining the Postmodern” (1986), the French critic cites “Auschwitz” and “Soviet Gulags” as the recent examples of the means to coerce people into compliance in the name of progress and emancipation, whereby it was not clear who exactly was underdeveloped and needed to be emancipated:

To be sure, the question of knowing which was the subject truly victimized by the lack of development – whether it was the poor, the worker, the illiterate – remained open during the 19th and 20th centuries. There were disputes, even wars, between liberals, conservatives and leftists over the very name of the subject we are to help become emancipated. Nevertheless, all the parties concurred in the same belief that enterprises, discoveries and institutions are legitimate only insofar as they contribute to the emancipation of mankind. (1613)

Tragedies occur when goals are manipulated for political ends. Lyotard warns against eliminating diversity – the space between the polar ends – and coercing uniformity because “[n]either economic nor political liberalism, nor the various Marxisms, emerge from the sanguinary last two centuries free from the suspicion of crimes against mankind” (1614).

Lyotard’s idea of postmodernism as a cultural movement, in fact, resists the idea that the whole world march in lockstep toward one utopian future. He endorses a multiplicity of points of view and ways of living that would give rise to novel ideas of conceiving history, the nation, and individual identity – concepts that are intimately bound up with the condition of the colonized. Obviously, Lyotard’s vision confirms

(post)colonial subjects, but it does so by first subjecting them to a Western ideological paradigm, whose controlling centrality is also validated at the same time.

This inability of critics to step outside their frames of reference or ideological modes is ultimately also the supreme lesson one learns from the “Orientalized” vision of Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978). Whether it is the millennia-old history of cultural relations between Europe and Asia; the scientific discipline that produces experts in “Oriental” languages and culture since the early nineteenth century; or the stereotypes and images about the “Orient” – Orientalism in all these aspects, according to Said, embodies a “field of learned study” (49). The legitimacy of the field depends on a cultural distinction, constructed artificially, between the “Occident” and “Orient” by orientalists, the practitioners of the field. The cultural distinction turns completely on an “imaginative geography,” which has nothing to do with a fact in nature but still needs to be preserved and enforced in order for Orientalism to be a valid project. Orientalists thus police the borders of the field of study. Said remarks:

[The] Orient (“out there” towards the East) is corrected, even penalized, for lying outside the boundaries of European society, “our” world; the Orient is thus *orientalized*, a process that not only marks the Orient as the province of the Orientalist but also forces the uninitiated Western reader to accept Orientalist codifications . . . as the *true* Orient. (“Imaginative Geography and Its Representations” 67)

Truth thus becomes a casualty of the ideological leanings of the orientalists, whose “Occidental” frame of reference determines what orientalism is. The deleterious effects of this mis-representation are all too obvious. The Orientals do not recognize themselves

in the portrayal. They seem standing beside themselves, looking at their “selves” as “others,” because no correspondence exists between representation and reality. The situation encapsulates self-alienation *in extremis* – the splitting of the self in two. On the level of colonial culture, this splitting of the self translates into – to say it with Ngugi – looking at your own reality with the “spiritual eyeglasses” of the colonial power. This activity inevitably results in self-denigration and the denial of indigenous reality.

I would like to quote Singh, the protagonist of Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*, here in regard to the denial of indigenous reality: reminiscing about his school days in his native Isabella in the Caribbean, he would later write in his fictional memoir that:

We had converted our island into one big secret. Anything that touched on everyday life excited laughter when it was mentioned in a classroom: the name of a shop, the name of a street, the name of street-corner foods. The laughter denied our knowledge of these things to which after the hours of school we were to return. We denied the landscape and the people we could see out of open doors and windows [. . .]. (95)

Metropolitan (mis)representation of the colony here reaches its intended, ultimate goal when colonials, like Singh, deny their reality and submit to self-degradation not because they feel the pressures of foreign imposition, but because self-denigration – as an effect of split-identity – normalizes and they feel an inner compulsion to it. Subjective compliance to the norm becomes a matter of free will. The expropriation of colonial culture at this point is complete. This hollowing-out of cultural identity – including racial identity – embodies the essence of the colonizing experience in Frantz Fanon as well.

In his suggestively titled book, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon characteristically dramatizes the conflict within the split-identity of the colonized as a battle between the two selves: on the one hand, there is the original, authentic self – albeit bruised – of the colonized; on the other, the colonizer has imposed an “Orientalized” version of the original on the colonized. The battle between the two selves shapes up metaphorically in terms of a chemical reaction: “[T]he movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self” (109). The attitudes and gaze of the colonizer, embodied in the “other,” “Orientalized” self, do violence to the colonized in two distinct ways. One, they render the colonized’s original self stationary and unchanging (“fixed”) – incapable of movement or development in any way, shape, or form. The colonizer’s attitudes and gaze, however, also threaten to re-define and re-present (“fix”) the colonized’s original, authentic self in terms of his – the colonizer’s – own attributes and values. These attributes resemble the guise of a “white mask” (note the title of the book!), and the wearing of the mask would be akin to approximating the identity of the colonizer. The colonized resists approximating the identity of the colonizer; the dynamics of the approximation has been the focus of postcolonial critics.

Homi Bhabha, for instance, describes the dynamics of the approximation of the colonizer’s identity in terms of mimicking the values of the colonizer in 1984. Evidently, colonial discourse relies on the notion that the colonized be civilized. If he were true to his post-Enlightenment mission of civilizing the colonized, the colonizer would insist that the colonized imitate him to the fullest extent possible. This is not, however, what

happens here in the mimicking. In his obligation to mirror back the closest image of the colonial master, the colonized produces neither identity nor difference because the mirroring back comprises none of the two. All the colonized does is assume a version of a “presence” of the colonizer that, according to Bhabha, can at best be “partial” (86). Mimicking thus turns on an ambivalent motive, and the “mimic man” that imitates and reflects back becomes “the effect of a flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English” (87 emphasis original). In Bhabha’s own words:

[C]olonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. . . . Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation. (“Of Mimicry and Man” 86)

Difference therefore persists; its existence, alongside apparent identity (“*almost the same*”), offers the colonized opportunity to both validate and reject the values of the colonizer.

Again, Singh may be seen as an epitome of the “mimic man.” He articulates dual views: on one hand, he steadfastly sings praises of London, the metropolis of the colonizer, as long as he is in his native Isabella in the Caribbean. No sooner than he arrives in London, he sees for himself what the city is like and calls it out:

The great city, centre of the world, in which, fleeing disorder, I had hoped to find the beginning of order. So much had been promised by the physical aspect. That marvel of light, soft shadow-less, always protective. . . . Here was the city, the

world. I waited for the flowering to come to me. . . . I would play with famous names as I walked empty streets and stood on bridges. But the magic of names soon faded. . . . In the great city, so solid in its light, which gave colour even to unrendered concrete . . . in this solid city life was two-dimensional. (*The Mimic Men* 18-19)

Critics and authors have embraced difference as a boon for the colonized; it may enable the colonized to mock metropolitan values and undercut colonial authority, as Singh does above. Difference, however, may also prompt counter-colonial resistance. *In the Castle of My Skin* embodies the resistance. Pa, the oldest character in the novel, points to the built-in difference in a colonial society when he rails against the perquisites of the colonizer: “If Mr. Creighton [the colonial master] an’ all the Creightons from time past can own it [the land], there ain’t no reason why we [the colonized] mustn’t” (79). His sense of difference as a deprived colonial goads him on to imagine what it feels like to be rich and famous: “I look up over yonder there at the house on the hill, an’ I wonder what it feel like to be big an’ great” (77).

Difference, furthermore, may bring about change by stimulating experimentation. In a 1982 essay “Imaginary Homelands,” Salman Rushdie reflects on the fact of his being an Indian-born writer living and publishing in Britain. He hails his difference from the mainstream and converts it into a condition for literary cross-fertilization:

Let me suggest that Indian writers in England have access to a second tradition, quite apart from their own racial history. It is the culture and political history of the phenomenon of migration, displacement, life in a minority group. [. . .] the past to which we belong is an English past, the history of immigrant Britain.

Swift, Conrad, Marx are as much our literary forbears as Tagore or Ram Mohan Roy. America, a nation of immigrants, has created literature out of the phenomenon of cultural transplantation [. . .] it may be that by discovering what we have in common with those who preceded us into this country, we can begin to do the same. (20)

Rushdie's idea of cultural and literary cross-fertilization results in creating "Imaginary Homelands" that may be at variance with real homelands, but are authentic and rejuvenating. In this feat of literary cross-fertilization and creating "Imaginary Homelands," Rushdie comes close to what Bhabha has in mind when he talks about the "hybrid" sites that open up and facilitate "translation" or "negotiation" between antagonistic elements in theoretical discourse.

In the essay entitled "The Commitment to Theory" (1988), for instance, Bhabha discusses these hybrid sites in terms of moments of consensus building between contradictory or antagonistic elements, which may emerge within a political movement or initiative. He illustrates this phenomenon with respect to the miners' strike of 1984-85 in Britain. While on the macro scale, the strike may have been about the rights of a working class, yet within the broader fight women strikers emerged with their own stakes about the equality of pay and status in the working class and society. The theoretical perspective that takes up such issues essentially "becomes the *negotiation* of contradictory and antagonistic instances that open up hybrid sites and objectives of struggle" (25). The hybrid sites, consequently, occupy the space that represents neither one thing ("a unitary working class") nor the other ("the politics of gender") but is

something else besides that contests the terms and territories of both. In Bhabha's own theoretical terms:

The language of [theoretical] critique is effective not because it keeps forever separate the terms of the master and the slave, the mercantilist and the Marxist, but to the extent to which it overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a space of translation: a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object that is new, *neither the one nor the other*, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the moment of politics. (25 emphasis original)

New political initiatives and objects thus come to being because of the “translation/negotiation” or “hybridity.” Two years after the publication of “The Commitment to Theory,” in 1990, Bhabha expatiates on “hybridity” in an interview characteristically entitled “The Third Space.” In it, he graphically recasts “hybridity” in terms of the third space that emerges as a corollary of the fusion (“translation” or “negotiation”) of two earlier spaces. It is important to the critic that he emphasize the novelty of the third space, which incorporates and supersedes the histories of the two previous spaces, and takes on an authority of its own. Bhabha answers the interviewer Jonathan Rutherford's curiosity as to how to define hybridity in the final analysis by stating that hybridity is “the third space which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives” (211).

Finally, difference plays a role in a sense other than the discrepancy between colonizer and colonized I have been discussing thus far. This sense has to do with a

conflict of values within an individual itself. Every individual lives with a multitude of values – as a straight man, an environmentalist, liberal, pro-choice, anti-drug and so forth. Which values the individual espouses and brings to the fore at a time, accounts for its provisional identity for that very moment on a continuum of identity formation. Singh in *The Mimic Men* seems to be varyingly conflicted concerning his values toward Isabella, the fictional island of his birth in the Caribbean, and India, the land of his ancestors. He runs thereby a gamut of identity formation that stretches all the way from being a disgraced colonial politician to a dignified Aryan Indian and every place in between.

In this chapter, I have been concerned with defining and describing the dynamics of a psychosocial base of identity – the fact that irrespective of its mode, identity depends on the social norms and values of the entities in which it is entrenched. The values the self shares with those entities constitute, figuratively, a home from which it speaks. The figurative home, however, does not obviate the need for or lessen the importance of a literal, physical house, as Mr. Biswas's case evidences. Since social norms and values are at the center of identity in the figurative as well as literal sense of the word, threatening them would mean undermining identity. This, in fact, has been the case concerning the identity of the colonized. Regimes of colonization have vitiated the force of native norms and values and rendered partially ineffective the identity of the colonized. Philosophical and literary dominance from the metropolis along with metropolitan language and representation have tried to coerce the colonial subjectivity into acquiescence and self-denigration. Self-division has been the obvious result.

In spite of the dire situation (perhaps because of it) of the colonized – the fact that the colonized has to look at “self” as “other” – a sense of difference persists between the

colonizer and colonized, acting as a hope for the downtrodden. The difference has enabled the colonized to validate and reject – i.e., relativize – the values of the colonizer; it has also provided the colonized a base for constructing cultural identity from the bottom up, to anchor self in a renewed set of norms and values because, as Frantz Fanon says in the building of national culture: “Everything works together to awaken the native’s sensibility. . . . The native rebuilds his perceptions because he renews the purpose and dynamism of the craftsmen, of dancing and music, and of literature and the oral tradition. His world comes to lose its accursed character” (*The Wretched* 243-44).

CHAPTER III

RESISTANCE AND REVOLUTIONARY STRUGGLE: *IN THE CASTLE OF MY SKIN*

(1953)

This chapter discusses George Lamming's 1953 debut novel, *In the Castle of My Skin*, as a colonial village in Barbados of the 1930s reorganizes itself into a semi-independent community. It demonstrates the way Lamming underscores a social revolution as he explores a new identity and home for the villagers while using colonial difference as a condition of their social being for his initial point of departure. I discuss the revolutionary struggle in terms of the Marxian notion of historical materialism. The chapter also talks about the intersection of individual, artistic identity of the protagonist, G., with communal identity of the village as the protagonist-narrator ingests and shapes his impressions of the community at the same time that he experiences them.

To begin with, *In the Castle of My Skin* enacts Fanon's notion of building a national culture in the image of one's own norms and values. The novel focuses on the life of a community, Creighton's village, whose all-black population of some three thousand residents is dominated by the norms of the white man. The scene is colonial Barbados of the 1930s, and the domination stretches back three centuries when the British first colonized the island in 1627 and brought along large numbers of African

slaves to work their sugar plantations. Difference as a function of colonial mimesis has ever since been the privilege of the colonizer. In fact, difference acts (and has acted) as the motivating factor in the colonizer's desire for colonial mimesis, as Homi Bhabha has argued in "Of Mimicry and Man," which I discussed in greater detail above in Chapter 1: if the colonizer desires to be mimicked, it is not that he wants to produce a co-equal human being; rather, the colonizer's intent is to create an "Other" that is reformed and recognizable as such. That is to say, the colonized is from the outset conceived as "*a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (86). This residual difference between the colonizer and colonized shapes the world of *In the Castle*.

Lamming takes up the theme of colonial difference, and the condition of the colonized associated with it, in Creighton's village and sedulously explores it within the vicissitudes of some nine years. During these years, the village moves from a state of colonialism to something resembling semi-independence. The nine years are bounded on each end by the details of the hero-narrator G.'s life: his ninth birthday, approximately in 1936, opens the novel and his imminent departure in 1945 from the island to Trinidad at the age of eighteen concludes the book. Lamming underscores the village's transformation in terms of his concern with community and self, identity and home as he delineates the revolutionary struggle that accompanies the historic changes. He juxtaposes rural culture and the oral tradition of simple working folk against the narratives of written history of the colonizer and the threat of impending capitalist modernization. Embedded within the changes are an historicity and a forward-surg-ing movement of historical processes that tend to disabuse the village community – indeed the whole island and the region – of their centuries-old tradition of political subservience.

These processes, however, do not completely succeed in replacing the old political system.

Lamming has, on various occasions, attested to the veracity of these historical processes. Twenty-five years after the initial publication of *In the Castle*, he recalls in an interview in 1978 with Robert Lee, a St. Lucian writer and broadcaster, the *Zeitgeist* of the 1930s and '40s. It was a time that was rife with hope and expectation, in which peoples of the Caribbean were beginning to rebuild their perceptions about themselves, the region, and national culture. They were eager to forge new values in arts and crafts, upon which they would – to say it with Fanon – base new selves and national identity. With reference to the role played by literature in this task of building new personal and regional identities, Lamming remembers that:

[A]ll of the journals which were going to nurse, as it were, and cultivate the people whose names were going to be heard later as Caribbean writers, these journals came within a year or two of one another. You know, *Bim* [in Barbados], sort of '43, '44; *Focus* [in Jamaica], *Kyk-over-all* [in Guyana], all these journals would appear at much the same time, although, and this is the very interesting thing, there was never any direct collaboration between any of the editors. (264-65)

This literary activity across the Caribbean surely encapsulates the advent of a new self-consciousness, in which writers were reflecting indigenous reality in their works and literature, in turn, nurtured their lives. Within the crucible of these highly formative years of the 1930s and '40s, however, Lamming isolates another event of the late 1930s,

whose authenticity and constitutive influence on Caribbean reality cannot be disputed.

He tells Lee that when:

I [was] a boy, a very young boy, Barbados [was] thought of as a very ordered, very conventional, very conservative society. But in July 1937 nobody on the island could have had those illusions when those barefooted men marched on Government House with the demand to see the Governor. And in the town, whites fleeing, cars overturned into the harbour, stores being smashed. (266)

The event Lamming refers to is the unrest associated with the labor disturbances and trade-union activity of the mid to late 1930s in the Caribbean.

The decade of the 1930s had brought economic depression to financial markets worldwide. Major economies like Britain and the United States suffered terrible losses, and their governments had to pay huge relief in the form of food, clothing, and other public works to an unprecedented number of unemployed workers. While these industrialized nations could cope with the financial collapse, agricultural economies like those in the West Indies were left to their own devices. They had no resources to address the needs of their people. Meanwhile, tensions had already been building in the West Indies for some time between workers and the Colonial Offices about stagnant wages and poor work conditions, so that the economic depression added more stress to an already tense situation. Historian F. R. Augier et al. observe in their account of the years that:

A series of strikes and riots touched off by local grievances in individual islands started in the bad year of 1934. They were a protest both against low wages and against the Crown colony government which made it impossible for West Indians to do much about their own hardships. . . . The unrest spread to Trinidad, Jamaica

and Barbados in 1937 and 1938. City riots were added to strikes and disorders in the country. (280)

Not only did the labor riots act as a rallying cry for social and economic change, they also helped fuel the literary activity that has been occurring across the West Indies and consolidate it into a recognizable literary genre – the Caribbean novel. Lamming remembers that the riots were an event “that I remained very very intellectually and emotionally involved in. I have taken the view on occasions that the political upheavals of the 1930s, what came to be called the disturbances or riots that took place in Trinidad, Barbados and on a very big scale in Jamaica profoundly shaped that curious phenomenon: the Caribbean novel” (265). The novelist subsequently comes very close to admitting the historicity of the labor riots in *In the Castle* when Lee asks him whether it was this sort of growing feeling of cultural nationalism that gave direction to his work, he responds: “I think there is a connection between the political character of many of the early novels which were then published in the fifties [like *In the Castle of My Skin*] and the events of the late 1930s” (266).

Yet however authentic the historical events of the late 1930s may be in *In the Castle* and in whatever way they may have shaped the identity of Creighton’s village, some critics remain skeptical of their significance or historicity. Neil T. Kortenaar, for instance, does not see any importance in the events of the novel in his 1991 discussion of the book. He brings a metropolitan-political perspective to the novel, looking at *In the Castle* from the vantage point of its various aspects – the narrative, characterization, and plot. Each aspect Kortenaar discusses, he refracts it through the lens of traditional, Eurocentric categories to evaluate its effectiveness in the book, which he ultimately

pronounces flawed. Thus the narrative as a novelistic aspect, in this scheme of things, would require, that it relate a cause-and-effect progression of an action that is significant and ends in a climax. Kortenaar cites examples of this climax in the floods of *The Mill on the Floss* and *The Virgin and the Gypsy*, where the floods signify death and rebirth, baptism and regeneration (44).

Since the action in *In the Castle* does not end in a climax (the colonizer goes unscathed; the colonial revolution dissipates into chaos), “the text,” Kortenaar observes, “refuses to satisfy our traditional expectations of the narrative: the pleasurable build up and release of tension” (44). The text, therefore, is “anti-historical” (49). Where this thoroughly conventional, metropolitan perspective causes Kortenaar to proclaim *In the Castle* “anti-historical,” it also hinders him from discerning any significance in the characterization of the community as it is depicted in the novel; for him, the community is an indistinguishable mass, simply “unreflective and based on interpersonal relations” (49). Kortenaar’s political bias is at its most flagrant when he concludes that “[t]he colonial society Lamming writes about lacks imaginative wholeness: it was created by others and never had the reality in the imagination of its members that England had in the imagination of the English, or Dixie had in the minds of Southerners” (52). I want to make common cause with the Indian critic, Viney Kirpal, who concludes in her rebuttal of Kortenaar’s thesis in 1997 that:

In the Castle of My Skin is not a flawed novel, as Kortenaar contends but one constructed according to the principles of oral storytelling [hence a relaxed attitude toward narrative construction and characterization]. At the same time, George Lamming is writing a modern and complex novel, with complete

awareness of the techniques of the modern English novel. He has used the Joycean one-day narrative technique most conspicuously in Chapter 13, where the action is divided by time into Morning, Noon, and Evening. But he does this by not employing the stream-of-consciousness technique, possibly because he does not perceive his characters as the sophisticated intellectuals and isolates of modern English fiction. Indeed, the assimilation of oral and written narrative structures renders Lamming's novels [*sic*] stylistically one of the best modern texts. It ought to be judged not Eurocentrically but on its own terms as a work straddling different "literary" traditions while remaining firmly rooted in the indigenous. (112-13)

The indigenous literary tradition in the Caribbean in 1953, when *In the Castle* was first published, has been ripening throughout the '30s and '40s. It demanded that writers look inward and not across the sea to London to practice their art.

Kenneth Ramchand acknowledges the ripening process and the new attitude it spawned toward native reality in the "Introduction" to his seminal work, *The West Indian Novel and Its Background* (1970), by noting that "[f]or the first time in writing related to the West Indies, the Black characters are not restricted to being peripheral or background figures. To this may be attributed, at least in part, the realistic exuberance with which West Indian writers of the 1930's expressed the life and surroundings of the West Indian peasant" (4-5). By the 1950s, this attitude toward West Indian characters and landscape had further consolidated, so that Lamming felt comfortable passing a definitive judgment on both; in the essay, "The Occasion for Speaking," collected in his 1960 *The Pleasures*

of Exile, Lamming characterizes unambiguously the interrelation between the West Indian peasant and the vocation of the novelist, explaining that:

Unlike the previous governments and departments of educators, unlike the business man importing commodities, the West Indian novelist did not look out across the sea to another source. He looked in and down at what had traditionally been ignored. For the first time the West Indian peasant became other than a cheap source of labour. He became, through the novelist's eye, a living existence, living in silence and joy and fear, involved in riot and carnival. It is the West Indian novel that has restored the West Indian peasant to his true and original status of personality. (38-39)

Neil T. Kortenaar, with his metropolitan-political bias, may not be able to see significance in the events and lives of the peasants in Creighton's village, and his pronouncements about the novel may be colored by his "Orientalized" view of West Indian fiction. But for Lamming, looking from the inside, the West Indian peasant and landscape offer new possibilities of social and historical research. These people carry a great deal of weight in his imagination, and he works hard to restore them to their rightful place in history. Supriya Nair re-assesses Lamming's *oeuvre* in her 1996 book in terms of the novelist's re-visioning of history from this very perspective of the restoration of the peasant. She lauds Lamming's emphasis on the peasantry as the base of Caribbean culture and observes that: "Since agricultural labor was the base of the 'foreign [i.e., metropolitan] invention' of Caribbean plantation society, Lamming's insistence on foregrounding the foundation from the inside seeks to rewrite a literally manufactured history of imposition and dispossession" (4-5).

To this effect of foregrounding the foundation – of accentuating the peasant and their rural folk traditions – Lamming wrote an introduction, “*In the Castle of My Skin: Thirty Years After*,” which he published for the first Schocken edition of the novel in 1983; in it, the novelist revealingly tells the reader that:

The book is crowded with names and people, and although each character is accorded a most vivid presence and force of personality, we are rarely concerned with the prolonged exploration of an individual consciousness. It is the collective human substance of the Village, you might say, which is the central character. When we see the Village as collective character, we perceive another dimension to the individual wretchedness of daily living. It is the dimension of energy, force, a quickening capacity for survival. The Village sings; the Village dances; and since the word is their only rescue, all the resources of a vital oral folk tradition are summoned to bear witness to the essential humanity which rebukes the wretchedness of their predicament. (*Conversations* 47)

Thus if Kortenaar sees an indistinguishable mass of people in Creighton’s village that are simply “unreflective” and rely on “interpersonal relations,” Lamming sees in the selfsame community and characteristics symbols of endurance, communitarian spirit and a unique way of life. The novelist remains thoroughly committed to telling the story of the peasants from his insider’s perspective. Indeed, the specificity of detail he uses to delineate Creighton’s village – a small peasant community in colonial Barbados of the 1930s – and its internal dynamics renders a vision of the community along the lines of historical materialism.

Thus in his famous “Preface” to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Karl Marx summarizes the laws that govern the material and social development of a society. “In the social production,” Marx states,

[W]hich men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material forces of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society – the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. (626)

The relations of production in Creighton’s village are the relations of exploitation. There is the dominant white Mr. Creighton who owns the lands, and the dominated black villagers who work for him. In what is essentially a closed agricultural economy, the villagers can hardly fulfill their basic needs. Yet they must also pay their weekly rents to Mr. Creighton. The landlord, in return for their services, assumes a paternalistic attitude toward his tenants, surveying, for example, the damage done to the village property after the yearly floods: “Two horses in an outfit of brilliant polished leather dragged the carriage from road to road through the village, stopping here and there as the fancy took the landlord. The survey lasted all morning, during which he had seen most of the extreme damage and made a rough estimate of the necessary repairs” (20).

True to the spirit of exploitative relations, the dominant planter class is geographically neatly segregated from the dominated peasantry:

To the east where the land rose gently to a hill, there was a large brick building surrounded by a wood and a high stone wall that bore bits of bottle along the top.

The landlords lived there amidst the trees within the wall. Below and around it the land spread out into a flat unbroken monotony of small houses and white marl roads. From any point of the land one could see on a clear day the large brick house hoisted on the hill. (17)

The bourgeois mode of production that the social organization in Creighton's village represents has its imperatives for the exploitative class; these individuals must constantly guard their self-interests, keeping – for example – the exploited from any socioeconomic advancement. Thus the blacks are not allowed to own the land; they pay, and have been paying, their weekly rents to the Creightons for generations:

An English landowner, Mr. Creighton, had died, and the estate fell to his son through whom it passed to another son who in his turn died, surrendering it to yet another. Generations had lived and died in this remote corner of a small British colony, the oldest and least adulterated of British colonies: Barbados or Little England as it was called in the local school texts. (17)

To the bourgeois relations of production in Creighton's village, thus, comes another political dimension: at the same time that these relations represent a modern emergent capitalist society, they also incorporate a colonial power. Mr. Creighton, the English landowner, is the immediate representative of this colonial power of Great Britain. Indeed, Mr. Creighton's landowner status owes a great deal to the colonial difference the Englishman embodies against the indigenous population; and it is by virtue of this difference – along with his dominant, ruling-class bourgeois status – that he bars the peasants from acquiring a piece of land.

Being the bourgeois colonial master, Mr. Creighton also accepts the privileges demanded by him of the colonized. Thus during his inspection visit of the village after the floods I drew attention to above, Mr. Creighton observes that “[t]hose who were untidy scampered into hiding, much to his amusement, while the small boys who were caught unawares came to attention and saluted briskly. The landlord smiled, and his wife beside him smiled too” (20). His perceived larger-than-life character of a colonial master commands absolute conformity from the colonized. In fact, the villagers regard Mr. Creighton as the paragon of excellent behavior worthy of emulation:

When the lights [in the landlord’s house] went out, and the wood was dark, the villagers took note. The landlord’s light had been put out. The landlord had gone to bed. It was time they did the same. A custom had been established, and later a value which through continual application and a hardened habit of feeling became an absolute standard of feeling. (21)

Miss Foster, a character in the novel, cannot hold back her admiration for Mr. Creighton, who has once listened to her story of losing a house in the yearly floods and offered her tea and money on top of his audience in his own house: “Teacup and saucer, my child, as you never see in your life. And on the back of it he give me half a crown, sixty cents, believe it or not. I went down on me knees” (26). Mr. Creighton does not make any demands for praise or adoration, though. Nevertheless, he accepts whatever privileges come his way from the villagers for being their colonial master. Meanwhile, his role as the head of the village economy is firmly ensconced in the economic structure of the community.

In regard to the economic structure of the village, I want to mention the view of the Kenyan novelist and critic, Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Ngugi underscores the brutal human exploitation in Creighton's village by likening the world of *In the Castle* to feudalism – an historically earlier socio-economic organization of medieval Europe – adding, however, that “[w]hat distinguishes Creighton Estate from earlier forms of feudalism, more highly stratified with corresponding duties and rights, is its colonial setting with roots in slavery. The rights and duties are divinely willed by Creighton and Great Britain” (48). Personal decisions are, therefore, taken out of people's hands and consigned to foreign determination. However, the villagers at this point in the narrative do not understand the mechanics of a system that is imposed on them. They are ignorant of the ideological forces that help create and institute this social and economic injustice. The innocence of the colonized spurs Lamming to highlight the role some of the ideological forces and institutions, such as religion and the colonial education, play in the lives of the colonized; but the innocence also enables the novelist to accentuate the simple ways of folk life.

In the first third of the novel, Lamming juxtaposes the unaffectedness of the masses against the sophistication of the white, ruling class as a symbol of a unique way of life that has seen the villagers through centuries of oppression and dispossession. The unaffectedness, however, also incorporates a gesture of resistance to colonial authority when the villagers on occasions quibble metropolitan ideas – as when they interrogate the meaning of freedom and slavery on Empire Day, a day that is specifically designed to celebrate the unity of Big England with “Barbados or Little England” (17). This query has a direct bearing on the history of the villagers and the region that are otherwise

pejoratively represented as having no history – as may be witnessed in the accounts of nineteenth-century metropolitan writers like Thomas Carlyle, James Anthony Froude, and Anthony Trollope, among others. Lamming here strategically intervenes to disrupt the authority of official, metropolitan accounts of written history and historiography. He injects memory and oral narratives of working folk as alternative means of chronicling events. Nair in her study of remaking history in Lamming observes that “if history and potential in the modern West Indies seemed irrevocably trapped in the colonial complex, Lamming sees a way out by presenting, in his novels, the resistance of oral and rural cultures that persist in the Caribbean” (80).

In the Castle represents an epitome of rural culture in Barbados of the 1930s. At the center of the rural tradition lies the notion of a collectivity that, regardless of the number it encompasses, defines the uniform character of the community. The protagonist-narrator explains this collective character with reference to his mother and two neighbors: Miss Foster and Bob’s mother:

It seemed they [my mother, Miss Foster and Bob’s mother] were three pieces in a pattern which remained constant. The flow of its history was undisturbed by any difference in the pieces, nor was its evenness affected by any likeness. There was a difference and there was no difference. Miss Foster had six children . . . Bob’s mother had two, and my mother one. The difference between six and two and one did not belong to the piece itself. In the corner where one fence merged into another . . . the pattern had arranged itself with absolute unawareness. Outside at the street corner where villagers poked wreckage from the blocked canal, it had absorbed another three, four, fourteen. But there was no change in the increase.

Here where the fences penetrated each other and in silent collaboration produced a corner there were three. Outside where the roads crossed there were more; thirteen, thirty. (16-17)

Inherent in the collectivity, and trouncing its disparateness, is the human substance that acts like glue and keeps the community together. As I have pointed out above, Lamming talks about the human substance in the introduction to the novel he wrote in 1983, in which he explicitly states that “[i]t is the collective human substance of the Village [mark the capitalization!] . . . which is the central character,” and against which all individual traits recede to the background for the common good of the collectivity: “The Village sings; the Village dances” (“Thirty Years After” 47). Whether it is Miss Foster with her six children, or Bob’s mother with two, or G.’s mother with one – they are all absorbed into and become part of one historical continuity that is Creighton’s village. The defining feature of Creighton’s village consists in the fact that:

This world of men and women from down below is not simply poor. This world is black, and it has a long history at once vital and complex. It is vital because it constitutes the base of labour on which the entire Caribbean society has rested; and it is complex because Plantation Slave Society (the point at which the modern Caribbean began) conspired to smash its ancestral African culture, and to bring about a total alienation of man, the source of labour, from man, the human person. (“Thirty Years After” 48)

However, despite this dehumanization and self-estrangement, these “men and women from down below” have survived in the Caribbean. And in spite of the indigent

conditions they have had to endure, these “hardy poor” (7) in Creighton’s village have not lost faith in human relationships.

In fact, human bonding is their only source of strength amidst the overwhelming misfortunes of life. When the flood waters, with which the novel opens, threaten to engulf their neighborhood, the hero-narrator’s mother initiates a song that acts as a means of reaffirming their closeness:

Then she broke into a soft repetitive tone which ... became a scattering peal of solicitude that soared across the night and into the neighbour’s house. And the answer came back louder, better organized and more communicative, so that another neighbour responded and yet another until the voices seemed to be gathered up by a single effort and the whole village shook with song on its foundation of water. (3)

Not only does the basic human interaction help the poor survive the calamity, it also reveals their belief in the invincibility of the human spirit, for the entire village literally sings in the face of the rising waters.

The same spectacle of celebration of life and human togetherness repeats itself each morning when Savory the baker arrives with his provisions cart in the neighborhood:

They buzzed round the cart sniffing and coughing and shouting in excitement. As the crowd thickened the voices rang louder and louder until no single order was clearly audible to Savory. . . . The shouting lasted till the voices grew hoarse or the crowds lessened. Then it gave way to a joke or a comment which could be heard by anyone nearby. (83)

Elsewhere, the villagers exchange neighborly love in a variety of situations and places: “When the lights went on, the little boys like a bevy of flies assembled around the lamp-post for gossip and stories. Elsewhere in similar manner men gathered to throw dice or cut cards or simply to talk. The spectacle repeated itself at each crossing where there was a street lamp ringed to a post” (2). Women gather in their backyards for gossip and for “exchanging the confidences which informed their life with meaning” (17).

Ambrose Kom calls attention to the vegetation imagery that conveys the stability and rootedness of the villagers: “During their daily gossip,” he observes, “the women form a circular unit around a tree whose roots, by their position in the earth, symbolize the women’s own deep-rootedness and, above all, their interdependence” (410). But Lamming makes clear that the villagers’ continuity and stability are due to their collective inertia because “[t]heir consciousness had never been quickened by the fact of life to which these confidences might have been a sure testimony” (17). The fact of life in Creighton’s village consists in the condition of the colonized – it consists in oppression and disempowerment, political subjugation and economic exploitation of the poor. But the villagers, as they are presented in this third of the novel, are given to the “status quo”; their consciousness as yet is limited to acquiring the basic necessities of life. This passive attitude is most clearly reflected by Trumper, one of the protagonist-narrator’s friends: “’When you up here,’” said Trumper, “’on a night like tonight you see how it is nothin’ could change in the village. Everything’s sort of in order. Big life one side an’ small life a next side, an’ you get a kin’ o’ feelin’ of you in your small corner an’ I in mine. Everything’s kind of correct”” (167).

However, the villagers' apparent indifference toward their social reality cannot last long, for the laws governing the socioeconomic development operate slowly but surely. "At a certain stage of their development," writes Marx,

[T]he material forces of production in society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or – what is but a legal expression for the same thing – with the property relations within which they have been at work before. From forms of development of the forces of production these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. (626)

Thus it is only a matter of time before the villagers' inaction would turn to a revolution. Meanwhile, though, they may cherish the illusion of safety created by the colonizer by a skillful exploitation of their innocence and faith in the existing system.

A variety of ideological forces and strategies go into legitimizing and perpetuating the existing system. Barbados is identified not in terms of the hierarchy that exists between a colonial power and its colony; rather, it is flatteringly referred to as a junior partner in the grand imperial design, the British Empire: "One day before time changed for eternity, Little England [i.e., Barbados] and Big England, God's anointed on earth, might hand-in-hand rule this earth" (29). While the reference to Barbados as "Little England" may pamper Barbadian ego, the larger motive of the flattery seems to be that it enables the colonizer to safely bypass local history. If the school texts (that come from Britain) emphasize "the oldest and least adulterated" character of "Barbados or Little England" (17) with regard to its fidelity to the "Mother Country" (19), the books also carefully ignore the contributions of native heroes and history. Instead, the school children learn about "the Battle of Hastings and William the Conqueror" (50).

In her extended and compelling argument about the uses of history and the way history shapes one's present and future, Supriya Nair emphasizes the role of school as an important social and cultural institution, which helps individuals mediate their past and produce identities that are grounded in history. These individuals would, in turn, reproduce conditions that vouch for historical continuity. However, by introducing a curriculum that teaches the Battle of Hastings and William the Conqueror, the colonialist school authorities strike at the root of local culture. They strategically disrupt indigenous historical continuity by privileging English history over Barbadian past. Nair writes that:

Ideally, education should involve a process of getting to know oneself through an ongoing relationship with the past But in the colonial system, education may . . . involve a process of forgetting one's past When the process instantiates a sense of inferiority and shame and justifies the presence of the colonizers by parroting their assertion of moral and cultural superiority [as it does here by privileging the colonizer's culture and history], colonial education consolidates colonial rule. What is at stake here is just how historiography affects history itself, since the assumption is that an active sense of one's history (narrative) is essential to activating one's history (praxis). (90)

Not only do G. and his classmates not learn about their past, but the past they do learn alienates them from their own history. The colonizer has made sure that his sense of history, and writing of history, prevails so the historical narratives students learn about in school do not trigger an engagement with indigenous heroes and events; these are strategically pushed into oblivion, at the same time that English history is valorized. The students suffer a double loss.

This system of education can have no other *raison d'être* than to completely alienate individuals from their social reality. Said's notion of an "Orientalized" version of history comes to mind. Alternatively, the colonizer intends to "fix" or "re-present" the colonized in the image of his own values. This educational policy cannot help the colonized integrate historical experience and thus form authentic identities; it can only lead to a *Spaltung* of the self because the correspondence between social reality and materials of education is not given. The students look at indigenous reality – as Ngũgĩ would say – with the "spiritual eyeglasses" of a culture that is centered far away in Europe. It is this split of the self, skillfully accomplished, that perpetuates the colonial myth. In a 1964 article "Jasmine," the prominent West Indian writer, Vidiadhar S. Naipaul, suggests a similar self-estranging effect of colonial education on the colonized. Beginning with the affinity of language between Great Britain and the Anglophone Caribbean, he goes on to illustrate the impertinence of metropolitan literature in colonial settings in this way:

The language was ours, to use as we pleased. The literature that came with it was therefore of peculiar authority; but this literature was like an alien mythology. There was, for instance, Wordsworth's notorious poem about daffodil. A pretty flower, no doubt; but we had never seen it. Could the poem have any meaning for us? (24)

The alienating effects of colonial education are most clearly observable in the character of the head-teacher. He perfectly embodies a split personality on Empire Day.

Having been fed on a heavy dose of metropolitan literature and history, the head-teacher has no sure knowledge and certainly no means of incorporating his slave past into

his present. He can, therefore, only dismiss his pupil's inquiry as to the meaning of the word "freedom." The young student has heard the head-teacher talk about Queen Victoria in one way and the old people on the wall in another: "They had talked about her as a good queen because she freed them" (48). It is noteworthy how Lamming here unobtrusively injects oral narrative of rural folk into the official narrative of Empire Day that exclusively rests on the authoritativeness of written imperial history. The oral tradition juxtaposes the written word. Nevertheless, it is only a matter of little imagination on the part of the students before they – galvanized by the old people, their sense of history activated by the oral narrative – are able to figure out for themselves what this conversation about freedom is all about:

How it was the queen that made them free. I heard it too, another boy said. I thought it was so strange, but I didn't worry because it didn't refer to me. The queen had made them free. They must have been locked up once in a kind of gaol. That's what it was, one boy said quietly. Most of them were locked up in a gaol at some time in the past. And it would appear that when this good and great queen came to the throne she ordered that those who weren't free should now become free. It was beginning to make sense. Now they could understand what this talk about freedom meant. (48)

The head-teacher, who should be able to satisfy the student's query, is, however, as arrogant as he is evasive in his explanation: "... he didn't know what the old people were talking about. They might have been getting dotish" (48-49). Furthermore, because he has no base to place his identity upon, the head-teacher can only look toward England for direction. The dependency explains his nervousness and obsequious behavior vis-à-vis

the English school inspector during the festivities; but it also highlights the precariousness of his safety he is feigning in front of the other villagers. Later he would brutally beat an innocent school boy out of the precariousness.

In his seminal work on the black psyche and race relations, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Frantz Fanon reflects on the devastating effects of colonizing cultures on indigenous population; with respect to the phenomenon of self-division in the black person that results from mimicking the values of the white colonizer, he goes on to state that “[t]he black man has two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white man. A Negro behaves differently with a white man and with another Negro” (17). This observation is particularly true of the head-teacher. Being a split personality, he is all too polite in the presence of the white school inspector: “the head teacher who seldom laughed would smile for the length of the inspector’s visit” (27). But as soon as the inspector leaves, he rebounds to his default character of a tyrant and a snob and viciously beats an innocent school boy (who hasn’t laughed during the head-teacher’s speech) in the name of good manners: “[G]entlemen don’t grin and giggle like buffoons” (34).

Lamming takes pains to put the head-teacher and his ilk in proper perspective within the colonial context. The head-teacher, along with other professionals such as doctors, lawyers, engineers and overseers, forms the middle stratum of colonial society. Owing to their privileged status, these middleclass individuals – the native bourgeoisie, so to speak – might function as an interface between the upper class and the working masses. But thanks to their colonial education, these individuals are completely alienated from the “folk”; they ally themselves with the dominant class. Again, Fanon’s words in his other influential, anti-colonial work, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), capture the

character of these individuals with extraordinary precision: “The intermediary does not lighten the oppression, nor seek to hide the domination; he shows them up and puts them into practice with the clear conscience of an upholder of the peace” (38). Thus employed by the landlord to guard his property, the overseer (like the head-teacher at school) constantly bullies the villagers in the name of law and order. He distrusts his own people and slings racist remarks at them; “low-down nigger people” (19) is the phrase he coins for his fellow blacks. He accuses them of being jealous and malcontent: “The villagers were low-down nigger people since they couldn’t bear to see one of their kind get along without feeling envy and hate” (18).

Fanon argues that the self-interests of the emergent middle class may harden into tribalism, putting blinkers on the cause of national consciousness. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), he acknowledges the role national consciousness plays as a rallying cry for human cause and democracy. However, in the chapter “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness,” Fanon paints the various scenarios in which national consciousness may be manipulated or corrupted by the vested interests and vanity of the native bourgeoisie that thoughtlessly imitates the values of the bourgeoisie of the colonial power:

The national middle class which takes over power at the end of the colonial regime is an underdeveloped middle class. It has practically no economic power, and in any case it is in no way commensurate with the bourgeoisie of the mother country which it hopes to replace. In its narcissism, the national middle class is easily convinced that it can advantageously replace the middle class of the mother country. (149)

Not only is the national middle class resourceless (“Neither financiers nor industrial magnates are to be found within this national middle class” 149), it depends for its survival on capital from the metropolis – a dependency that obscures its goal of developing a national consciousness.

Fanon dwells with singular insistence on the inanity of the national middle class that follows the western bourgeoisie along its path of negation and decadence without ever having first explored or invented the accomplishments of the metropolitan model. He singles out the national middle class as the main culprit that, having no vocation or talents of its own, is completely dependent on capital and capitalist structures of the former colonial power. Seen from this perspective, it is appropriate that Fanon would envision the role of the emergent middle class as a mere conduit, “[a] transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the mask of neo-colonialism” (152).

Lamming spares no detail in exposing the effete and self-serving character of the native bourgeoisie. As recent as in 2001, he reiterates the self-dealing of the emergent middle class, alongside its alienation from the working masses, in an interview – “The Sovereignty of the Imagination” – with critic David Scott. When Scott prompts him to talk about the new social order that is emerging in *In the Castle* in the wake of the riots in 1937 and ’38, Lamming replies that:

I am going to see ’37 and ’38 in fact *kidnapped*, so to speak, by a leadership that had little or nothing to do with the makings of it. And by leaders that are very decent but saw themselves as the natural heirs to the departing imperial power. Not necessarily the natural leaders of the people who become their constituency.

I mean they chose themselves as the leaders by virtue of education, by virtue also of the mythology which the school has played in shaping our social relations.

(112-13)

These are the kind of people that the overseer, head-teacher and Mr. Slime embody. They effectively hijack the revolution. Lamming also reveals, in the alienating effects of colonial education on these people, how the colonizer has succeeded in dividing the society and solidifying his rule, for the hostilities within the black community “cut sharp and deep through every layer of the land” (18), and the language of the overseer later becomes the language of “the Government servant, ... of the lawyers and doctors” (19). These individuals become the crucial tools for perpetuating colonial rule.

Religion is also used for legitimizing colonial authority. The empire is identified with the Garden of Eden and the villagers with the fallen brood of Lucifer. Both the empire and the garden are described as God’s domains; to rebel against either would be to rebel against God. The colonizer, in this scheme of things, assumes the status of God’s representative, with whose grace the banished angels will be reintroduced into heaven: “The garden is God’s own garden and the empire God’s only empire. They work together for us. God save the king who will help us to see the garden again. That’s all we have to think of now, the empire and the garden” (63). It is remarkable how the apotheosis of the British Empire here coincides with the Christian religious belief with which Lamming and his generation grew up in Barbados of the 1930s. In an article he wrote for the 10th anniversary of the Caribbean Conference of Churches (CCC) in 1983, Lamming observes that:

The entire globe was the spiritual property of the Christian God. This religious proposition was supported by a secular doctrine which presented the British Empire as the political custodian of all human destiny. We were made aware of rival powers, French or German, perhaps, but these did not exist as human entities in their own right. They were interlopers who represented a heretical challenge to what had been divinely ordained as the limits of human reality: the Christian God as creator of the universe, and the British Empire as His temporal trustee. (“The Garden and the Empire” 213)

Within the apparent security of a system politically so skillfully contrived, life – it would seem – holds no surprises. Yet the first signs of a conflict between the forces of production and the relations of production emerge in chapter 5; it describes a time when the material conditions for a political transformation are given, for as Marx observes, “[n]o social order ever disappears before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have been developed” (627). The chapter specifically refers to civil disturbances in Trinidad, to “cane fires,” and to “stones and sticks” that were thrown on the public buildings (92).

Several critics call attention to this period of the 1930s and ‘40s as a period of general unrest throughout the Caribbean. I have pointed up Lamming’s own thoughts on the period, at the beginning of the chapter, as a time in which a labor consciousness may be seen as emerging. In the same vein, David Williams notes:

The 1930s and 1940s brought to the Caribbean not only economic depression but also political discontent and, in the mid-1930s, trade-union activity, a phenomenon not welcomed by the authorities. There were protests and riots over

unemployment in Jamaica and Trinidad, labour disturbances in St. Vincent and St. Lucia, and agitation in Bridgetown over the deportation from Barbados of labour leader Clement Payne. (vi)

Gloria Yarde, in discussing the representation of historical details in Lamming's first four novels, emphasizes that "[...] throughout the West Indies the independence which was granted so freely in the '60s was struggled for in the 'forties and early 'fifties with strikes and the imprisoning of leader [sic] being quite common" (43).

Sandra Pouchet Paquet, in her 1982 authoritative book – *The Novels of George Lamming* – explores the influence of Caribbean politics of the 1930s and '40s on the novelist's fiction. With regard to the political activity of these decades, she observes that:

With the rise of organized labour to political power [in the mid-1930s] came political changes and a rapid growth in political consciousness among working class people everywhere. There was renewed agitation for political reform and for greater autonomy. Migrant labour and Marcus Garvey's politics of race added new dimensions to the political awareness of the 1930s and 1940s, and fed directly into the independence movements of the 1950s. (9)

Gordon Lewis sums up the case for Barbados, where *In the Castle* is set, thus:

The foundations of contemporary Barbados . . . were laid . . . in the years after the watershed of the 1937-38 West Indian riots. Its leadership was . . . in the two-pronged movement of the Barbados Labour Party and the Barbados Workers' Union. . . . There was [also] the work of Negro educators . . . who gave a new self-respect to the educated coloured Barbadian at a time when educational reform

tended to be the preserve of the Barbadian white emulators of the Arnoldian public school ideology. (234)

In this atmosphere of a growing political consciousness, in which people want to establish new social, cultural, moral, educational and even aesthetic values for themselves, a social revolution seems to be on the horizon. However, I want to underscore the fact that as much as the raised labor consciousness is a measure of political self-control on the part of the working masses, it also repudiates the class determination of plantation slave society of the colonizer: the laborers erupt onto the scene to change the status quo. If the villagers previously had not understood the workings of the Creighton monopoly, a person like the shoemaker now explains to his companions how the landlord is totally dependent on their labor for business operations: “If you ain’t there to unload those boats, Christ, they can’t unload of themselves. And the Great [i.e., Mr. Creighton] can’t do it. They can give orders and all that, but they can’t do one honest day’s work” (88).

Similarly Pa, an important character in the novel, aptly voices the protest attitude of many of his fellow-islanders: “If Mr. Creighton an’ all the Creightons from time past can own it [the land], there ain’t no reason why we mustn’t” (79). He justly dreams of becoming rich and famous: “I look up over yonder there at the house on the hill, an’ I wonder what it feel like to be big an’ great” (77). Pa senses the inequities inherent in a system that rests on the notion of colonial difference. Against the backdrop of the Battle of Hastings and William the Conqueror before, some now wonder out loud why local history and heroes were omitted from school curricula: “If you remember good, you’ll never remember that they ever tell us ‘bout Marcus Garvey. They never even tell us that

they was a place where he live call Africa” (96). The shoemaker cannot leave his listeners alone. By way of the bygone empires of Rome, Spain and Portugal, he superbly demonstrates change as a wonted and necessary phenomenon of life and urges his fellow-villagers to partake in contemporary political events or else “[...] times will go along ‘bout it business an’ leave we all here still waitin’” (94). Noteworthy in these exhortations is the fact that they are all speech-based. Lamming juxtaposes oral narrative against the written narratives of imperial history.

In this environment of urgency and awakened consciousness, Mr. Slime, whose name is his best description and who is an ex-teacher, responds to the hopes of the masses by founding a cooperative – the Penny Bank and the Friendly Society. The aim of the cooperative should be to relieve the villagers of the economic burden of colonialism and as Trumper puts it, “to make us owners o’ this land” (160). Thus whatever his resemblances may be with a trade-union leader of the time, as Gloria Yarde has identified them in her article (36-37), Mr. Slime certainly possesses a keen eye for openings and opportunities; he kindles the imagination of the masses and wins their trust. It should be noted, though, that he is one of those middleclass professionals we have encountered in the overseer, doctor, civil servant and the like. His class-origin foretells his course of action. This fact notwithstanding, he rapidly gains in power.

Within a year Mr. Slime’s strength accumulates to the proportions that are best described by Boy Blue, another of the hero-narrator’s friends: “Seems to me there be only two great men round here . . . Mr. Slime an’ the landlord. An’ if you don’t watch out there goin’ soon be one, Mr. Slime only. The landlord will sort o’ stay where he is in the big house, but Mr. Slime will be sort o’ captain o’ this ship” (159). Mr. Slime does

become the captain of the ship and organizes a dock-workers' strike. This activity adds a political dimension to the economic enterprise he has launched before. I agree with Ian Munro when he points out that "Slime's dual attack on the landholding system and on the ownership of the national economy by the English is actually a single attack on the oligarchy represented by Creighton" (54). But the big question remains whether the attack will benefit the masses. The strike proves a failure. The confrontation with the authorities and the subsequent intervention of law enforcement crush the united action which, having been forcibly suppressed, turns into a popular revolt. The revolt quickly degenerates into riots, in which the workers seek to vent their frustration by attacking Mr. Creighton, who is co-owner of the docks.

"At the level of individuals," Fanon states, "violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect" (*The Wretched* 94). However, this symbolic act of restoring self-respect is also thwarted when Mr. Slime intervenes at the right moment and the landlord escapes unscathed. Mr. Slime's political maneuver as an opportunistic intermediary, however, goes too far for him: "Mr. Slime looked weary . . . he hoped it was all over" (200). Lamming later reflects on the landlord's escape in the introduction he wrote in 1983 for the Schocken edition of the novel. In it, he admits that:

When I read this scene some twenty years after its publication, I was surprised by the mildness of its resolution. From the distant and more critical vantage point of London, the past now seemed more brutal. I wondered why I had allowed the landlord to go free. . . . Now I had begun to think that the most authentic response

to the long history of shame and humiliation which had produced the riots demanded that the white landlord should have been killed. (50)

Nevertheless, he balances the landlord's escape against the need of his fictional aesthetic – the realization of the existence of a better world: “The novelist does not only explore what has happened. At a deeper level of intention than literal accuracy, he seeks to construct a world that might have been; to show the possible as a felt and living reality” (50). The realization of this longed-for world without violence, however, renders the action in the novel without a climax. Yet although the united action of the workers does not end in a climactic victory either as a strike or in killing Mr. Creighton, the lack of climax does not deny their struggle an historical significance (as Neil Kortenaar argues it does), for the village will never be the same again; it has plunged into subverting the status quo and redefining itself in terms of its social, economic, cultural and political future.

The first person to perceive this imminent transformation is Mr. Creighton. In sensing that his times are gone, Mr. Creighton puts up his lands for sale. Soon he would be “... a relic of another time” (222). This is a time for Mr. Slime to plunder the Penny Bank and the Friendly Society. He, with others such as the head-teacher, buys out the lands with the capital he has accumulated with the money of the peasants. Notices are served to the villagers, among them to Pa, the oldest inhabitant of the village, to vacate their homes. The villagers' shock at having to leave their spots of land, into which they have rooted themselves over the decades, is intelligible. Equally understandable, though, is the need of the “nouveaux riches” to own the land; for having lived an itinerant existence in the city for their entire lives, the land represents stability for the new rich.

Besides, the land has for centuries been associated with the “big an’ great” like Mr. Creighton, so that its ownership takes on a three-fold importance: The land was “priceless, perennial and a symbol of some inexplicable power” (233).

At the heart of the turbulence, however, lies a socio-economic reorganization of the community. New property relations are emerging. A capitalist market economy, in which the land is being commodified, is paving its way into the village. With the commodification comes the concept of ownership into being. This truth is best expressed by the man who wants to purchase Mr. Foster’s spot of land; as the stranger tries to explain to Mr. Foster the difference between “owning” and “renting” through his example of a car and garage, he stresses the prerogative of the owner: “It is a question of who *owns* what and whether it’s a car, a house or what you like, it makes no difference” (231 emphasis added). Against the backdrop of this transformation, the complaints of the shoemaker (who has ironically always endorsed change) sound ridiculous; they are nonetheless heart-rending: “Where in the name of peace would I put the ol’ shop? Who going move it? What would I pay to move it with, an’ even if I could where I goin’ at my age with this shop?” (229).

Pa, though self-contained, feels just as much indignation over the transaction involving his spot of land as anybody else in the village. But before he leaves, he asks the head-teacher, the future owner of his spot of land, some tough questions. “[W]hy first of all did Mr. Slime leave the teachin’,” the old man wants to know, “an’ why he come to buy this land since there wus no love an’ harmony ‘twixt ‘imself and Mr. Creighton?” (246). “An’ why the landlord,” Pa further wonders, “go an’ sell it without tellin’ us?” (248).

The head-teacher cannot answer these questions. In fact, no one can who is involved in the break-up. According to Marx,

Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary this consciousness must be explained rather from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social forces of production and the relations of production. (626-27)

These questions thus can only be dealt with in an historical perspective in terms of class struggle and solidarity. Only Trumper, who has been out to America and whose consciousness has been sharpened by racial and class politics in that country, possesses this perspective. He appropriately speaks in terms of exploitation: “Way back he [Mr. Slime] promise that he’d make these people here owners o’ this land. He tell them there wasn’t nothing to prevent them buying this lan’, and he wus right, ‘cause I know for a fact that the very money that go into that Penny Bank an’ Society buy this land in his name” (280). Owing to his American experience, Trumper even commiserates with the oppressed and the downtrodden: “I’m going to fight for the rights o’ the Negroes, and I’ll die fighting” (289). He urges G. to do the same, for “[a] man who know his people won’t ever feel like that [alone]. Never” (293). Since Trumper’s political enlightenment instructs him that life is not an apolitical affair, he urges G. to make up his mind and get politically engaged: “[T]his world is a world o’ camps, an’ you got to find out which camp you’re in. And above everything else keep that camp clean” (280).

At the end of the novel, the society is in total disarray. The peasants suffer a complete dislocation from the land at the hands of their own leader. A new property-less

class has been created. There are no direction and home for the working and the farming masses. Perhaps the solution is in what Trumper suggests that “[...] in a world o’ Slimes there ain’t no way out for those who don’t know how to be slimy” (278). But the novel does not take up these new social and class differences emerging within the black community. It chronicles the change from the world of Creightons to the world of Slimes. Lamming has time and again resented the self-serving character of the emergent, new class of Slimes. In his conversation with David Scott I referenced earlier, the novelist underscores the self-importance and expediency of these people. In a similar vein, he once again describes their rise to political power in his interview with Robert Lee. In it, he states that when limited experimentation was granted to the Caribbean in parliamentary politics after the 1937 riots, these new Slimes of the era pounced at the opportunity and chose themselves to be the leaders of the people. Lamming argues that:

It was in that process that an indigenous middle-class, an indigenous sort of petty bourgeoisie was created to be the leadership of politics in the theatre of parliament. And there is a sense in which, for the next thirty odd years or so (from 1937), the Caribbean masses became spectators to the politics which they had themselves initiated, and what mistakenly is seen as the Caribbean “middle-class” (there is no such thing in this region), reaped the fruits of a tree that they themselves had not planted. And this really is the situation that is going on to this day. (“Caribbean Politics” 267)

This whole transformation from colonialism to limited self-rule is contained within a time-frame of nine years, from G.’s ninth birthday to until he turns eighteen. In covering

the childhood and early youth of G., the transformation encompasses the maturative years of the narrator.

In more ways than one, G.'s maturation coincides with Lamming's own growing up in Barbados. For one, the novel reproduces the events in Barbados and other parts of the Caribbean from the mid-1930s through the mid-1940s; this is the period in which Lamming, born in 1927, was growing up and he experienced these events first-hand. Second, the narrator's initial, G., may stand for Lamming's own first name, George. Third, George Lamming grew up in Carrington's village, Barbados that bears a close affinity with Creighton's village, where G. lives in the novel. As David Williams points out, Carrington's village, like Creighton's, experienced yearly floods and had public baths (vi). Fourth, there is an intriguing resemblance between a character in the novel and its counterpart in Lamming's own life; the novelist discusses this character in his 1960 non-fiction work, *The Pleasures of Exile*. In the chapter "Journey to an Expectation," he talks about an old man in his village who was his godfather and whom the children lovingly used to call Papa Grandison. Lamming reminisces about Papa's life, stating that "[w]hen I was about twelve years old, I had had the shattering experience of seeing old Papa Grandison . . . forced to move his small house from the site which generations of children had learnt to speak of as 'the corner where Papa who keep goats does live'" (226). This real-life, venerable figure transmutes into Pa of the fiction. Pa subsequently meets the same fate as does Papa Grandison, "whom a wicked arrangement of money had forced to move. . . . The land had been sold to a new syndicate who were black men [like the head-teacher and Mr. Slime in the novel]" (*Pleasures* 227).

Lamming tops these personal details off with an absolutely unambiguous remark as to the autobiographical nature of *In the Castle* when he notes in his all-important 1983 “Introduction” that, having come to England in 1950, “[i]n the desolate, frozen heart of London, at the age of 23, I tried to reconstruct the world of my childhood and early adolescence” (“Thirty Years After” 48-49). What we have here then is that, in the thin guise of G. and Creighton’s village, Lamming traces his own coming of age and the political developments of his native village in the 1930s and ‘40s. However, the personal dimension of the novel runs counter to what Lamming says about the status of individual consciousness versus the value of the village collective in the book. In the same 1983 “Introduction,” in which he gives a clue about the autobiographical nature of *In the Castle*, he also notes that “[t]he book is crowded with names and people, and although each character is accorded a most vivid presence and force of personality, we are rarely concerned with the prolonged exploration of an individual consciousness. It is the collective human substance of the Village, you might say, which is the central character” (47).

While this apparent privileging of community over individual Lamming suggests here may in the long run prove true, nevertheless it is also true that no other character in the novel narrates the same amount of events as does G. In fact, G. is the protagonist-narrator of the book. A bulk of the incidents is refracted through his consciousness. He may at times inexplicably disappear from the scene, though – as when he absents himself during the festivities on Empire Day in chapter 3, and his first-person narrative voice from the first two chapters is replaced in the third with an omniscient third-person

narrator. Nevertheless, G. remains an abiding presence as an individual throughout the novel.

In light of this fact, I would argue that Lamming's privileging of community over individual is conditionally true in the sense that G.'s consciousness never technically attains the upper hand; it nevertheless permeates the affairs of the community. Lamming shapes G.'s personal maturation in a way that it insinuates the larger political transformation of the community without ever dominating it. Sandra Pouchet Paquet views this relationship between the personal and political in terms of complementarity. Recognizing the panoramic nature of Lamming's works that encompass a range of characters and landscapes, Paquet acknowledges the difficulty the works may pose to the critic in terms of focusing on one character in the conventional sense of hero or heroine. She observes that:

Lamming's fiction typically presents a crowded canvas. His novels are dense and panoramic in scale, at times covering territory that ranges from one end of the Caribbean to the other in the fictive island of San Cristobal. . . . It is often difficult to focus on a single most important character in the conventional sense of hero or heroine. This is certainly the case in *The Emigrants*, *Of Age and Innocence*, *Water with Berries*, and to varying degrees in the other novels where competing elements in the society, or the society itself, are as important as the unfolding history of any single character. Even in *In the Castle of My Skin*, where autobiography identifies a central character, G. shares the focus of the novel in a complementary way with the village community. (4-5)

Thus Lamming configures the personal and political aspects of the novel in a way that the community gets its especial due, and G.'s consciousness – though not predominating – is not shorthanded. The two go hand in hand and fuse to form an integral whole.

Critics have, of course, been quick in recognizing this thematic unity. Only a few weeks after the publication of *In the Castle* in 1953, an anonymous reviewer (in the manner of early reviews) in the *Times Literary Supplement* observes: “The book is difficult to classify. . . . Mr. Lamming appears to have been unable to make up his mind whether to explore the world of adolescent consciousness or the world of social history, and has tried to make the best of both” (“Youth in Barbados” 206). The reviewer does not discuss just how Lamming achieves this goal of integrating the two strands of the book; nor is the personal world of “adolescent consciousness” or the political realm of “social history” explored in any detail. The matter is left at the inability of the novelist to make up his mind.

Subsequent critics have, however, elaborated on the personal and political aspects of the book and tried to inter-relate the two. Ian Munro writes in his 1979 essay, “George Lamming,” that:

In the Castle of My Skin is the best-known of his works and is perhaps the most widely read West Indian novel. It is Lamming's most autobiographical work, covering nine years in the life of G., the novel's artist-hero, from his ninth birthday to his departure for Trinidad. Interwoven with G.'s story is that of his village, which also undergoes dramatic changes during the course of the novel. (*West Indian Literature* 128)

Sandra Pouchet Paquet adds nuance to the elements of autobiography and communal change in the novel. She notes in her 1982 book, *The Novels of George Lamming*, that:

In the Castle of My Skin is autobiographical in that it recalls select moments of the author/narrator's childhood experience. But in this structurally challenging first novel, Lamming simultaneously organizes an account of political change in a representative island community. G.'s 'movement into adulthood is measured by change in the environment' . . . so that the author/narrator's maturing sensibilities and growing political awareness on one level mark the island's painful movement towards independence from colonial rule on another. (14)

Celeste A. Wheat connects the personal and political in the novel in 2009 as she examines the theme of colonialism and exile in Lamming's three works: *In the Castle of My Skin*, *The Emigrants*, and *The Pleasures of Exile*. She observes that:

As a coming of age novel, *In the Castle of My Skin* exemplifies much of the thematic content of Caribbean fiction within the 1950s and 1960s era in its treatment of race, class, gender, colonialism, and exile. It is not merely a novel that chronicles the experiences of a child coming of age in the Caribbean, but may also be viewed as a novel capturing an important historical moment in a society that in many ways is also coming of age. (2)

Inasmuch as these critics view a connection between the coming of age of the protagonist and the political developments of the community where he lives, G.'s story may be read as a national allegory. This connection is particularly instructive because it may elucidate the personal, autobiographical and public, political dimensions of the novel and shed light on how they interpenetrate to form an integral whole.

Fredric Jameson proposes just such a connection between the personal and political aspects in the works of third-world writers in his 1986 essay, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." According to Jameson, all third-world texts – irrespective of their originary borrowings – are necessarily "allegorical" (69). They can be read as manifestations of "national allegories," especially when their forms arise out of "predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel" (69). For Jameson, when first-world writers write, they maintain a clear separation between the lived experience of their private lives, on one hand, and the sphere of politics, on the other. This separation is a pre-given determinant of the culture of the western realist and modernist novel. Jameson variously delineates the separation as the radical split between "the private and the public," "the poetic and the political," and what we like to think as "the domain of sexuality and the conscious and that of the public world of classes" (69). Third-world texts, on the other hand, blur the separation between the private and the public and project a political dimension in the form of national allegory. Even when the public aspect is inconspicuous or not readily distinguishable, the private narratives of third-world writers can be read in terms of the embattled situation of culture and society at large. The private stories, in other words, take on the form of veiled national allegories.

This theoretical construct of textual production in first- and third-world writers is, of course, not entirely unproblematic: What are we to make of George Orwell's *1984*? Can we not read his *Animal Farm* as a political allegory? How can we reconcile Jameson's thought with the feminist slogan of "All personal is political?" Besides, as Aijaz Ahmad has pointed out in his 1987 "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the

‘National Allegory,’” there is the basic epistemological difficulty of conceiving a unitary third world. According to Ahmad, it is grossly irresponsible and misleading for a theorist to speak of a “third world,” let alone a theory of “third-world literature,” on the basis of a few texts that have been available to him in metropolitan languages (4). People in the so-called “Third World,” states Ahmad, are various, and they relate to the issues of nation, art, religion, and politics in vastly different ways and in myriad languages, so that to speak of these people as a unitary subject of study is to indulge in creating “ideal types” – an undertaking that is more akin to wishful thinking than to casting a useful theory of literature (3-5).

As relevant as these criticisms of Jameson, however, may be, they by and large leave untouched his central notion of the mechanics of aesthetic representation – a representation that has to do with the relationship between subjective art and politics: while first-world writers may maintain a clear demarcation between the private and public, their third-world counterparts blur the separation so that the private stories of the latter can allegorically be read as narratives of public and political concern. This notion of a public and political allegory seems to me particularly relevant to *In the Castle* and can illuminate the political and private concerns of the novel as well as show how the two interact. M. Keith Booker and Dubravka Juraga also note the applicability of Jameson’s idea to *In the Castle*. In their co-authored book, *The Caribbean Novel in English* (2001), they suggest that “[t]o the extent that G.’s personal experience is presented as a version of the experience of his entire community, G.’s story can be understood as a form of ‘national allegory’” (26). The authors, however, do not explore the “national allegory,”

or trace the inter-relatedness of G.'s personal experience and that of his community, partly because such an exploration does not coincide with the objective of their book.

Yet the inter-relatedness of G. and his community's experience is already signaled by the conditions of the protagonist-narrator's birthday, with which the novel opens. The rain showers that greet G.'s birthday also reveal the village's vulnerability: "The floods could level the stature and even conceal the identity of the village. With the turn of my ninth year it had happened again" (3). The older G. grows, i.e., the more he loses his childhood innocence, the more the village loses its old identity – its political innocence – and the more it awakens to a condition of self-rule. Nowhere is this inter-relatedness more evident than in the structure of the novel.

The first four chapters where the village is portrayed as relatively stable correspond to a childhood mentality in the narrator – the village is safe because G. is childishly naïve. Chapter 5, in which the first signs of a conflict between the colonial authority and the villagers take shape, initiates a phase of transition. This political transition finds its parallel, on the personal level, in chapter 6, in the psychological insecurity of G. and his friends as they head out to the beach. Although it is hard to determine with accuracy how old G. has become by this chapter (for there are no precise time statements), the novelist relates the political turmoil in the village to the psychological turmoil in the boys, indicating that the childhood world is receding in their minds, and that they too – analogous to the village – are making a transition into another world.

Discussing the dynamics of the psyche in the stages of life, Carl Jung observes: "[T]he first stage of consciousness, consisting in merely recognizing or 'knowing,' is an

anarchic or chaotic state. The second, that of the developed ego-complex, is monarchic or monistic. The third brings another step forward in consciousness, and consists in an awareness of the divided, or dualistic, state” (8). This dualistic state that, according to Jung, “extends roughly from the years just after puberty to middle life” (8) is a state in which the subjective “I” experiences itself as strongly as it does the objective world – the “also-I” (10). The individual has to negotiate between itself and the social world, the “also-I.” Standing on the threshold of this social world or having just entered it, the adolescents Trumper, Bob, Boy Blue, and G. are plagued by the fears and doubts that characterize the initiation into adult life.

Trumper is thoroughly conscious of the loss of a world within a world, though he is unsure as to the exact nature of the lost realm:

“I wus sittin’ under the cellar at home. . . . It was quiet, quiet, quiet . . . when suddenly somebody say something ‘bout the weddings, an’ I right away rush out from the cellar . . . an’ I hear the story ‘bout the weddings, but all time it seem to me something gone. . . . Seems to me sometimes it wus the cellar that disappear, but not the cellar I lookin’ at as I listen to the story. ‘Twas as if there was another cellar in that cellar, an’ ‘twas the other cellar which disappear.” (114)

Boy Blue is downright apprehensive about the entry: “That’s happen to me too . . . ‘an’ where you wus sittin’ wus a worl’ all by itself, an’ then the something happen, an’ that world come to an end, an’ you got to get up an’ go to the other world where the new something happen. It sound stupid, but ‘tis true the way it happen” (114). Trumper is bogged down by doubt: “‘Tis a hell of thing when you got to decide an’ you ain’t sure what you deciding between, an’ worse when you ain’t got nothin’ to decide with” (116).

G. makes a sexual discovery, typical of early adolescence, of two sea creatures locked in their coital embrace and is fascinated by the sight: "It was like a revelation, seeing the claw-fastened bodies pressed together" (107). Chapter 6 abounds with discoveries and images of confusion, all of which attest to the transition of the boys into an adult world.

One such image, narrated over several pages, is especially emblematic of the boys' dualistic condition. Trumper tells the story of a village man named Jon, who is caught between two women, Susie and Jen, both of whom he dearly loves. When he is forced to decide between them, Jon secretly promises to marry each woman. On the day of the wedding, however, he climbs into a tree between the two churches and observes from there each would-be bride, who thinks she is to be wedded to her Jon. When Boy Blue objects to the logic of the story and makes Trumper aware that "[y]ou can't be in a tree an' two churches at the said, same time," Trumper rejoins, just as curtly: "I don't know. . . . P'raps you can if you feel you can" (123).

Carolyn T. Brown, whose analysis of this "faux-naif" narration is to date most perceptive, calls attention to the psychological fact of individual perception ("P'raps you can if you feel you can"). Leaning on Jung, who postulates individual perception as a psychic position capable of embracing incompatible alternatives, Brown argues that "[s]ince all perceptions ultimately must be subjective, the subjective projection can become more actual than the objective manipulation of physical matter" (41). In other words, what Jon (and vicariously through him Trumper) is trying to do is reach back, imaginatively, into a state of being in which harmony was possible and one could live with duality, with Susie and Jen, with the "I" and "also-I," without having to decide between them. The significance of the story lies not just in evincing Trumper and his

friends' yearning for an earlier, harmonious stage of childhood; it also lies in re-enacting (which Brown does not discuss) the boys' anxieties through Jon's predicament once the choice has been thrust upon them. This is how Trumper tries, time and time again, to make sense of Jon's muddled situation: "Poor Jon was betwix' the devil an' the deep blue sea. . . . Jon was like a feather in the wind that go now here and now there. . . . That was Jon. No an' yes was the same thing. . . . 'Twus a hell of a mix-up" (115-16).

Nonetheless, there can be no retreat from this mix-up. If there is one sure thing the mix-up is tantamount to, it is the confirmation that the boys are growing into an adult world.

But whereas the other boys' growth is merely physical, G.'s is physical and artistic. Right at the beginning of chapter 6, he, the hero-narrator, perceives daybreak in these terms as the boys head out to the sea: "Now the apertures of cloud had widened into valleys through which the light flowed like a broad river over the descent of plains. . . . The morning was now a clear indication of day. The parakeets' scream had died down or fused with the other birds' carolling, and these were several" (102). The lyrical quality of the prose is unsurpassable and may be noticed again as the boys press on their journey to the beach:

The parakeets were screaming from the treetops, and below them the dew dripped from the hedges and the high grass which we scaled. Behind us in our path the grass lay slaughtered by footprints with the water shivering over the edge of the blades. The grass rose high before us, and the dew making a sea of dots on the surface of the blades looked like a thousand eyes in the opaqueness of the near morning. (101)

Noteworthy in these details is the manner in which G.'s young mind is attracted to nature – to valleys and clouds, plains and parakeets, grass blades and dew drops – and how he tries to linguistically transcribe that natural experience.

With respect to the transcription of experience, it is worth noting that G. employs two dialects to render reality from early on. The first dialect, the Barbadian vernacular, is associated with the folk – with Pa and Ma, Mr. Foster, the shoemaker, Trumper, Boy Blue, G.'s mother and the like. The other dialect – the Standard English – the narrator reserves for himself. Although the double usage does not discount or favor one vernacular over the other (Trumper and Boy Blue's accounts, as we have seen above, are just as lyrical as G.'s), it does serve a constitutive purpose: it helps define G.'s sensibility from the rest of the characters; it highlights his awareness of the words as a medium to be shaped by the imagination. And once again, this is how that medium mellows into poetry: "The sea heaved and our laughter was lost in the wash of the waves. A wave shot forward right up to the line of our footprint in the sand. When the water slid back the sand sloped sharply to the sea, and the foam of the wave making brief bubbles over the sand shaped itself between the spaces of our toes" (117). The alliterative music of the words "slid," "sand," "sloped," "sharply," and "sea" is inescapable. G. has begun to build the castle in which to shield his artistic self against the demands of the social world, the "also-I." Toward the end of chapter 6, he self-consciously acknowledges the role of language as an instrument available to the creative imagination to deal with reality: "You could slaughter your feelings as you slaughtered a pig. Language was all you needed. It was like a knife. It knifed your feelings clean and proper" (146). Although his narrative is not an exercise in avant-garde art, G. does envision in the manner of (post)modernists a

manipulation of language that is divorced from reality: “You could say what you like if you know how to say it. It didn’t matter whether you felt everything you said. You had language, good, big words to make up for what you didn’t feel” (146). G. goes from strength to strength in exploring his artistic potential.

Lanning intertwines these personal, artistic explorations with political details in a manner that they do not gain the upper hand. Thus at regular intervals in chapter 6, the sociopolitical reminders punctuate the text in one form or another. For example, when G. describes the dawn, the boys are crossing the white residential area. They are attracted to the orderliness of the neighborhood – the tree-lined avenues in the posh community contrast with the bare marl roads in the village. The behavior of the birds, which are closely associated with the two communities, neatly reflects the attitude of the blacks and whites toward each other: “Neither the sparrows nor the blackbirds making their noise from the trees flew down to join them [the doves], and suddenly it occurred to me that in the village the sparrows and the blackbirds which were the commonest victims of our snares had seldom been joined by the doves” (103). I have dwelt at length on chapter 6 to demonstrate its centrality in developing the personal aspect of the novel which – to reiterate – corresponds to the development of the political aspect in chapter 5.

The transition from childhood that begins in chapter 6 is completed by chapter 11, which marks the world of an adult person. Correspondingly, chapters 7 through 11 trace, politically, the ripening of the revolutionary struggle. The remainder of the novel, chapters 12 through 14, has a meditative tone reflecting, on the political level, disillusionment with the rebellion. In terms of its structure, the remainder diffuses into something of a diary form in contradistinction to the relatively tight structure of the

earlier chapters, as of chapters 1 through 4. Within this tripartite outline – stability, revolution, and disillusionment – corresponding, respectively, to childhood, adolescence, and manhood, chapters 4, 8, and 10 have a special status that has to do with the question of narrative voice in these chapters.

The bulk of the novel is told by G. in the first-person, limited consciousness mode; it cannot be otherwise, for G. is describing his childhood and early youth as he recalls them at a later point in time. At times, though – as Lamming critics (Brown, Kirpal, and Williams) have observed – the first-person, limited-consciousness narrator gives way to a third-person, omniscient narrator, notably in chapter 3, which deals with the festivities of Empire Day. At other times – as here in chapters 4, 8, and 10 – Lamming interrupts the first-person narrative mode and inserts pieces of dramatic dialog. The dialogs bring in political information unexpectedly by their very nature and obviate the need for portraying a social revolution in its minutest detail – an undertaking that may violate the autobiographical framework of the novel. In so doing, the dialogs minimize the distance between the personal and political dimensions of the novel and enhance their integration too.

Thus chapter 4 adumbrates and hastens the political developments of chapter 5 through the voice of the old man as he responds to his wife's query – a query that augurs the end of centuries old tradition of owning the land by the whites:

Old Woman: Seems to me you see yuh salvation in Mr. Slime. He's get a chance to go to yuh head like rum to a next man's, an' now you hear the shout you can't think or say nothing that ain't bound up with him.

Old Man: I ain't know exact, Ma, an' Mr. Slime never so much as say except that he feel that you an' all the rest who been here for donkey years, 'tis time that we own it [the land]. If Mr. Creighton an' all the Creightons from time past can own it, there ain't no reason why we mustn't. (79)

Similarly, chapter 8 projects what is to follow in the next chapter in the controlled yet frightened tone of Ma. As the old woman informs her husband about the disrespect the village boys have shown to the landlord in assaulting his daughter, she foreshadows the more violent action of a murder plot against the colonial master in chapter 9; her fears ominously culminate in the aphorism: "It need no more than a drop, Pa, to flow over the cup" (180).

Chapter 10 anticipates, in the lyrical voice of Pa, the cheating character of the native bourgeoisie that will betray the peasants' trust. The old man deftly links the native bourgeoisie's betrayal to the one in the remote past that set the boats sailing between Africa and the New World. "The silver of exchange," Pa talks in sleep,

[S]ail cross the sea and my people scatter like clouds in the sky when the waters come. There was similar buying and selling 'mongst tribe and tribe, but this was the biggest of the bargains for tribes. Each sell his own. . . . The silver sail from hand to hand and the purchase was shipped like a box of good fruit. . . . For the buyer and the seller 'twas no difference 'twixt these two, price and value, value and price, since silver is solution for every ready-made sorrow. And so 'tis today in the islands. . . . Silver is more than what pass from hand to hand. (202-03)

Thus by experimenting with narrative voice in chapters 4, 8, and 10 – by replacing the conventional first or third-person narrative voice with dramatic dialogs – Lamming more effectively fuses together the personal, artistic and public, political aspects of the novel.

Crucially, the experimentation with the narrative voice has roiled the metropolitan critic Neil T. Kortenaar, whom I cited in the beginning of the chapter. He takes umbrage at the shifting narrative voice and notes that:

Some chapters are recounted by the boy G., sometimes he disappears altogether, and some chapters present the dramatic dialogue of an Old Man and an Old Woman who call each other Ma and Pa. The text is a veritable anthology of narrative modes. Late in the book, we are given excerpts from G.'s diary – as though Lamming had suddenly remembered a narrative mode that his encyclopedia did not yet include. (45)

Kortenaar does not see anything of value coming out of the shifting narrative voice. Yet as I have tried to demonstrate above, Lamming employs the shifting narrative modes to more tightly weave together the personal and political aspects of the novel. His experimentation with the narrative voice may, indeed, be seen in terms of what the literary scholar Franco Moretti says about the nature of development of literary forms.

In his 2003 essay, “New Conjectures,” Moretti speculates about the process by which literary forms develop in both metropolitan and peripheral settings. He aphoristically notes that “[n]o literature without interference . . . hence, also, no literature without compromises between the local and the foreign” (79). In experimenting with narrative voice, Lamming interferes with the conventional novelistic form to fit his own aesthetic needs. Ultimately, *In the Castle* emerges as a self-contained narrative whole

that is unique in form and content. Lamming skillfully depicts personal, artistic and public, political experiences in one narrative. It is this dual thematic, supplemented with an array of issues (such as colonial education and the slave past), that have led the West Indian critic, David Williams, to rank *In the Castle* amongst the “most influential of Caribbean novels” (v). And it is this thematic complexity coupled, as it were, with a technical virtuosity, that have prompted Viney Kirpal to take issue with Neil Kortenaar in her re-assessment of the novel in 1997; by exposing Kortenaar’s Eurocentric fallacies (mentioned at the beginning of the chapter), Kirpal not only supplies a necessary corrective to the Lamming critique, but also restores the novel to its original grandeur as a “major work of modern West Indian fiction” (104).

CHAPTER IV

CULTURAL DISPLACEMENT AND CULTURAL SYNCRETISM: *A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS* (1961)

This chapter deals with Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul's 1961 novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Naipaul uses colonial difference and the condition of the colonized the difference entails to explore the social history of migrant Hindus in colonial Trinidad of the first half of the twentieth century. He does so by concentrating on the disintegration of Hanuman House, an enclave of Hindu culture within the Creole reality of the island. Within this broader theme of cultural dissolution of the migrant Hindus, the novelist also focuses on the biography of Mr. Biswas, the hero of the novel, who struggles from birth on to find an identity for himself. Through close reading of the novel, supplemented with current scholarship, I demonstrate how Naipaul pulls off his dual thematic. Where he traces out the cultural disintegration and syncretism of the migrant Hindus, on one hand, he also construes a new identity for Mr. Biswas, on the other, by building a house for the protagonist. Disintegration and construction unfold simultaneously.

I begin with a 2006 book-length study of V. S. Naipaul by Gillian Dooley, in which she approaches the writer's work from the vantage point of Naipaul's life circumstances and the various statements he has made about his craft over the years. In

regard to the writing of fiction in general, and *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) in particular, Dooley remarks that:

[...] Fiction provides a different type of information from nonfiction. A social history of the Hindu community in rural Trinidad might be factually informative, but it is likely to be dry reading matter beside *Mr. Biswas*, a novel based on the life of a man like Naipaul's father, struggling to make a satisfactory life for himself and his family in colonial Trinidad. . . . Good fiction, with its subjective point of view and concern for the apparently trivial details of a life, a community, or a society, *and its absence of an objectively testable corresponding reality*, offers readers an opportunity to enter imaginatively into the setting and the lives of people they could otherwise understand only in a theoretical way. (26 emphasis added)

This is an astute observation to make about the writing of imaginative prose, yet Dooley disregards the possibility of an objective reality that may willy-nilly define itself irrespective of the authorial intent. Citing the way his background molded him as a writer – this in itself is an acknowledgment, albeit inadvertent, of an objective reality – Dooley later softens her claim about the absence of a testable, objective reality in Naipaul's fiction and notes that “[t]his is not to say that he is apolitical, but that his purpose as a writer is not primarily political” (28). Even so, *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a sufficiently political book.

The novel treats the colonial legacy and the condition of the colonized in the lives of indentured sugar laborers from India in the Caribbean island of Trinidad and Tobago during the first half of the twentieth century. Against this historical backdrop, Naipaul

traces another objective reality – the social history of the migrant Hindus – in the biography of Hanuman House into which his protagonist, Mr. Mohun Biswas, comes to be married. Mr. Biswas’s own life struggle and achievement constitute a third, and main, strand of the novel. Given this thematic density, an early critic, L. Edward Brathwaite, observes of one dimension of the novel in 1963 that:

Before *Mr. Biswas* the West Indian East Indian was without form, features or voice. . . . But what is even more important to us in our exploration of the West Indian psyche is that here, in the world of Hanuman House, we have the first novel [from the West Indies] whose basic theme is not rootlessness and the search for social identity; in *A House for Mr. Biswas* we have at last a novel whose central character is clearly defined and who is really trying to get *in* rather than get *out*. (17)

Brathwaite’s remark implicitly refers to the string of West Indian protagonists – such as G. in the Barbadian George Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), and the boy-narrator in V. S. Naipaul’s *Miguel Street* (1959) – who look to England for their futures and migrate there instead of fulfilling their ambitions within the Caribbean. However, once they arrive in the colonial metropolis, they discover that the metropolitan reality does not measure up to their expectations, at which point they start pining for the certainties back home. According to Brathwaite, this back-and-forth movement causes in West Indian protagonists, and their author-creators, a wavering – a free-floating non-commitment – that prevents them from fully engaging either end of their journeys: “The point I am trying to make is that the West Indian artist, for all his talent, for all his sense of colour and movement and drama, refuses, it seems to me – or rather, is *unable* – to

commit himself positively to any one position or viewpoint” (15). In the context of this indecision and wavering, Mr. Biswas’s commitment to stay put and realize his ambition within the Caribbean is, for Brathwaite, a step forward that amounts to an absence of rootlessness and quest for social identity in the protagonist.

Responding to Brathwaite’s assessment, however, Kenneth Ramchand, another early and esteemed West Indian critic of the novel, does not approve of Brathwaite’s remark about the absence of rootlessness and quest for social identity in the protagonist. Ramchand brings to the novel an historical understanding and seizes the opportunity to rebut Brathwaite: “*A House for Mr. Biswas*,” retorts Ramchand, “[. . .] is the West Indian novel of rootlessness *par excellence*,” arguing further that “[w]e are in a better position to take this view if we recognize the novel’s historicity” (192). Of course, Ramchand is right when he insists that in order to appreciate *Mr. Biswas*, one must take into account the historical background of the migrant Hindus in Hanuman House – a background that would lead one to logically see the cultural displacement and deracination of the novel’s many characters.

However, Ramchand’s argument, it seems to me, does not completely thwart Brathwaite’s point; for as far as the historical tendency of West Indian protagonists goes to migrate to the colonial metropolis for self-fulfillment, the latter critic’s point about Mr. Biswas’s committing himself to “get *in*” rather than “get *out*” of the Caribbean is highly consequential. After all, the “get[ting] *in*,” the claiming of the land as one’s own – literally as well as figuratively – is what *A House for Mr. Biswas* is all about. The “Prologue” declares the theme and sets up the parameters of the claim right at the outset

of the narrative. Naipaul uses the metaphor of the house to facilitate his protagonist's claim:

And during these months of illness and despair he [Mr. Biswas] was struck again and again by the wonder of being in his own house, the audacity of it: to walk in through his own front gate, to bar entry to whoever he wished, to close his doors and windows every night, *to hear no noises except those of his family*, to wander freely from room to room and about his yard, instead of being condemned, as before, to retire the moment he got home to the crowded room in one or the other of Mrs. Tulsi's houses, crowded with *Shama's sisters, their husbands, their children*. As a boy he had moved from one house of strangers to another; and since his marriage he felt he had lived nowhere but in the houses of the Tulsis, at Hanuman House in Arwacas, in the decaying wooden house at Shorthills, in the clumsy concrete house in Port of Spain. And now at the end he found himself *in his own house, on his own half-lot of land, his own portion of the earth*. That he should have been responsible for this seemed to him, in these last months, stupendous. (8 emphasis added)

Mr. Biswas is taken with the idea of a physical house: of his being able to walk from room to room and about the yard; to permit or bar entry to the structure to whoever he likes; and the audacity of possessing "his own portion of the earth" – all this constitutes the literal, physical aspect of the claim, of "get[ting] *in*" the Caribbean, of sending down roots into the Caribbean soil and forging one's impress on the landscape.

Equally important, however, is also the figurative dimension of Mr. Biswas's claiming his own house. For one, the claim marks a break with the values of the

extended family of Hanuman House: Mr. Biswas's house accommodates his own nuclear family ("to hear no noises except those of his family"). For another, his claim launches a new order of individualism in which everybody – by contrast to the communalism of the Tulsi establishment ("Shama's sisters, their husbands, their children") – has to fend for him- or herself; one's identity will be determined by one's own achievement. Ultimately, then, the claim encompasses the beginnings of new familial and personal identities. Naipaul dexterously weaves the literal and the figurative to fashion a narrative that, on one hand, chronicles the personal achievement of the protagonist, but on the other traces out the transformation of a whole population in Trinidad. It encapsulates a human story as much as it does a social-political one.

The human story begins with the birth of Mr. Biswas, the hero of *A House for Mr. Biswas*, right at the beginning of the novel. He is conceived as a direct descendant of indentured Indian laborers that came to the Caribbean in the wake of the abolition of slavery in the West Indies. Labor shortages in the British West Indian islands, ever since the Emancipation Act went into effect on August 1, 1834, had been acute. The freed slaves often refused to apprentice with or work for their old masters and moved about in ever greater numbers for better wages and work conditions. In less than twenty years after the Proclamation of Emancipation, by the early 1850's, the labor situation on the sugar plantations worsened to the degree that the planters and Colonial Offices, with the help of the overseas Government in London, had to start looking for fresh sources of labor elsewhere. They found these in China and, to a greater degree, in India. Historians F. R. Augier et al. record that:

In the eighteen-fifties it cost 25 pounds to send an immigrant from China to the West Indies, but only 15 pounds to send one from India. India became the main source of immigrant workers for the West Indies by the second half of the nineteenth century. . . . Recruiters found thousands of Indians in the villages and in the swarming, over-populated towns of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, who could readily be persuaded that the West Indies by contrast was a land of promise. (198-99)

This precisely is the socioeconomic background of Mr. Biswas's forefathers, barely fifty to sixty years before his birth. In the interim since their arrival in the West Indies, however, the Indian workers had seen a significant, new social dimension come to their existence. When they were first hired in the bazaars of Calcutta, Agra and elsewhere, the Indian laborers – Augier et al. like to remind us – were contracted for five years: “In general, the immigrant had to give five years' service from the day he was allotted to an estate” (204).

However, after their initial indenture had expired, many immigrants worked for another five to ten years on the sugar estates, recalling how perilous their voyage had been from India that had lasted anywhere from “seventy-two to a hundred and twenty-six days” (Augier, et al. 204). When the Crown, in an effort to retain the cheap labor, adopted the policy of dispensing small plots of land in lieu of return passage, a number of the immigrants opted to stay. Peasant proprietorship came into being, enabling the Indians to live in small village communities outside the estates, on which they nonetheless continued to work part time. With the village communities came the revival of a cultural and social life that was not possible (and often suppressed) on the estates

during the early part of the Indians' arrival in the West Indies. Gerard Tikasingh, in a paper delivered in 1975 to a symposium on East Indians in the Caribbean, traces the "emergence" and "consolidation of the Indian community" in Trinidad back to the decades surrounding the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century (12-13). Into this rejuvenating, peasant world of the Indian diaspora, Mr. Biswas is born sometime in the first decade of the twentieth century.

Emerging from this culturally lean background that has been cut off its originary source in India for several decades, Mr. Biswas – as a second-generation, displaced Indian born in Trinidad – tries to find an identity for himself that would comport with the values of an evolving, heterogeneous Creole society on the island; his life-long struggle to adjust the values of his inherited culture to the demands of a colonial life is the focus of the novel. This struggle is related chronologically; it begins right after Mr. Biswas's birth at the outset of the novel and is concluded forty-six years and five-hundred-and-ninety pages later, shortly before his death, at the end of the narrative. Cultural confrontation and cultural assimilation – with the concomitant tensions of disorientation and alienation, psychological bewilderment and loss of identity – determine the course of the struggle. An individual struggle though it may be, it captures through a parallel track in Hanuman House, the house of Mr. Biswas's in-laws, the social history of nearly half a century of an entire population in Trinidad, from the early 1900s through the mid-century.

Naipaul evokes the village culture of the migrant Indian workers at the birth of Mr. Biswas. When Mr. Biswas's grandfather asks the midwife about the new arrival in the house, she responds by saying, "[b]oy, boy," and hastily adds: "[b]ut what sort of

boy? Six-fingered, and born in the wrong way” (15). Both she and Mr. Biswas’s grandmother consider the midnight hour of the child’s birth “inauspicious” (16). The grandmother immediately sets about hanging cactus leaves on every aperture of the hut to exorcize the demons that may have entered the dwelling along with the newborn at that “inauspicious” hour of the day. The pundit that comes to cast the child’s horoscope (Mr. Biswas is born to Hindu parents) adds to the fears of the family by warning them “to keep him [the child] away from trees and water. Particularly water” (16). Failing that, predicts the pundit, the disaster that is in store for the family could not be averted. Mr. Biswas’s grandfather responds to these warnings, as he does to all unfortunate predictions, by acquiescing and resigning: “Fate,” he says, “[t]here is nothing we can do about it” (15).

The thematic import of these details, however, becomes apparent when the third-person, omniscient narrator, Anand – Mr. Biswas’s son – intervenes and accounts for the premonitions in a rather lighthearted and comic way. “Mr. Biswas”, he tells us, “lost his sixth finger before he was nine days old. It simply came off one night and Bipti [Mr. Biswas’s mother] had an unpleasant turn when, shaking out the sheets one morning, she saw this tiny finger tumble to the ground” (18). The narrator further explains that it was “malnutrition that had given him the sixth finger” (22). Naipaul therefore seems to be employing the details to underscore that Biswas is born into a world that is ridden by superstition and ignorance; fatalism and passivity rule the daily existence of its members. However flourishing the culture may appear on the surface, in essence it is stagnating.

Against this social and cultural stagnation, the narrator consistently addresses his hero throughout the narrative by his last name Biswas. In fact, the consistency is so

noteworthy that only two persons in the novel – Mrs. Tulsi, Biswas’s mother-in-law, and her chief-aide Seth – use the protagonist’s first name at all, if they ever use it. This narrative move on the part of the narrator to call the hero by his last name would be innocuous, were it not for another narrative peculiarity that the narrator demonstrates – he confers the title of “Mr.” on the hero even as the latter is being born: “When the midwife came the children were asleep. Some time later they were awakened by the screams of *Mr. Biswas* and the shrieks of the midwife” (15 emphasis added). As striking as these narrative moves, however, may be, they have gone unaccounted for in Naipaul criticism. It is as though their meaning was unimportant, and the critics and commentators take the fact of calling the hero by his last name, prefixed with the title “Mr.”, as a matter of course.

Yet I think the narrative moves are deliberate and invested with significance. Naipaul gives the infant the title “Mr.” to confer middleclass respectability on a hero that is otherwise of humble origins. The title, along with the last name Biswas, elevates the hero from the sordid conditions of his birth. Obviously, the protagonist does not qualify for the respectability at this point in his life when he is just entering the world. He has to earn it through grit and struggle. That is why Naipaul associates the title “Mr.” with another marker of middleclass respectability – namely, the house. The house symbolizes the struggle the hero is to embark upon. The two markers combine masterfully to crown Naipaul’s *magnum opus* as *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Thematically, thus, the two markers stand as much for distinguishing Biswas from the rest of the crowd, both before and at the Tulsis, as for the arduous struggle, by which the protagonist qualifies himself for the distinction his creator bestows upon him at birth. At the end of his life when “he found

himself in his own house, on his own half-lot of land, his own portion of the earth,” Biswas would acknowledge the incredulousness of the struggle by calling it “stupendous” and would wonder out loud too whether “he should have been responsible for [all] this” (8).

Apropos of his titled last name, I want to draw attention to Mr. Biswas’s given name – Mohun – as well, if only for the foil it provides against the gravity of his titled surname. Mohun means the beloved in Hindi, and it is also the name given in Hindu legend to Lord Krishna by the milkmaids. Biswas, ironically, is none of these – he is not a deity, and nobody loves him. By combining his given and titled surnames, Naipaul the ironist yokes together irony and seriousness; he creates a delicate balance between tragedy and comedy throughout the fiction. More intimately, Naipaul pays through the given name a tribute to his father, Seepersad Naipaul, who was a journalist and a writer as well for much of his life in Trinidad and had published a short-story, “They Named Him Mohun,” modeled upon his own life in a 1943 collection entitled *Gurudeva and Other Indian Tales*. (V. S. Naipaul has reissued the collection, with a foreword, under an altered title, *The Adventures of Gurudeva and Other Stories*, in London in 1976.)

This autobiographical aspect of *A House for Mr. Biswas* has a bearing on the composition and criticism of the novel, especially the criticism that concerns the identity of the hero. Reputedly, the character of Mr. Biswas is modeled upon Naipaul’s father, Seepersad Naipaul, who variously worked as a sign-painter, shopkeeper, journalist, and community welfare officer – the roles that Mr. Biswas takes on in the novel. Seepersad Naipaul, like Mr. Biswas of the fiction, had a difficult relationship with the wealthy family of his orthodox Hindu in-laws and suffered a mental collapse. Richard Kelly

identifies Anand, the son of Mr. Biswas and the implied author of the novel, with V. S. Naipaul. “Both escape,” Kelly comments, “the entrapment of Trinidad by winning a scholarship to England” (69-70). Bruce King, in a book-length study of Naipaul, devotes a whole “Appendix” to the autobiographical subtext of the novel. Drawing on previous scholarship, King develops an informative point-for-point correspondence between the fictional world of the novel and the factual details of V. S. Naipaul’s family. He observes that,

After Seepersad’s father died when he was six years old, Seepersad and his impoverished mother became dependent on his mother’s sister (the novel’s Tara). . . . After some schooling Seepersad became a sign-painter; he painted a sign for the general store connected to Lion House (Hanuman House) owned by the Capildeos (the Tulsis) of Chaguanas and married Bropatie Capildeo (Shama). (153)

Naipaul himself indicates the autobiographical nature of the world of *Mr. Biswas* in the sprawling interview he granted to Bharati Mukherjee and Robert Boyers in 1979 at Wesleyan, Connecticut. To the question Mukherjee asked whether it has been hard to write *Mr. Biswas* because no literary models existed for that kind of transplanted world, Naipaul responded: “And of course for me this was complicated by the fact that I didn’t even really belong in the exotic world I was born into and felt I had to write about. . . . And that world itself was in fact turning when I entered it” (588).

Four years later, in 1983, Naipaul gives the definitive answer as to the intimate, familial nature of *Mr. Biswas* in a piece – “Writing *A House for Mr. Biswas*” – he did for *The New York Review of Books*. Naipaul opens the piece by saying that “[o]f all my

books *A House for Mr. Biswas* is the one closest to me. It is the most personal, created out of what I saw and felt as a child” (22). He goes on to remark that the original idea for the book was, quite simply, to tell the story of a man like his father. And that,

For me to write the story of a man like my father was, in the beginning at any rate, to attempt pure fiction, if only because I was writing of things before my time. The transplanted Hindu-Muslim rural culture of Trinidad into which my father was born early in the century was still a whole culture, close to India. When I was of an age to observe, that culture had begun to weaken; and the time of wholeness had seemed to me as far away as India itself, and almost dateless. I knew little about the Trinidad Indian village way of life. I was a town boy; I had grown up in Port-of-Spain. I had memories of my father’s conversation; I also had his short stories [*Gurudeva and Other Indian Tales*]. . . . This was what my fantasy had to work on. (22)

Indeed, his imagination worked on the meager details he had about the displaced, indentured Indians in Trinidad; and the excerpt above contains in miniature ideas that reverberate throughout *Mr. Biswas*.

Thus Naipaul renders a loving portrait of Trinidad Indians in the country in the first four chapters of the novel. In the chapter entitled “Pastoral,” he paints a nostalgic picture of the social life of indentured Indian laborers at the beginning of the twentieth century, fifty to sixty years into the indentureship. Their memories of their motherland and its culture at this point in time seem to be relatively intact. Bissoondaye, Mr. Biswas’s grandmother, hosts a social gathering in celebration of her grandson’s arrival in

the family. The fest includes food, pomp and show and features a dramatization of the Supreme Hindu deity – Shiva – the creator, destroyer and transformer of the universe:

Mr. Biswas responded well to these [massage] exercises, and Bissoondaye became so confident that she decided to have a celebration on the ninth day. She invited people from the village and fed them. The pundit came and was unexpectedly gracious, though his manner suggested that but for his intervention there would have been no celebration at all. Jhagru, the barber, brought his drum, and Selochan did the Shiva dance in the cowpen, his body smeared all over with ash. (18)

The mourning ceremonies of the migrant workers are no less evocative than the delightful celebrations and call to mind the old Indian customs of grief. When Raghu, Mr. Biswas's father, drowns in the village pond, Bipti, the protagonist's mother, becomes a widow. Her widowhood calls for a series of solemn actions to be performed in a certain order, culminating in crying and wailing, sealing the grievous nature of the occasion:

“Bipti was bathed. Her hair, still wet, was neatly parted and the parting filled with red henna. Then the henna was scooped out and the parting filled with charcoal dust. She was now a widow forever. Tara [Mr. Biswas's aunt] gave a short scream and at her signal the other women began to wail” (32).

As nostalgic as Naipaul here seems to be though, he is well aware that the Indian village culture is under duress from the broader Creole reality of the island. Mungroo the village stick-fighter is completely dedicated to his art of crafting and carving the sticks: “Afterwards, the sticks, their heads carved, were soaked in coconut oil in bamboo cylinders, to give them greater strength and resilience” (174). But then at the end of the

process, he takes the fighting sticks to an old man “to have them ‘mounted’ with the spirit of a dead Spaniard” (174). Of course, the Indians would not know what a Spaniard was, but they equate him with bravery and fearlessness in their imagination; and the narrator is quick to intervene and clear up the matter in the guise of Mr. Biswas, who knew that “[...] the Spaniards . . . had surrendered the island one hundred years before, and their descendants had disappeared; yet they had left a memory of reckless valour, and this memory had passed to people who came from another continent” (174). Unbeknownst to them, the Indians are reconciling their culture with the demands of the broader Creole reality.

More insidious than this impingement from without on Indian culture, however, is the constant threat of cultural stagnation from within. Since the diasporic Indians in Trinidad are cut off from their originary source in India, their cultural values have no live feedback; they are stagnating and not evolving. Part of the stagnation is noticeable – as I have argued above – in the ignorance and superstition, fatalism and passivity, as these manifest themselves in the rituals at Mr. Biswas’s birth. Naipaul, however, attests to the outdated, dwindling nature of the culture more thoroughly in a factual account in his travelogue of India, *An Area of Darkness* (1964). In it, he observes that:

In its artefacts India existed whole in Trinidad. But our community, though seemingly self-contained, was imperfect. Sweepers we had quickly learned to do without. Others supplied the skills of carpenters, masons and cobblers. But we were also without weavers and dyers, workers in brass and makers of string beds. Many of the things in my grandmother’s house were therefore irreplaceable.

They were cherished because they came from India, but they continued to be used

and no regret attached to their disintegration. . . . Customs are to be maintained because they are felt to be ancient. This is continuity enough; it does not need to be supported by a cultivation of the past [. . .]. (29-30)

The novelist accounts for the cultural stagnation in terms of a misdirected devotion to physical objects. The division of labor based on caste skills in traditional Hindu society, as it is referenced here, no longer exists in Trinidad. However, the members of the Trinidadian Hindu community compensate for that obsolescence by irrationally clinging to the artifacts that came from India; and this devotion to physical objects, in and of itself, is considered “continuity enough.” Naipaul mocks the practice and pleads for maintaining the values of the past that sustain a culture, though one wonders what a caste-based division of labor might look like in the Trinidad of the early twentieth century.

Naipaul takes his proposition of the indispensability of cultural values to its logical consequence. Later in the travel book, he discusses how the world of the migrant Hindus, once severed from its source, gradually ceased to exist in Trinidad:

The family life I have been describing [in *Mr. Biswas*] began to dissolve when I was six or seven; when I was fourteen it had ceased to exist. Between my brother, twelve years younger than myself, and me there is more than a generation of difference. He can have no memory of that private world which survived with such apparent solidity up to only twenty-five years ago [i.e., up to 1939/40], a world which had lengthened out, its energy of inertia steadily weakening, from the featureless area of darkness which was India. (35)

The novelist provides an elaborate illustration of the dissolving world of the migrant Hindus in Hanuman House, the house of Mr. Biswas's in-laws, to which the hero moves after marrying Shama, one of the many Tulsi daughters that reside there. The detail and intimacy Naipaul lavishes on the establishment over hundreds of pages render it emblematic of the condition of the diasporic Hindus in Trinidad at large, precisely because of the cultural disintegration the house reveals behind its façade. The façade itself is the most suggestive feature of the house, though:

Among the tumbledown timber-and-corrugated-iron buildings in the High Street at Arwacas, Hanuman House stood like an alien white fortress. The concrete walls looked as thick as they were, and when the narrow doors of the Tulsi Store on the ground floor were closed the House became bulky, impregnable and blank. The side walls were windowless, and on the upper two floors the windows were mere slits in the façade. The balustrade which hedged the flat roof was crowned with a concrete statue of the benevolent monkey-god Hanuman. From the ground his whitewashed features could scarcely be distinguished and were, if anything, slightly sinister, for dust had settled on projections and the effect was that of a face lit up from below. (80-81)

The façade betrays the claustrophobic, prison-like, out-of-place nature of the dwelling (“narrow doors”, “windowless”, “alien”); but it also suggests, somewhat ironically, the protective nature of the house in that the façade takes on the aspect of a “fortress.” Significantly, though, the façade also spells out the disorderly, chaotic nature of the world that surrounds it; this is a world that consists of poverty-stricken, ramshackle houses that are made out of tin and timber.

Naipaul provides a fuller picture of the destitution of the surrounding world as Mr. Biswas heads out on a job search in neighboring Pagotes, not far from Arwacas, where Hanuman House is located. This is what the hero witnesses along the Main Road in Pagotes:

He passed a tailor and tried to picture himself cutting khaki cloth, tacking, and operating a sewing machine. He passed a barber and tried to picture himself stropping a razor; . . . For a moment he was perversely tempted by an undertaker's, a plain corrugated iron shed that made no concession to grief He passed dry goods shops . . . and the rickety little rooms bulged with dry goods . . . the wreckage of a turbulent flood which appeared to have forced the doors of the shops open and left deposits of dry goods on tables and on the ground outside. The owners remained in their shops, lost in the gloom and wedged between dry goods. . . . Grocers' shops, smelling damply of oil, sugar and salted fish. Vegetable stalls, damp but fresh, and smelling of earth. . . . The women behind the vegetable stalls were old and correct with thin mournful faces; . . . and babies in the back-ground lying in condensed milk boxes. And all the time donkey carts, horse carts and ox-carts rumbled and jangled in the roadway, the heavy iron-rimmed wheels grating over gravel and sand and wobbling over the bumpy road.

(67-69)

Economically, the scene paints the picture of a business district that is chaotic and dingy, and less fortunate. There is no order or logic to the series of businesses that are strung up along the street. Barbers and green-grocers, tailors and undertakers compete next to one another. Nor do the businesses seem to be performing particularly well. Mournful faces

of shop-owners, augmented by gloom and odor of the shops, arouse in the spectator an impression of impending doom. Even the arrangement of the merchandise, a deliberate business decision, takes on the aspect of a natural disaster (“a turbulent flood”) that has strewn the articles about, with babies sleeping intermittently among cardboard boxes. All this chaos is topped off by the incredible traffic din that unfolds outside in the street. It does not come as a surprise when Mr. Biswas, “his resolution shaken,” returns to his mother and lets her know that “I am not going to take any job at all” (69). Ironically, though, it is a job of painting a sign for the Tulsi store that takes him to Hanuman House. In entering the house with the imposing façade, Mr. Biswas steps from the broader economic and social chaos of rural Trinidad into the more localized cultural disintegration at Hanuman House.

Critics have perceptively and usefully commented on the various aspects of the façade. Selwyn R. Cudjoe, while discussing the emergence of a nascent capitalist economy in early twentieth century Trinidad, underlines the physical, protective nature of the façade that promises the poverty-stricken Mr. Biswas “an apparent solidity, peace, and impregnability. Physically, it resembled an ‘alien white fortress,’ constructed of ‘concrete walls’ that made it look ‘bulky, impregnable and blank’” (54). Kenneth Ramchand adds to the apparent physical, protective nature of the façade an equally apparent religious and cultural dimension; he reads the reference to “the monkey-god,” and I completely agree with him, as a ridiculing one. The fact that the features of the protector Hindu god should be “whitewashed” contributes, according to Ramchand, to “our sense of the Indian culture being already out of date” (195). Considering the windowless, thick, bulky and impregnable nature of the façade, he concludes his thoughts

on Hanuman House by noting that “[m]ore impressionistically, there seem to be suggestions of a huge bark, hatches closed, and becalmed. All these intimations of decay, it seems to me, are caught up in the ambiguity of the word ‘façade’” (195).

In addition to the physical and cultural dimensions underscored by Cudjoe and Ramchand, I would like to draw attention to the pretentiousness that is inherent in the expression “façade” and which Naipaul seems to be deliberately playing upon when he uses – ironically, as it were – the terms “fortress,” “impregnable,” and “bulky” to refer to Hanuman House. In reality, the house is quite vulnerable and is under constant cultural encroachment from the outside. The term “façade” thus telegraphs, even on a semantic scale, the impending fate of Hanuman House; it acts as a transition between the cultural stagnation of Mr. Biswas’s childhood world and the impending decay of the Tulsi establishment. In terms of the structure of the novel, the stagnant world of Mr. Biswas’s childhood merges into the seemingly vibrant world of the Tulsi organization at Hanuman House. (Chapters Two and Three are, correspondingly, titled “Before the Tulsis” and “The Tulsis.”)

Ostensibly, Hanuman House embodies the old Hindu communal order and works according to its own rules and regulations sanctioned by that tradition. Individuality is detested. There are degrees of precedence all the way down from Mrs. Tulsi, the head of the household, to Mrs. Shama Biswas’s own children. Everybody pays respect to Mrs. Tulsi. “Puja,” the Hindu divine service, is often performed:

The organization of the Tulsi house was simple. . . . The daughters and their children swept and washed and cooked and served in the store. The husbands, under Seth’s [Mrs. Tulsi’s brother-in-law’s] supervision, worked on the Tulsi

land, looked after the Tulsi animals, and served in the store. In return they were given food, shelter and a little money; their children were looked after; and they were treated with respect by people outside because they were connected with the Tulsi family. Their names were forgotten; they became Tulsis. (97)

However, on closer examination of the house, a number of cross-influences come into focus. Christmas in Hanuman House is celebrated as enthusiastically as in any Christian family. Children are given presents, cakes are baked, and ice-cream is made. The sisters get so busy making preparations for a big Christmas lunch that their children get a “skimpier dinner” than usual a day before (214). Shekhar, the elder son of Mrs. Tulsi, wears a crucifix. Ignoring the Hindu caste rules for marriage, he marries a Presbyterian girl:

And at last, in a laxly Presbyterian family with one filling station, two lorries, a cinema and some land, they found a girl. . . . [A]fter smooth and swift negotiations the marriage took place in a registry office, and the elder god [the epithet given to Shekhar by Mr. Biswas], contrary to Hindu custom and the traditions of his family, did not bring his bride home, but left Hanuman House for good . . . to look after the lorries, cinema, land and filling station of his wife’s family. (230-31)

Notably, Shekhar’s younger brother Owad follows his sibling’s precedent and marries a Christian girl as well. Even what remains of the Hindu tradition in Hanuman House is, to a great extent, a mere ritual; it appears as a simulation of the complicated rules of the Hindu religion.

Throughout the novel, references occur to ritual in connection with Tulsi worshipping. The shop-blessing ceremony at The Chase is but one example. Hari is an ordinary Tulsi husband that presides over the ceremony: “Hari, the holy man, who was to be the pundit that day, was just as Mr. Biswas remembered him, just as soft-spoken and lymphatic” (150). But as soon as he changes into the priestly garb of a Hindu pundit, whose duties include officiating at social and religious gatherings, Hari is treated with significance: “Then he went into the bedroom that was reserved for him and changed into his pundit’s garb, which he had brought in a small cardboard suitcase. When he emerged as a pundit everyone treated him with a new respect” (150). Hari mutters a few words from the holy scriptures while Shama sits, listening to him “with bowed head. Her hair was still wet from her ritual bath and she was dressed in white from top to toe” (152). The holy scriptures, it seems, have ceased to be important with respect to what they instruct and require of one in terms of moral and social conduct. Their significance is reduced to their utility as a source of religious chants, regardless whether the chants are understood or not. Obviously, the Tulsis substitute highly ritualized acts for tradition. Ritual alone, however, cannot replace values that instill life into a tradition – any tradition – and so pivotally influence existence. Naipaul’s stance on tradition here is what he describes as a diminished past in his travelogue of India, *An Area of Darkness*:

It [India] remained a special, isolated area of ground which had produced my grandfather and others I knew who had been born in India and had come to Trinidad as indentured labourers, though that past too had fallen into the void into which India had fallen, for they carried no mark of indenture, no mark even of having been labourers. (27)

Naipaul sums up his observations to the effect that the old values the migrants brought with them to the Caribbean worked for a certain number of years. These values, cut off from their roots, were not only open to the eroding effect of time, the process of cultural hybridization weakened them too.

Naipaul describes the cultural hybridization in terms of what he calls “seepage” rather than a direct confrontation between cultures. Answering the charge of fellow-novelist, George Lamming, of not paying enough attention to the fundamental West Indian experience of confrontation among cultures, Naipaul observes that:

[T]o see the attenuation of the culture of my childhood as the result of a dramatic confrontation of opposed worlds would be to distort the reality. To me the worlds were juxtaposed and mutually exclusive. One gradually contracted. It had to; it fed only on memories and its completeness was only apparent. It was yielding not to attack but to a type of seepage from the other. (*Darkness* 35)

Whether the cultural hybridization occurred through direct confrontation or encroachment, the end result is the same: a new Creole culture is coming into being. Christmas celebrations in Hanuman House, otherwise a citadel of Hinduism, are an example of the new Creole culture. Since the old values the migrants brought with them from India had no live source to feed upon, they shrank to a ritual, gave way to cross-influences from the outside, and gradually vanished from memory.

The Hindu tradition in Hanuman House embodies a tradition that has shrunk to an empty ritual and is dying away gradually. Naipaul reiterates the conditions of the demise one more time in his travelogue of the West Indies, *The Middle Passage* (1962). In the “Trinidad” section of the book, he observes that while the self-sufficiency of the Indian

family organization may have given the Indian a measure of security in the beginning, it was “an enclosing self-sufficient world [that was] absorbed with its quarrels and jealousies, as difficult for the outsider to penetrate as for one of its members to escape. It protected and imprisoned, a static world, awaiting decay” (88). The same familial stasis and decay characterize the religion of the Indian community. The religious values have shrunk to empty rituals because they have been severed from their source; their extinction is only a matter of time: “A peasant-minded, money-minded community, spiritually static because cut off from its roots, its religion reduced to rites without philosophy, set in a materialist colonial society . . . has turned the Trinidad Indian into the complete colonial, even more philistine than the white” (89).

While the stasis and decay proliferate, Hanuman House has only in part accepted the Western metropolitan values of the colonizer that prevails in the novel, but paradoxically never steps into the foreground – as is noticeable alone in the isolation of the citadel so that cultural disintegration and cultural hybridization carry the day. Maureen Warner-Lewis has studied the cultural confrontation and cultural syncretism in Hanuman House in depth. She sees in these phenomena the central factors affecting Mr. Biswas’s identity and observes in her 1970 article that:

[T]he theme of cultural clash [is] one of the most dominant to emerge from a reading of V. S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr. Biswas*. It not only accounts for the background to and explanation of many events in the novel, increasingly so in the latter half, but is also responsible for Mr. Biswas’ difficulty of adjustment in his relationship with Tulsidom, an aspect of the central theme of the work, that of the individual’s assertion of himself. (94)

Warner-Lewis also underscores the psychological confusion that the intermixing of cultures may spawn. She identifies myriad cultural practices resulting from the intermixing apart from the observance of Christ's birthday at Hanuman House: the Tulsi daughter Chinta pronouncing Hindu incantations in combination with a candle and crucifix; the members of the Tulsi clan eating salmon on Good Friday after the Catholic-influenced Creole custom; Mr. Biswas's children attending a Sunday school despite the fact that they are non-Christians. All these hybrid practices may cause shifting cultural allegiances in the individual:

This religious ambiguity and syncretism and, in some cases, even neglect of traditional religion, is one of the earliest aspects of cultural confrontation with which Naipaul deals in his novel. And he progressively shows the sometimes subtle, sometimes obvious, way in which the Western-orientated Creole culture of Trinidad corrodes Hindu traditional customs and beliefs, and the shifting attitudes and psychological bewilderment this produces. (97-98)

Mr. Biswas, in the ultimate analysis, is then an offspring of the cultural ambiguity, and he is heir to the "psychological bewilderment" Warner-Lewis talks about. He is one of those younger generation Indians that are born on the island. Like many of his generational mates in Hanuman House, he has never known India in person; all his knowledge of the sub-continent is second-hand. It is fitting that the old Indians in the Hanuman House arcade should appear "romantic" to him (194). He has no clear system to rely upon, no solid base on which he can place his identity.

Caribbean critic Gordon Rohlehr concentrates on character and rebellion in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. He sees in Mr. Biswas the mediocre and grotesque individual that

he is. But the critic also acknowledges the hero's wish of forging an identity for himself. Given the cultural ambiguity of his situation, however, that rivals the cultural ambiguity of the region he is born in, Mr. Biswas's character and struggle can only go so far.

Rohlehr strikes a judicious tone as to the potentialities of the man:

No one can deny the danger of regarding Biswas as a figure representative of the Caribbean predicament. He is so strongly individual, and his limitations so grave. Moreover, if he resembles some of the grotesques of Dickens, he has been created by a writer who has a more contemporary sense of void, loneliness, meaninglessness and absurdity, so prevalent in modern European literature. Biswas's nowhere-ness may be something much more universal. Yet . . . he is representative enough of our local predicament: a man without a past, an orphan wavering between equally dubious cultural alternatives. (92-93)

Mr. Biswas oscillates between the broader social chaos of colonial Trinidad and the more localized cultural disintegration at Hanuman House. There is no order he can single-mindedly call his own – neither Hinduism nor Christianity, neither communalism nor individualism.

Mr. Biswas's already tenuous identity as a cultural hybrid is imperiled by his family. As I have remarked above, he is born at midnight which his grandmother considers an "inauspicious" hour. The midwife reports that he is born in the wrong way. The mother Bipti discovers that he has an extra finger. The physical deformity along with the details of his birth, which the parents as well as the grandparents interpret as a bad omen for the whole family, stigmatizes the child within his own house. He is never properly integrated into the family. In the manner of a self-fulfilling prophecy, Mr.

Biswas does originate the disaster the pundit has presaged – he causes his father, indirectly, to dive into the village pond where the latter thinks his son has drowned, while Mr. Biswas is hiding out at home. The father drowns in the process: “Lakhan brought up Raghu unconscious. They rolled him on the damp grass and pumped water out of his mouth and through his nostrils. But it was too late” (31).

The accident marks the height of Mr. Biswas’s social disgrace. His marginalization goes further, however. The villagers, especially the next-door neighbor Dhari who has initially been favorably disposed to Mr. Biswas and has given him the job of tending to his calf, can no longer tolerate his presence in their midst and drive him away by harassing his mother: “In the end Bipti sold the hut and the land to Dhari, and she and Mr. Biswas moved to Pagotes” (40). At the age of about eleven, Mr. Biswas is made to leave the only house in which he could have had an opportunity to socialize. His mother sends him to a school in Pagotes. After almost six years at school there, and just when he is beginning to be equipped for the society he is born in, his Aunt Tara (on whose bounty Mr. Biswas and his mother have been living in Pagotes) removes him from school, and sends him away to be trained as a pundit. Neither the family nor school as socio-cultural institutions help Mr. Biswas internalize the norms and values into which he is born. He remains, in every sense of the word, a cultural destitute. From the age of eleven on, he migrates from one house of relatives to another: “For the next thirty-five years he was to be a wanderer with no place he could call his own, with no family except that which he was to attempt to create out of the engulfing world of the Tulsis” (40). And yet “[. . .] how easy it was to think of those houses without him!” (131). In none of those houses is he accepted into the family atmosphere. None of them offers him the

socialization he was deprived of in his parents' house; a significant step in the formation of personal identity is recklessly ignored.

At this juncture of his life when he is about seventeen (i.e., in the mid-1920s or thereabouts), Mr. Biswas's plight is total. He has no skills to operate within his own community, and he is at a loss in the broader island society. It is no wonder that, "with his mother's parents dead, his father dead, his brothers on the estate at Felicity, Dehuti [his sister] as a servant in Tara's house, and himself rapidly growing away from Bipti . . . he was really quite alone" (40). Naheed Ahmad in an unpublished thesis has described this loneliness in terms of what she calls a "feeling of uselessness" in Mr. Biswas (102). Although she recognizes that "[t]he physical fact of a house symbolizes his [Mr. Biswas's] need for a solid foundation of primary human ties;" and even though she contrasts his failure to achieve such basic links with his immediate family symbolically through his brother Pratap's integration with the family (101), Ahmad does not pinpoint the cause of Mr. Biswas's failure. She does not relate his inability to establish primary human relationships to his neglected childhood and improper socialization. Naipaul, however, insists that we acknowledge the social dimensions of Biswas's upbringing, even though their consequences for his identity may be milder than those emanating from his cultural ambiguity. Thus the novelist devotes two chapters – "Pastoral" and "Before the Tulsis" – to Biswas's childhood and adolescence; these are placed right at the beginning of the book and together with his cultural ambiguity, they set the tone for Mr. Biswas's social involvement later in the novel.

Mr. Biswas's social involvement consists in his waging a war against the Tulsis and is aimed at winning an identity for himself independent of his in-laws. No sooner

than he discovers that his in-laws have chosen him for a husband because he belonged to the “proper caste” (97) – though this may be the right Hindu custom for marriage – he rebels; he starts defying the Tulsis authority openly and, in so doing, declares his wish to find a solution for his identity on his own, though he remains dependent on the Tulsis for much of his life. It should be noted that in his wish to find a definition of self in terms of his own achievement rather than through his association with the Tulsis, Mr. Biswas is influenced, inadvertently, by the Western values of the wider colonial society. Naipaul here records how the Creole culture subtly impinges upon the Indian enclave. Mr. Biswas has begun to reconcile the communalism of his inherited culture with the individualism of a Western-oriented colonial existence. Seth, Mr. Tulsis’s brother-in-law and chief aide, voices this reorientation by saying that Mr. Biswas wants to “paddle his own canoe” (140). Seth’s epithet, however, is also a backlash to Mr. Biswas’s own penchant for ridiculing the Tulsis family by calling them names.

In Naipaul criticism Biswas’s tendency to belittle the Tulsis family through name-calling and other acts of disparagement, such as spitting on the antagonists, that claim hundreds of pages and provide for a great deal of laughter in the novel, has variously been described as a form of comedy, humor, irony, and satire, even as a manifestation of the grotesque. Gordon Rohlehr in his essay “The Ironic Approach: The Novels of V. S. Naipaul,” identifies irony in Naipaul’s *oeuvre* as a principal tool enabling the novelist to work out his themes by dwelling on the discrepancy between the character of the ironist and the object of irony, whereby the ironist assumes a cultural or intellectual superiority over the object he ridicules. Rohlehr points out that the effect of articulating the discrepancy results in laughter, buffoonery, comedy or even satire. At any rate the

technique offers Naipaul, according to Rohlehr, a certain measure of dispassion and objectivity: “The worth of his irony is that it enables him to examine his past without any sentimental self-indulgence. We see Biswas as a full human being who is as weak and contemptible as he is forceful and admirable” (139). Rohlehr’s analysis of Naipaul the ironist, it seems to me, is spot on; but I wanted to take his point about the discrepancy between the character of the ironist and the object of irony a little further and apply it to Mr. Biswas. After all, it is Mr. Biswas that takes on the role of the ironist within the novel. It turns out that, in matter of fact, Mr. Biswas constantly overestimates his own character. He is in reality little more than a wanderer in Hanuman House; his absence or presence in the family hardly matters. Upon returning to Hanuman House, of his own accord, after he has had a quarrel with the family, he expects that he would be met by “silence, stares, hostility and perhaps a little fear” (102). Instead, we are told that Seth and Mrs. Tulsi, the two most important personages in the household, continue “as they had done even before he left, hardly to notice him. . . . The house was too full, too busy; such events were insignificant because he mattered little to the house” (102).

Amidst this nonentity concerning his existence in Hanuman House, Mr. Biswas assumes the comic posturing to defend himself against the looming threat of engulfing anonymity because the attitude would set him apart from the Tulsi crowd and give him a measure of psychological relief as well. The posture would, however, also enable him to channel his rebelliousness in ever more creative ways against Hanuman House. Witness how the psychological relief and rebelliousness manifest themselves early on in name-calling during a conversation between Mr. Biswas and Shama. The scene concerns his return to Hanuman House following a brush with the Tulsis. This is how he vents over

various members of the Tulsi clan in a back-and-forth with his wife, punctuated by explanations from the narrator:

“How the gods [Shama’s two brothers], eh?”

Shama wouldn’t reply.

“And how the Big Boss getting on today?” That was Seth.

Shama wouldn’t reply.

“And how the old queen?” That was Mrs. Tulsi. “The old hen? The old cow?”

“Well, nobody didn’t *ask* you to get married into the family, you know.”

“Family? Family? This blasted fowlrun you calling family?” (104-05)

Later Mr. Biswas would substitute funnier and more sarcastic epithets for the various Tulsis, matching each member with a particular animal and Hanuman House with a large zoo: “And what about the two gods? It ever strike you that they look like two monkeys? So, you have one concrete monkey-god outside the house and two living ones inside. They could just call this place the monkey house and finish. Eh, monkey, bull, cow, hen. The place is like a blasted zoo, man” (120).

As liberating as the comic posturing here may be, it is worth reiterating that it originates in Mr. Biswas’s desperate need for self-defense and psychological relief. While the posturing starts off innocuously in this way, Biswas may push it over the edge depending upon the desperation of the moment. At such times, the comic posturing turns into grotesquerie and may further devolve to the point where it starts hurting Mr. Biswas the ironist; and when the object of irony or comedy is very trivial, the posturing may indeed seem to verge on the absurd. During his adolescent years before marriage, for instance, Mr. Biswas is entrusted to one of his distant relations Bhandat, in whose rum

shop he works. He avenges himself for the maltreatment he receives at the hands of his benefactor by “spitting in the rum when he bottled it, which he did early every morning” (61). Living at Hanuman House, he deliberately rinses his mouth out of the window, knowing full well that the dirty water would land in the kitchen down below: “I know that. I just hoping I spit on some of your family” (105). He does end up throwing food on Owad, Mrs. Tulsi’s younger son, out of the window, for which he gets a sound beating from Govind, one of the Tulsi sons-in law, and an eventual eviction from Hanuman House for punishment. After the eviction, when he runs a shop for the Tulsis at The Chase, he devotes whole weeks to absurdities:

He grew his nails to an extreme length and held them up to startle customers. He picked and squeezed at his face until his cheeks and forehead were inflamed and the rims of his lips were like welts. When his skin became pitted with little holes, he studied these with interest and found the perfection of their shape pleasing. And once he dabbed healing ointments of various colours on his face and went and stood in the shop doorway, greeting people he knew. (184)

This is pathetic posturing, indeed. It borders on the ludicrous and the grotesque; it betrays Mr. Biswas’s elemental fear of the insecurity he feels deep inside him as to the status of his existence – his identity – in the world; and he seems to be overcompensating for the insecurity by resorting to the absurd acts of growing his nails to an extreme length, or picking at his face until his cheeks became inflamed.

Keith Garebian has examined the grim humor and grotesqueries in the novel in depth. He argues that Naipaul’s comedy in *Mr. Biswas* is primarily of the grotesque type and that “the grotesque is a mixture of two elements: the playful (as in Biswas’ mimesis

and buffoonery) and the fantastically sinister (as in his paranoid seclusion and nightmares). The two are always connected because they are both aspects of the same absurd experience from which Biswas cannot escape” (489). The absurd experience Garebian refers to concerns Mr. Biswas’s knowledge that the world denies him an identity and is out to get him. In general I make common cause with Garebian and Rohlehr, both of whom explain, in their own ways, Mr. Biswas’s comic posturing as a form of satire or the grotesque. But I also wanted to draw attention to the fact that, in spite of Mr. Biswas’s buffoonery and grotesqueries, Naipaul ironically (Naipaul the ironist!) endows his hero with undying optimism.

Living with his mother as a disgraced teenager in a back street at Pagotes, with no money and hardly any prospects for the future, Mr. Biswas looks forward to the days to come with anticipation: “He no longer simply lived. He had begun to wait, not only for love, but for the world to yield its sweetness and romance. He deferred all his pleasures in life until that day” (80). After his move to The Chase where he takes over a Tulsi shop, he eventually realizes that the move has been for naught because the place is too remote and indigent to support a food shop like his. Despite the grim realization, he puts a positive spin on the situation: “And that was what Mr. Biswas continued to feel about their venture: that it was temporary and not quite real, and it didn’t matter how it was arranged. He had felt that on the first afternoon; and the feeling lasted until he left The Chase. Real life was to begin for them soon, and elsewhere. The Chase was a pause, a preparation” (147). After his nervous breakdown at Green Vale where he works on a Tulsi estate, he has to be transported back to Hanuman House to recuperate. As soon as he is back up on his feet again, he ventures out to Port of Spain to look for a job: “He was

going out into the world, to test it for its power to frighten. The past was counterfeit, a series of cheating accidents. Real life, and its especial sweetness, awaited; he was still beginning” (305). This is not just unending hope against all odds, the attitude embodies a zest for life that is as invigorating as it is inspiring, and it keeps Biswas going through thick and thin until he reaches his goal.

Peggy Nightingale hails Mr. Biswas’s optimism as “one of the most optimistic notes in Naipaul’s writing.” In her book *Journey through Darkness: The Writing of V. S. Naipaul* (1987), she acknowledges the role of the comic and tragic in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, but remarks that:

Like the earlier fiction, this novel [*A House for Mr. Biswas*] chronicles and exposes flaws in Trinidad society, but this time, in spite of humorous treatment of separate incidents and characters, the effect of the society as a whole on an individual’s life is seen as deeply tragic. And yet, Mohun Biswas’s struggle for self-respect and freedom provides one of the most optimistic notes in Naipaul’s writing. (44)

Mr. Biswas’s struggle for self-definition and freedom is symbolized in the building of his own house and runs parallel to the disintegration of Hanuman House. The many houses he inhabits before he comes to live in his final one reflect, in varying degrees, the dissolution of Hanuman House and, by extension, the dissolution of the Hindu community at large in Trinidad. It is notable how the various houses progressively accommodate Mr. Biswas’s immediate family only (by contrast to the extended family at Hanuman House), registering the emergence of a new familial order.

The first of these houses is located at The Chase. Mr. Biswas moves there not long after his marriage to Shama, to run a food store for the Tulsis. His repeated taunting of the various Tulsis at Hanuman House, in particular of his tossing food on Owad, lands him at The Chase. The environment at The Chase is hardly different from the village where “he had spent his early years” (141). It is rural, remote, and insignificant. The fact that most of the villagers at The Chase work on the sugar estates gives the reader a clue as to its predominantly East Indian character, so that the life at The Chase encapsulates a continuation of the Indian customs and beliefs from Mr. Biswas’s childhood. The community seems to be relatively intact, which is mirrored in Shama’s disapproval of her husband’s rebellion; she opposes Mr. Biswas’s defiance of the Hindu world, and there are often quarrels between husband and wife. After each quarrel Shama leaves The Chase in protest for Hanuman House and spends days there. The more often the quarrels take place, the longer the periods she stays at Hanuman House. The relationship between the two worsens to the point that they spend their last two years (of the total six) at The Chase in a state of “mutual hostility; at peace only in Hanuman House” (192).

Hanuman House, as an embodiment of the Hindu world, represents a safe haven at this stage. It dispenses harmony and offers a welcome relief from the disappointments of the outside world. In fact, Mr. Biswas does not quite know what to make of his independence once he is “out there”: “How lonely the shop was! And how frightening! He had never thought it would be like this when he found himself in an establishment of his own. . . . Hanuman House would be warm and noisy with activity. Here he was afraid to disturb the silence, afraid to open the door of the shop, to step into the light”

(145). Ironically, he also comes to realize, once he has separated himself from Hanuman House, the worth of the joint family:

Though Hanuman House had at first seemed chaotic, it was not long before Mr. Biswas had seen that in reality it was ordered With no child of his own, he had wondered how the children survived. Now he saw that in this communal organization children were regarded as assets, a source of future wealth and influence. . . . The House was a world, more real than The Chase, and less exposed; everything beyond its gates was foreign and unimportant and could be ignored. (188)

As stable as Hanuman House may appear here though, its solidity is relative to the threat posed by The Chase. And however innocuous that threat may be, it is concerning that Biswas should equate the nonentity of his childhood and adolescent days with “the thought of the shop in *darkness* at The Chase” (190 emphasis added). Furthermore, the darkness is a solid and ever present feature of Biswas’s surroundings at The Chase: “Though it was small and stood in the open, the kitchen was always dark. The window by day and the flambeau or fire by night showed that the walls were black and fluffy with soot, as though a new species of spider had been bred there, with the ability to spin webs as black and furry as its legs” (142). The full import of the darkness, however, does not begin to unravel until the Green Vale days later in the novel. For now, though, Mr. Biswas may continue keeping the shop. Eventually, however, he gives up when the profits in the shop shrink over time and he is unable to invest afresh – at which point he returns to the relative security of Hanuman House.

The second house is located at Green Vale and represents a variation on The Chase. After having failed in his first venture, Mr. Biswas is sent to another Tulsi outpost to work on an estate as an overseer. The laborers on the estate are all Indians that, though taunting and insubordinate at times, are in the main manageable and who all live in a close-knit community at the estate barracks. Hanuman House at this stage is still relatively intact and the quarrels between husband and wife persist. For the time being, Biswas loses Shama who stays at Hanuman House, visiting him off and on at Green Vale; but he gets hold of his children, especially Anand, whom he never loses in the further course of the novel. However much Shama may incline toward the Tulsis in the Green Vale days and however casual she may be in her visits to Biswas during the time, she cannot tolerate the misery of her husband. She tells Biswas on one of her visits that it was out of fear of her sister Chinta's jealousy that she had smashed the doll's house he had presented to their daughter Savi:

“You didn't know what I had to put up with. Talking night and day. Puss-puss here. Puss-puss there. Chinta dropping remarks all the time. Everybody beating their children the moment they start talking to Savi. Nobody wanting to talk to me. Everybody behaving as though I kill their father. . . . So I had to satisfy them. I break up the dolly-house and everybody was satisfied.” (226)

In giving Savi a Christmas present for herself, Biswas is, of course, promoting individuality and difference in a communal organization that exists on the sole principle of resemblance and conformity; and in Shama's explanation Naipaul records the first tangible hint of a crack in the communal edifice: one Tulsi member is defecting. Despite this development to the contrary, Biswas's psychological distress at Green Vale is at its

highest: “The snakes appeared more often in his dreams. He began to regard them as living and wondered what it would be like to have one fall and curl on his skin” (282). His anxiety over his existence rises to the point that he suffers a nervous breakdown and has to be driven back to the “warmth and reassurance” of Hanuman House (295).

David Ormerod focuses on theme and image in the novel and points out how the denial of personal identity to Biswas reflects in the images of vegetation around him and vice versa. He cites the following paragraph from the novel to corroborate his point with regard to the Green Vale episode:

Whenever afterwards Mr. Biswas thought of Green Vale he thought of the trees. They were tall and straight, and so hung with long, drooping leaves that their trunks were hidden and appeared to be branchless. Half the leaves were dead; the others, at the top, were a dead green. It was as if all the trees had, at the same moment, been blighted in luxuriance, and death was spreading at the same pace from all the roots. But death was forever held in check. The tonguelike leaves of dark green turned slowly to the brightest yellow, became brown and thin as if scorched, curled downwards, over the other dead leaves and did not fall. And new leaves came, as sharp as daggers; but there was no freshness to them; they came into the world old, without a shine, and only grew longer before they too died. (205-06)

The image is indeed evidence of extraordinary precision for the diseased state of Mr. Biswas’s mind at this point in his struggle – he hangs on to life, like the half-dead leaves on the trees, by a bare thread of sanity and grit. The blighted growth recalls Biswas’s worn-out physical condition. However, Ormerod goes – it seems to me – too far when he

suggests that “as the leaves came into the world old, so did Biswas, who bore the title ‘Mr.’ even as a new-born child” (“Theme and Image” 601).

Biswas does not come into the world old and stale. If there is one characteristic that sets this otherwise weak man apart from others, it is his capacity to perpetually renew himself – his resilience and optimism – in the face of adversity. Naipaul gives the infant the title, rather – as I have argued above – to confer middleclass respectability on a hero that is otherwise of humble origins; the title elevates Biswas from the sordid conditions of his birth and puts him on a par with the rigors of a middleclass struggle that he is to embark on in building a house for himself. Biswas would acknowledge the toughness of the struggle by calling it “stupendous” at the end of his life when “he found himself in his own house, on his own half-lot of land, his own portion of the earth” (8). Ormerod acknowledges the toughness of the struggle as well when he, elsewhere in the piece, views in the psychological collapse of Mr. Biswas the potential for a new beginning; there he astutely remarks that “[c]urled like a foetus in the darkness [of the Blue Room at Hanuman House], he awaits rebirth, a rebirth to a new life, from the countryside and communalism of the first part of the novel to the town and individualism of the second” (597). The comment on Mr. Biswas’s coming into the world old, therefore, seems to be, at its most benign, woefully misplaced.

Further, if there are trees that – as Ormerod indicates – epitomize death-in-life and correspond to Biswas’s diseased state of mind, there are others that are ordinarily green and that “*darkened* the road” (emphasis added 206). The whitewash on the walls of the barracks where Biswas lives at Green Vale is “mildewed . . . and freckled with grey and green and *black*” (emphasis added 206). The underside of the galvanized iron roof at the

barracks is “*black* [and] furry” (emphasis added 209). The dead trees surrounding the barracks resemble a “wall of flawless *black*” (emphasis added 237). Biswas worries about his existence so much that he hallucinates a “billowing *black* cloud” that would “funnel into his head” unless he was careful (emphasis added 266). While such details of the dark and black may be run-of-the-mill descriptions in a chapter that deals with the disturbed state of the hero’s mind, they nevertheless gather symbolic significance when Biswas begins associating the black color with Hanuman House – as when his sleep is interrupted and he dreams of strange images:

His sleep was broken by dreams. He was in the Tulsi Store. There were crowds everywhere. Two thick black threads were chasing him. As he cycled to Green Vale the threads lengthened. One thread turned pure white; the black thread became thicker and thicker, purple-black and monstrously long. It was a rubbery black snake; it developed a comic face; it found the chase funny and said so to the white thread, now also a snake.

When he passed the house [at Green Vale] and saw the black snakes hanging from the roof, he touched a crapaud pillar and said, ‘Hari blessed it.’ He remembered the suitcase, the whining prayers, the sprinkling with the mango leaf, the dropping of the penny. ‘Hari blessed it.’ (272)

The house with “the black snakes hanging from the roof” refers to the house Mr. Biswas has begun building for himself near the barracks at Green Vale; and in associating the black color of the snakes on the house, which is later destroyed in a thunderstorm, with the blessings from Hari the pundit of Hanuman House, Biswas is telegraphing the fate of the Hindu tradition in Trinidad at large, and in the Tulsi organization in particular.

F. G. Rohlehr in an essay, "Predestination, Frustration and Symbolic Darkness in Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*," observes that the scope of a book that deals with the struggle of one person against a whole way of life cannot be other than tragic. "Predestination," he remarks, "is suggested . . . in the symbols of darkness and stagnation which recur almost like themes throughout" (5). Obviously, Rohlehr sees predestination in terms of eventual disappearance of the Hindu culture in Trinidad and notes that "[d]arkness is ever present in any reference to the Tulsi World. There the people, like the furniture[,] are 'scattered about,' 'unrelated' except in a fantastic pettiness and capacity for intrigue. It is 'choked' and 'crammed' with generations of Tulsis, all without any obvious individuality" (7). Biswas's battle to wrest individuality out of the anonymity is indeed a monumental task; and the recurring symbols of stagnation Rohlehr mentions take me back to Naipaul's own analysis of the cultural situation of the Trinidadian Hindus I cited earlier in the discussion. Cut off from its roots, the Hindu culture in Trinidad has shrunk to a mere ritual. It has no nourishing base or values to rejuvenate itself and therefore embodies "a static world, awaiting decay" (*The Middle Passage* 88).

The ramifications of the stagnation, however, do not fully come into view until the Tulsi family, along with Biswas, move to a house at suburban Shorthills. Prior to that, Biswas's move to Port of Spain to work with a newspaper registers certain changes to his status within his own family. As he one day visits Hanuman House, Savi and Anand "at once took possession of him" (329). Even Shama, who heretofore tended to be more Tulsi, "dusted a bench at the table and asked whether he had eaten" (329). It is with this progress of his whole family, more or less, together that Biswas moves to a house in Port of Spain owned by Mrs. Tulsi. The children acclimate to the city

environment so fast that Hanuman House at rural Arwacas soon becomes a distant memory. Savi, Mr. Biswas's eldest daughter, is so irritated by their visit to the house over Christmas that she cannot endure its boredom. "This is," she blurts out in exasperation, "the last Christmas I spend at Hanuman House" (366). Separately, the children discover their father's relations – a move that bestows on Mr. Biswas, indirectly, a sense of self-importance and identity; besides the children enjoy the explorations, too:

[T]he children preferred visiting Mr. Biswas's relations. These relations had come as a revelation. Not only were they an untapped source of generosity; Savi and Anand had also felt up to then that Mr. Biswas, like all the fathers at Hanuman House, had come from nothing, and the only people who had a proper family were the Tulsis. It was pleasant and novel, too, for Savi and Anand and Myna to find themselves flattered and cajoled and bribed. (348-49)

Biswas reflects the new-won status by putting in a garden: "He planted rose-bushes at the side of the house, and at the front dug a pond for water-lilies, which spread prodigiously" (346).

Parallel to Biswas's success, Mrs. Tulsi, as if recognizing the obsolescence of the old family order, begins staying long periods of time in her Port of Spain house with her younger son Owad. As for the obsolescence of the old joint family order, it is worth mentioning that a great impetus to it comes from Shekhar, Mrs. Tulsis's older son, who is next in line to vouch for continuity and safeguard tradition. But as I have mentioned above, he marries a Christian girl, ignores all Hindu caste rules and moves out to live with his bride. Mrs. Tulsi's absenteeism affects the environment at Hanuman House a

great deal. Once she is not there and once Seth, her right-hand man, is temporarily the head of the establishment, a struggle for power ensues between Seth and the Tulsi sisters:

During her [Mrs. Tulsi's] absences the accepted degrees of precedence at Hanuman House lost some of their meaning. . . . Many sisters attempted to seize power and a number of squabbles ensued. Offended sisters ostentatiously looked after their own families, sometimes even cooking separately for a day or two. . . . Seth exacted the obedience of everyone; he could not impose harmony. That was re-established every week-end, when Mrs. Tulsi and the younger god [Owad] returned. (231)

The sisters refuse to accept Seth's authority unquestionably. Only when Mrs. Tulsi, the living symbol of the past, deserts, if only for part of the time, do the sisters deem it appropriate to point out that Seth is not the rightful inheritor of power: "When all was said and done Seth was not of the family [he is the husband of Mrs. Tulsi's sister] and he alone could not maintain its harmony" (364).

The past has palpably begun to slip away; the sisters send a signal to "paddle their own canoes." Govind, the loyal Tulsi husband, who in his apparent loyalty to Mrs. Tulsi once beat up Biswas in front of the whole family, is disgruntled and has grown hostile. Shama informs about his "seditious sayings" (364). Though Mrs. Tulsi returns to Hanuman House from the Port of Spain house once her son Owad goes off to England to study, the situation at the old house is never again the same. For one, Mrs. Tulsi loses interest in controlling the family once her two sons are out of the house. She also seems to instinctively sense that the old order is outdated: "Nothing had outwardly changed, but Mrs. Tulsi no longer directed and her influence was beginning to be felt more and more

as only that of a cantankerous invalid” (364). The situation surely looks like the beginning of the end of Hanuman House.

The Tulsi move from rural Arwacas, the seat of Hanuman House, to suburban Shorthills accelerates the disintegration of the family. Though the Tulsis have bought the Shorthills estate to revamp it and make it profitable again, they have no idea as to how inefficient and outdated they have become because of their isolationist and xenophobic tendencies at Hanuman House. The narrator satirizes their remodeling ideas and insists on the out-datedness of the family – as when Mrs. Tulsi gives Biswas a tour of the property and, on seeing a secluded and raised platform under a mango tree, whispers: “Just the spot for a temple” (399). One wonders just how the idea of building a temple under a mango tree might contribute to the profitability of the estate. The Tulsi family is woefully out of touch with reality. Kenneth Ramchand puts his finger on the ludicrousness of the Tulsi ideas when in his commentary on *Mr. Biswas* he notes that the Tulsi attempts at renovation are nothing more than “the inadequate and pathetic fumbblings of a group that has been turned inwards too long to be able to cope with changing conditions” (“The World of *A House for Mr. Biswas*” 69). Their inadaptability is confirmed when Hari the family pundit, in fact, cuts down the mango tree and “built a small, kennel-like boxboard hut; this was the temple” (401-02).

Ramchand’s proposition of the obsolescence of the Tulsis is further borne out by what happens subsequently at Shorthills. Seth, after a quarrel, has already moved out. Without him there is nobody to supervise the estate work at Shorthills. Plundering of the estate products sets in. Govind collects the oranges and sends them to Port of Spain to sell: “Everyone wondered who took the money” (405). He also cuts down the orange

trees and “burned [them] in the kitchen” (405). W. C. Tuttle, another Tulsi husband, dismantled the electricity plant and “melted down the lead to make dumb-bells” (406). The Shorthills episode coincides with the outbreak of the Second World War and the arrival of American soldiers in Trinidad. With them come the concepts of the West that accelerate the dissolution of the communal order: the spirit for private ownership rises and the environment is recklessly exploited for personal ends. Again, Govind tears down the cricket pavilion to raise a shed for his cow, whose profits he keeps for himself. Scores of cedar trees are felled by W. C. Tuttle who wants to make furniture for himself. Mr. Biswas also plunders whatever little quantities of fruit he can and sells them in a cafe: “[H]alf a dozen oranges at a time, half a dozen avocado pears or grapefruit or lemons” (402). The Tulsi sisters concoct one economic plan after another to get rich fast. Eventually, the estate – under the stewardship of the Tulsis – starts to look devastated.

The further transfer from Shorthills to Port of Spain provides a totally new picture of the Tulsis. Several Tulsi husbands and wives exist next to one another under the same roof as discrete economic units; they run separate households and cook and eat for themselves. No longer is there a long-room tradition to eat together as there had been one at Hanuman House. The children receive instructions from their parents as to whom to play with. Individualism has invaded the communal organization. Away from Mrs. Tulsi, who continues to live at Shorthills, the sisters now “had daily squabbles of their own, about whose children had dirtied the washing, whose children had left the WC filthy” (434). There is an open competition in the Port of Spain house among families over possessions. Mr. Biswas and Mr. Tuttle are envious of each other because they both happen to be interested in books. (In fact, Mr. Tuttle derives his name from the

American writer, W. C. Tuttle, in whose westerns the Tulsi son-in-law is overly interested.) An undeclared war ensues between the Biswases and the Tutttles over acquisitions that claim several pages in the narrative. No parent is as concerned about his children's academic progress as Mr. Biswas.

Education, in fact, comes to be regarded by everyone as the only asset in contemporary Port of Spain of the postwar years: "The widows were now almost frantic to have their children educated. There was no longer a Hanuman House to protect them; everyone had to fight for himself in a new world" (436). The word about education gets to the rural Hindus in Arwacas, and "[t]hey all wanted their children to go to Port of Spain schools" (437). From the dissolving world of Hanuman House, second and third generation Indians go out to compete in the wider multiracial Creole society. Owad, Mrs. Tulsi's younger son, returns from England with a medical degree; he takes up his profession and "moved to San Fernando, where he set up private practice" (585). Anand, Mr. Biswas's son, wins a fiercely competitive, island-wide colonial scholarship to study abroad. Shekhar, the elder son of Mrs. Tulsi, is already a successful businessman in another part of the island. These individuals interact with their peers to form "a new caste separate from the society from which it had been released" (572). Education has promoted social mobility and diminished racial differences; class politics has indeed begun.

By the time Mr. Biswas acquires his own house in the mid-1950s, the Indian attitudes have made a complete turnabout. Biswas goes on a vacation to the seaside with his own little family: "In the evenings, with the noise of sea and wind, comforting now, around them, they played cards" (506). Instead of chanting the hymns of the Hindu

divine service, as would have been the case at Hanuman House, W. C. Tuttle now plays this western song over and over again:

One night when the moon was so mellow

Rosita met young man Wellow

He held her like this, his loveliness,

And stole a kiss, this fellow.

Tippy-tippy-tum tippy-tum. (434)

The old religious tradition has ceased to offer interest and has been replaced by modernity. Mrs. Tulsi, the living symbol of the past, once the controller of the organization, now appears “to live only for her illness” (522). She is no more than a “cantankerous invalid” (364). Shama, who had once disapproved of Biswas’s rebellion and depreciated him (“Yes, take up your clothes and go” 98), now stands by her husband. She is much more worried than Mr. Biswas about the mortgage and devises plans on her own to pay off the debt as early as possible.

Speaking of the mortgage debt, it is appropriate that we consider the other liabilities of the house too – not only because they take up so much space in the “Prologue,” but also because the liabilities determine the soundness of the physical aspect of the house. After all, the physical aspect is crucial to forging an identity for the protagonist, as we saw in the criticism of L. Edward Brathwaite at the beginning of the chapter. If the novel entrenches the hero, as Brathwaite claims, in the Caribbean soil by conferring a house upon him, then the house is all but perfect.

Aside from the fact that it is irretrievably mortgaged, the house is badly built. It is the product of the whims of a solicitor's clerk, who has designed and built it in his spare time, and therefore shows no signs of professionalism:

On the ground floor of Mr. Biswas's two-storey house the solicitor's clerk had put a tiny kitchen in one corner; the remaining L-shaped space, unbroken, served as drawingroom and diningroom. Between the kitchen and the diningroom there was a doorway but no door. Upstairs, just above the kitchen, the clerk had constructed a concrete room which contained a toilet bowl, a wash-basin and a shower; because of the shower this room was perpetually wet. The remaining L-shaped space was broken up into a bedroom, a verandah, a bedroom. Because the house faced west and had no protection from the sun, in the afternoon only two rooms were comfortably habitable: the kitchen downstairs and the wet bathroom-and-lavatory upstairs. (9)

As if this mockingly sorry state of affairs was not enough, the house evinces a litany of other structural deficiencies that are equally grave: "The staircase was dangerous; the upper floor sagged; there was no back door; most of the windows didn't close; one door could not open; the celotex panels under the eaves had fallen out and left gaps between which bats could enter the attic" (12).

While these drawbacks do seem to cast a serious doubt on Mr. Biswas's achievement, and therewith call his identity in question, the narrator cautions us not to give in to misgivings:

They [the Biswases] discussed these things as calmly as they could and took care not to express their disappointment openly. And it was astonishing how quickly

this disappointment had faded, how quickly they had accommodated themselves to every peculiarity and awkwardness of the house. And once that had happened their eyes ceased to be critical, and the house became simply their house. (12)

Mr. Biswas, then, does achieve his goal in the final analysis, notwithstanding the many structural deficiencies of the house. The displacement triggered by the diaspora gets stilled by the anchorage of the house. The narrator puts his final seal of approval on Biswas's success when he, in the concluding words of the "Prologue," casts the protagonist's achievement in terms of an emergence of new personal and familial identities:

How terrible it would have been, at this time, to be without it [the house]: to have died among the Tulsis, amid the squalor of that large, disintegrating and indifferent family; to have left Shama and the children among them, in one room; worse, to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one's portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated. (13-14)

The new personal and familial identities draw their sustenance from individualistic, rather than communal, success ("lay claim to one's portion of the earth"); and they exist in a nuclear, rather than an extended, family mode.

Parallel to Mr. Biswas's ultimate achievement, the total dissolution of Hanuman House is all but sealed. The "Epilogue" registers the dissolution when, at the end of the novel, various Tulsi sisters come to attend Mr. Biswas's funeral (who has died of a sudden heart attack) and return, afterward, "to their respective homes" (590). One way of life has passed away and another has emerged. This new order of the mid-1950s (with its

attendant identities), as contrasted with that of Mr. Biswas's childhood at the beginning of the century, encapsulates a shift from communalism to individualism; joint-family system to a nuclear family; traditionalism to modernity; passivity to competition; fatalism to ambition; illiteracy to education; and peasant Hindu ruralism to middleclass Creole urbanism. In the ultimate analysis, the new order represents a shift from East to West.

CHAPTER V

“SHIPWRECK,” LONDON, WRITING, AND SELF-IDENTITY: *THE MIMIC MEN*

(1967)

This chapter examines another novel, *The Mimic Men* (1967), by Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul. The novel takes the form of a memoir that its protagonist, Ralph Singh, writes in self-exile in London. Before coming to the metropolis, Singh has been a colonial politician on his home island of Isabella in the Caribbean. He feels that colonial difference and its legacies have diminished his existence to mimicking the values of the colonizer and that his identity, for that reason, is inauthentic. As Singh reorients and anchors his values in the art of writing, he tries to find a new home in that activity. He puts down the colonial experiences of his past – the affect of misery during his schooldays on Isabella; self-alienation and fragmentation; denial of native landscape and people; the attitude of abeyance; and the failure of human relationships – in a bid to undo their effects, to self-analyze and win a new sense of identity in the process. The chapter argues that these colonial accounts are not instances of self-reflexive parody, through which the protagonist ironizes his own statements and thus undercuts colonial authority – as has been claimed by some critics. Rather, these experiences are – the chapter demonstrates through close reading – rooted in Singh’s real life situations. However,

despite the honesty with which he registers his experiences and grounds his values in writing, Singh – as will be seen – does not quite succeed in achieving a new sense of identity.

It is appropriate to begin a discussion of *The Mimic Men* by calling attention to the colonialist stereotype of the mimic man, on which the novel is based and from which it derives its title. Ralph Singh, the protagonist of the novel, uses the stereotype to describe himself and his fellow-islanders as he reminisces about his life in a suburban hotel in London. Singh has recently been involved in politics in his native Isabella, a fictitious island of his birth and growing-up, in the Caribbean. After his spectacular failure in the island's politics, he has self-exiled to London where he is writing his memoir in a suburban hotel. Specifically, the remark about the mimic men occurs in the context of his memory about his school-days on Isabella in the 1930s and '40s, when Singh and his friends – distressed by the insignificance of their British island colony – used to fantasize about foreign landscapes and cultures. Notably, the *ersatz* culture appearing in their fantasies was of the West and of the white man. This is how Singh precisely reminisces about this culture:

There, in Liege in a traffic jam, on the snow slopes of the Laurentians, was the true, pure world. 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. (146)

Singh in this passage reveals a number of important themes of imperialism (and of *The Mimic Men*) in a nutshell: from the misperceived purity of white landscape and culture, through the originality and exemplary quality of Western learning, to the dependency and adulterated character (“corruption”) of the colonies, Singh’s memory is shot through with the beliefs of colonial discourse.

Implicitly, the passage also draws attention to the fact that the colonizing project is coming full circle: the colonized are resigned themselves to their subservient condition; they acknowledge their otherness vis-à-vis the colonizer as a mark of their unoriginality (“we pretended to be real”) and imitativeness (“we mimic men”). In so doing, not only do they admit to their inferior status, but the colonized also participate in their own objectification, perpetuating the cycle first initiated by the colonizer. Frantz Fanon’s insight into the dynamics of self-objectification of the colonized is painfully instructive here:

Every colonized people – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards. (*Black Skin* 18)

Singh and his school-mates have internalized the logic of the colonizer: they believe in the “Orientalized” version of their reality and see their destiny, their selves, in terms of the cultural values of the colonizer. Indeed, they seem to be pleading for graduation to the higher ideals of the colonizing nation as they evoke the “purity” and “originality” of

the culture of the “mother country.” Singh’s tone – of having been forgotten on the remote island – attests to the dependent status of the colony and is thoroughly self-pitying.

Apparent as this desire for self-definition in terms of values of the colonizer may be, some critics have taken exception to the politics of self-identity in *The Mimic Men*. Homi Bhabha, for one, sees no desperation in Singh’s pronouncements. In his widely acclaimed essay, “Of Mimicry and Man,” which I discussed earlier in Chapter 1, Bhabha talks about Singh’s identity in conjunction with mimicry, the primary focus of his piece. He argues that Singh cannot be forging an authentic identity as he mimics the values of the colonizer because mimicry is built on an ambivalent motive of the colonizer: if he desires to be imitated, on one hand, the colonizer does not want the imitation to go unchecked, on the other. In fact, he wants the mimicry to stay within limits so he does not lose his colonizer status vis-à-vis the colonized. Therefore, “colonial mimicry,” observes Bhabha, “is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other [i.e., the colonized]” that is the “*subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (86). Thus, there is no merging of identities of the colonizer and colonized in the mimicry. Difference persists and is actually desired by the colonial master.

Furthermore, this difference, according to Bhabha, may also be seen as manifesting itself in the form of the genre – the memoir – which Singh engages himself in throughout the novel to achieve a new identity. Obviously, Singh mimics the beliefs of colonial discourse as he writes his memoir: if colonial discourse relates the affect of abjection and misery of the colonized in a variety of ways, Singh’s memoir does the same. But since Singh cannot “*re-present*,” i.e., re-produce, the exact same original

through mimicking, as we saw above, he can only “repeat” the assumptions of colonial discourse in his reminiscences (88). Singh’s difference, nevertheless, lies in the fact that while he may very well be repeating the beliefs of colonial discourse, he imbues his memoir with irony and satire, according to Bhabha. That is to say, when Singh proclaims: “We pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life,” what he actually means is that their existence, learning, and preparation for life are not subjects of pretense but matters of fact. Bhabha concludes that Singh parodies his own statements: he is a “parodist of history” (88) and embodies “the effect of a flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English” (87). No matter how hard he tried, his attempt to produce a genuine colonial memoir is doomed, for it would be a mere repetition of the assumptions of Western colonial discourse. And Singh’s “desire to emerge as ‘authentic’ through mimicry – through a process of writing and repetition – is the final irony of partial representation” (88).

I am sympathetic to Bhabha’s idea of mimicry opening up a space of difference for the colonized, and I have talked about the various ways postcolonial writers utilize this space in Chapter 1. But I find Bhabha’s postulate that Singh manipulates the space through parody far-fetched; it is based on a partial reading of just one passage (“We pretended to be real . . .”) out of the entire novel – a passage that, as my explication shows, I read quite differently. In my view, there is no broad textual support for Bhabha’s postulate. To be sure, there are instances of irony and satire in the novel, but they do not add up to form a thorough-going parodic motif. Parody, further, involves amusement and comicality; it depends for its effect on imitation and travesty. Meyer H. Abrams, in his *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, notes that “a parody imitates the serious

manner and characteristic features of a particular literary work, or the distinctive style of a particular author, or the typical stylistic and other features of a serious literary genre, and applies the imitation to a lowly or comically inappropriate subject” (18). *The Mimic Men* incorporates none of the features.

The novel deals with the highly serious subject of colonialism and its devastating effects on the colonized. Singh as an ex-colonial details these effects in the novel as he, retrospectively, looks upon his life. He imitates the characteristic features of Western colonial discourse, with no ironic or satiric intent, to shape his memoir as he recounts the colonial and postcolonial experiences of his life. These include the misery and affect of his emotions during his schooldays on Isabella; colonial education and its effects on the colonized; colonial dependency and mimicry; fragmentation and alienation; the failure of human relationships; his studies and marriage in London to an English girl; the return to Isabella and the breakup of his marriage; his subsequent entry into island politics; the pettiness of colonial politics and its dependency for survival on the metropolis; and, finally, his self-exile in London. The declared purpose of the memoir is to come to terms with his experiences, retrospectively, by writing them down. Singh in the process analyzes his experiences and takes control of them by grasping their true nature. The analysis involves countering the fantasy and play-acting that have shaped his past behaviors. In so doing, he sets aright the past errors and emerges as a new person on his own terms as distinct from the terms the colonizer had set that induced those behaviors in the first place. It is his intent to thus impose order and peacefulness on his life that otherwise seems chaotic and disjointed to him. He says as much at the beginning of the memoir: “And it must also be confessed that in that dream of writing I was attracted less

by the act and the labour than by the calm and the order which the act would have implied” (32). Significantly, he reaffirms this sentiment of tranquility and order at the end of his endeavor, except that his tone then becomes palpably lighter: “So writing, for all its initial distortion, clarifies, and even becomes a process of life” (251). Writing, evidently, clears up a lot for him – he sees his life events in a different light after completing the memoir than before it. Writing helps him re-create himself through language. He essentially writes himself into a new being and sees his subsequent life, his identity, in terms of a writer (“writing . . . even becomes a process of life”).

This view of Singh’s writing as a self-investigatory tool, and the memoir as an earnest account of his colonial and postcolonial experiences (as distinct from a self-reflective parody propounded by Bhabha), has indeed been echoed by a number of critics through the years. Landeg White observes in his book in 1975 that:

The Mimic Men is something of a novel by a commentator, its plot anecdotal, peppered with generalising intrusions. It enables him to examine yet again the meaning and purpose of writing. Kripalsingh [a.k.a. Singh], whose first book this is, discovers as he proceeds that words are not necessarily dishonest, and that events which have seemed random and chaotic can be reduced to a deeply satisfying order. (156-57)

John Thieme, in 1985, reflects on the structure of the novel and the nature of narrator’s experiences, bringing the two together by noting that:

The unchronological narrative structure of *The Mimic Men* is a formal correlative of Singh’s disjointed, fragmentary life, which, prior to the moment when he settles down to write, has largely consisted of enacting a series of rather effete

roles. His memoir, written in a suburban London hotel, represents an attempt to impose order on his episodic existence. (10)

Richard Kelly concurs with White and Thieme in his assessment of Singh's writing and the memoir. He observes in 1989 that:

The act of writing his [Singh's] memoirs provides him the final solution to his sense of dislocation, for through writing he is at last able to take control of the fragments of his past and shape them into a spiritual and psychological autobiography. His failures in marriage, sex, politics, and business . . . can at last be controlled and given shape in words, paragraphs, and chapters. (90)

More recently, in 2009, Giosue Ghisalberti reads *The Mimic Men* from the vantage point of Singh's autobiography. He draws up a correlation between the non-sequential structure of the novel and Singh's consciousness, which has been driven by the randomness of his experiences, in a way that is reminiscent of Thieme's reading of the novel in 1985. Ghisalberti notes that:

Instead of a chronological history, the structural complexity of *The Mimic Men* (which often breaks sequence and shifts from one historical period to another) imitates Singh's consciousness as he moves from perception to recollection, from bitterness to reconciliation and, at the same time, corresponds to the "confession" that he had lived with a disordered state of mind, with a numb self-consciousness that suffered through the vagaries of his life. (73)

While all these critics may agree on the self-constitutive properties of language and writing, and believe in the abject nature of Singh's emotions too, they do not interrogate the fragmentary character of the protagonist's life experiences or probe into the cause of

his misery. The cause of Singh's misery never actually enters the critics' consciousness for he openly confesses his crisis in the memoir.

Yet the cause may hold a key to unlocking some of the deeper meaning of *The Mimic Men*. If on one hand, this will help us better grasp the various events of Singh's life, the cause may also, on the other, give us a clue as to the nature of the remedy Singh is proposing for himself. In other words, by examining the cause of Singh's identity crisis, we will be dealing with his life world and the process of writing in one. Further, Naipaul strategically associates Singh's crisis with certain domains of his *Lebenswelt* – especially the school and family – so that a probe into the crisis may, as will be seen, shed light on the intersection of Singh's identity and colonial education, as well as illustrate the significance of family in the formation of identity. Singh refers to his crisis time and again throughout the novel. The first reference to it comes in the guise of an encompassing “restlessness” and “disorder.” As he settles down to dig into his past, Singh declares that:

It was my hope to give expression to the restlessness, the deep disorder, which the great explorations, the overthrow in three continents of established social organizations, the unnatural bringing together of peoples who could achieve fulfilment only within the security of their own societies and the landscapes hymned by their ancestors, it was my hope to give partial expression to the restlessness which this great upheaval has brought about. The empires of our time were short-lived, but they have altered the world for ever; their passing away is their least significant feature. (32)

Obviously, Singh views his identity crisis, on the macro level, in terms of a geographical displacement his ancestors had to endure to populate the Caribbean. More closely, however, his concerns are sociological and cultural. He is worried that the forced intermingling of people – of slaves from Africa until 1834 and, when slavery ended that year, the importation of indentured laborers from the Indian subcontinent until 1917 – in the Caribbean has not resulted in the creation of any meaningful, common social institutions that would sustain these people. Imperialism as a cause or ideology has failed in the Caribbean. It has destroyed established social organizations by tearing people out of their natural habitats and has not replaced this devastation by creating new institutions. Fragmentation and alienation have been the logical consequences. The coexistence has not produced a homogenous society that would look beyond its racial or ethnic differences and share a common ideal or cause.

Identity as a signification of belonging to a cause, community, or country, however, depends on the fact that individuals share a common purpose and draw on shared norms and values – as I have argued in chapter one. Imperialism may have come and gone, as Singh rightly points out (“The empires of our time were short-lived”). Its legacies of fragmentation and alienation, however, persist in the present. It has left in its wake societies that are internally hopelessly divided, in consequence of which divisions millions of West Indians do not know who they are as a people. They suffer a crisis of belonging for they lack shared institutions and values. Their original values from Africa or India have been compromised under centuries of colonial rule so that these people are left with a “deep disorder” and “restlessness” in their lives.

Just how insidious the internal divisions are, may be seen in a remark Naipaul made in his nonfiction travel book, *The Middle Passage*, he published in 1962, a couple years before he began work on *The Mimic Men* in 1964. In the travelogue, he reflects on the composition of black Trinidadian society. Obviously, racism of color prevailed during colonial times, relegating blackness to an inferior status. The prejudice caused black people to despise themselves and emulate whiteness. According to Naipaul, the emulation resulted in assigning shades of color that verge on the absurd. The whole account sounds like this:

Until the other day African tribesmen on the screen excited derisive West Indian laughter; the darkie comic (whose values were the values of the Christian-Hellenic tradition) was more admired. In the pursuit of the Christian-Hellenic tradition, which some might see as a paraphrase for whiteness, the past has to be denied, the self despised. Black will be made white. . . . Pursuing the Christian-Hellenic tradition, the West Indian accepted his blackness as his guilt, and divided people into the white, fusty, musty, dusty, tea, coffee, cocoa, light black, dark black. (72-73)

Nevertheless, when Naipaul observes the behaviors of other ethnic groups, the situation is hardly any better: “Most have so far only reflected and flattered the prejudices of their race or colour groups. Many a writer has displayed a concern, visible perhaps only to the West Indian, to show how removed his group is from blackness, how close to whiteness” (73).

In an environment in which the internal divisions are so crass, and the only goal worthy of emulation is the value of whiteness, the state of individual psyche is severely

warped. Singh recalls his first memory of school in Isabella of the 1930s. He remembers taking an apple to the teacher, but he is puzzled by the nature of the fruit as he records the memory some thirty-odd years later because he knows that: “We had no apples on Isabella. It must have been an orange; yet my memory insists on the apple. The editing is clearly at fault, but the edited version is all I have” (90). The point Naipaul makes here is that colonial education brainwashes its pupils. Singh and his classmates have been schooled in a tradition that has emphasized the cultural superiority of the white man. Whether it is a traffic jam in Liege, the snow slopes of the Laurentians, or the daffodils of England, European landscape supersedes Isabellan beaches. The short composition pieces Singh and his classmates write in school characteristically relate to “visits to temperate farms,” away from the hot climate of Isabella (95).

On one level, learning about foreign climates and geography could be intellectually stimulating to young minds; it could spark their curiosity as to the variety of earth’s features and the distribution of world populations. But the instruction here is so designed that it privileges certain geographies over others, promotes certain narratives at the expense of others. The culture of England is emphasized over everything else, including the reality of the native country. Students discuss “the coronation of the English king,” or argue about “the weight of his crown” (90). They see the portraits of English monarchs in the hallways on a daily basis. Students’ lives are so infused with English narratives that Singh dreams of London even in sleep: “I dreamt that in this city I was being carried helplessly down a swiftly flowing river, the Thames” (91). The colonizer has mastered the technique of controlling and surveilling the lives of the colonized through the power of discourse – through English history and literature;

geography and philosophy – and what better place to instill this controlling mechanism than in school when young minds are most impressionable? The discursive power operates like a “Panopticon” that, as Michel Foucault has revealed in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), embodies the deepest structures of modern authority. Power is no longer exercised by individuals or in the name of individuals. It is disindividualized and automatized. It becomes systemic: “The Panopticon is a marvelous machine which, whatever use one may wish to put it to, produces homogenous effects of power. A real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation” (202). Thus, even though it may structurally not look like a “Panopticon,” the English discourse with its power of penetrating all aspects of life resembles that “marvelous machine,” and it brings forth its effects just as efficiently: docile individuals are produced all around; or as George Lamming would like to put it, “the perfect [colonial] lackey” is born out of the application of the power of English discourse (“Occasion for Speaking” 26).

The school, however, functions as a perfect site of social control in another sense as well. As an institution of learning that circulates only certain narratives – a certain type of knowledge – the school represents a space where power and knowledge reinforce each other. Not only do children not learn about their own culture and history, but the knowledge they do gain estranges them from native reality. The ubiquity of English discourse induces self-alienation in the young. Students learn to disavow their landscape and people, as I have discussed before in Chapter 1 as well:

Anything that touched on everyday life excited laughter when it was mentioned in a classroom: the name of a shop, the name of a street, the name of street-corner foods. The laughter denied our knowledge of these things to which after the

hours of school we were to return. We denied the landscape, and the people we could see out of open doors and windows. (95)

Singh constantly thinks of his existence on Isabella in terms of a “shipwreck” (97). He never completely identifies himself with his home country. Crucially, the self-alienation over time leads to split-consciousness in the students. On one hand, the students have their day-to-day lives anchored in island reality; on the other, the pull of English values – thanks to their colonial education – is so strong that they experience their selves as “others.” The classic case of “black skin” wearing “white masks” is produced. One might as well dub the situation a phenomenon of “daffodils-in-the-tropics” by leaning on Naipaul’s 1964 article, “Jasmine,” in which the novelist queries the relevance of English literature – of Wordsworth’s poem “Daffodils” – for students in a colonial setting who may have never seen the flower in their natural surroundings (24-31). (I have discussed this point earlier in chapter 1 as well.) English values and tastes poured wholesale into the students so distort their judgment that they cannot tell the indigenous from foreign. Singh would naturally confuse a tropical orange with a temperate apple. The hollowing-out of native reality at this point is complete. Naipaul paints the correlation between colonial education and individual identity in terms of self-fracture. The myth of England obsesses student thinking.

The potency of the myth of England as discursive power may be hard to shake off. George Lamming, as an ex-colonial, testifies to the compulsive yet corrupting nature of the myth in an essay, “The Occasion for Speaking,” collected in his *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960). He likens the nourishing power of the myth to the life-sustaining quality of

a wholesome food that all living organisms need to survive. The myth of England, Lamming observes:

[I]s akin to the nutritive function of milk which all sorts of men receive at birth. It is *myth* as the source of spiritual foods absorbed, and learnt for exercise in the future. This *myth* begins in the West Indian from the earliest stages of his education. But it is not yet turned against America. In a sense, America does not even exist. It begins with the fact of England's supremacy in taste and judgment: a fact which can only have meaning and weight by a calculated cutting down to size of all non-England. The first to be cut down is the colonial himself. (26-27)

However supportive the myth may appear at first glance, it ultimately leads to a cutting-down, to self-denigration, of the colonial. Another esteemed author and historian-journalist, Cyril Lionel R. James, also attests to the overpowering and debasing nature of the myth of England in his 1963 autobiography, *Beyond a Boundary*.

James grew up and went to school in Trinidad at the beginning of the twentieth century. (Incidentally, it is the same school, the Queen's Royal College, which Naipaul would attend thirty years later in Port of Spain, Trinidad.) The schools in the colony were, at the time, guided by the liberal-humanistic policies of the Victorian Matthew Arnold. James describes studying an impressive array of liberal arts at his school, but the curriculum included none of the subjects that would address the needs of local, colonial students:

I studied Latin with Virgil, Caesar and Horace, and wrote Latin verses. I studied Greek with Euripides and Thucydides. I did elementary and applied mathematics, French and French literature, English and English literature, English history,

ancient and modern European history. . . . I was fortunate enough to go back to the same school for some years as a teacher and so saw the system from within. As schools go, it was a very good school, though it would have been more suitable to Portsmouth than to Port of Spain. (37)

James, perceptibly, has no hard feelings about his *alma mater*. In fact, he seems to be grateful for all “the sweetness and light” he received from his Victorian education. Nevertheless, he completes a thorough analysis of the situation in the years ahead and comes to a different conclusion. He notes a little later in the autobiography that:

It was only long years after that I understood the limitation on spirit, vision and self-respect which was imposed on us by the fact that our masters, our curriculum, our code of morals, *everything* began from the basis that Britain was the source of all light and leading, and our business was to admire, wonder, imitate, learn; our criterion of success was to have succeeded in approaching that distant ideal – to attain it was, of course, impossible. Both masters and boys accepted it as in the very nature of things. The masters could not be offensive about it because they thought it was their function to do this, if they thought about it at all; and, as for me, it was the beacon that beckoned me on. (38-39)

James’s analysis tells him that when the reference point for your reality – the Caribbean reality – is based on a foreign ideal – namely, on the culture of England – you end up measuring native reality against that ideal. You look at the Caribbean with the value sets of England, or with the “spiritual eyeglasses” of Great Britain – as Ngugi would put it.

However, when that ideal becomes unattainable because the relationship between colonizer and colonized will not permit achieving it, you are doomed to imitate the ideal

in perpetuity. That impossible ideal – the myth of England or call it the English discourse – obsesses your thinking. It shapes your behavior; structures your feelings; imposes restrictions on your vision; impairs self-esteem; and limits your ability to achieve. Again, George Lamming concurs with James’s analysis in regard to the obduracy of the myth of England when he observes in his aforementioned essay that: “[w]e can change laws overnight; we may reshape images of our feeling. But this myth is most difficult to dislodge. It may be modified by circumstances, exploited or concealed by the behaviour each chooses for particular situations; but it is there, a part of the actual texture of behaviour itself” (26).

Indeed, the myth of England permeates Singh’s consciousness and shapes his behavior in every way imaginable. It affects the quality of his relationships at home and abroad; determines his outlook on the island of his birth; induces self-alienation in him; and governs the intensity of his psychological pain and restlessness. These behaviors provide for the content of the novel. They constitute the life blood of Singh’s memoir. I shall discuss some of these behaviors to illustrate the intersection between colonialism and Singh’s identity. But first I want to turn to the other main domain of Singh’s *Lebenswelt* – the family – that alongside school shapes his pathos and personality.

Singh is born to Indian parents and grows up in an exclusively Indian environment on Isabella. His father is a school teacher of modest means, while his mother belongs to a family of a select group of people referred to as “Isabella millionaires” (83). His maternal grandfather is reported to have made his fortune in the beverage industry by being the local bottler of Coca-Cola; besides, he owns a plant – Bella Bella Bottling Works – that produces other local drinks for island-wide

consumption. As such, he is a man of considerable wealth, influence, and connections. However, the relationship between this man and Singh's father is not amicable. Singh's father constantly disparages his in-laws and looks down upon his wife as the daughter of a mother, who just a few years ago used to sell her wares from door to door: "I remember the time when your [Singh's] mother's mother used to sell milk to *my* mother. Selling and carrying the cow. Milking the cow out . . . and selling it on the spot, just like that, in the road" (88). The relationship is verily fraught between Singh's father and his in-laws at the best of times and openly hostile at times of crisis – as when he, Singh's father, demonstratively, breaks "ninety–six" bottles of Coca-Cola in a rage at a soft-drink parlor (104): a rage that is triggered by a misstep taken by his son, Singh, who has given away a cricket bat to his mother's brother, Cecil. The cricket bat has, originally, been bought for Singh by his father as a Christmas present. The incident shows just how much malice exists in Singh's father's mind toward his in-laws; the man simply cannot stomach the business success and reputation of his wife's family.

The effect of the fraught relationship between Singh's father and his in-laws is not lost on the young Singh, however. Impressionable as he is at this juncture of his life when he is still in elementary school, Singh acutely perceives and responds to the dynamics in the family: "My father was a schoolteacher and poor. I never saw his family and naturally suspected the worst . . . as a boy I did what I could to suppress the connexion. I preferred to lay claim to my mother's family" (83). The alliance thus forged gives Singh a measure of security. However, Singh's immediate reference person in his mother's family is his uncle, Cecil, whom Singh describes as an extremely unreliable and condescending person: "It gave me great pleasure at school to have Cecil,

my mother's brother, roughly my own age, say that we were related. Cecil was a tyrant; he offered and withdrew his patronage whimsically" (83). Thus, Singh's insecurity in terms of his domestic relationships remains as grave as ever in the face of an unreliable alliance with his mother's family. The circumstance induces in him ambivalence toward human relationships in general and destabilizes his identity: "I must explain. I cherished my mother's family and their Bella Bella Bottling Works. But in my secret life I was the son of my father, and a Singh" (97). The destabilization of personal identity prompts Singh to fantasize about his supposed Asian "Aryan" origins, in which he sees himself as shipwrecked on a remote island in the Caribbean: "I was Singh. And I would dream that all over the Central Asian plains the horsemen looked for their leader. Then a wise man came to them and said, 'You are looking in the wrong place. The true leader of you lies far away, shipwrecked on an island the like of which you cannot visualize'" (98). Singh admits that "[i]t was at these moments that I found the island most unbearable" (98).

Singh's insecurity in domestic relationships that causes so much psychological pain is further aggravated by the abusive treatment his father metes out to his mother. I have already pointed out the invective the father hurls down on Singh's mother in terms of her low social status at the time he married her, but he also insults her parents. These disparagements contribute to shaping Singh's sensibility toward women. An incident in elementary school is particularly instructive in this regard. Students are doing grammatical gender in the language arts class. The teacher asks the masculine and the students provide the feminine. When his turn comes up, Singh is asked to provide the feminine for "husband" (90). As he prepares to give an answer, he draws on his experience at home. He visualizes two individuals – his father and mother – that have

been living together in a marriage bond for some time but have nothing in common. Recognizing the fact, he hesitates to give an answer outright loud: “I got out of my desk and walked down the aisle to Mr. Shepherd’s table. . . . He bent down with concern and I whispered into his ear: ‘Wife’” (90).

The point of the muted response is driven home when Singh the memoirist, who records the incident as an adult at a later point in time, breaks into the narrative and remarks that: “More than thirty years later, the man agrees with the child: it is a terrible word” (90). Singh has not been able to overcome the effects of his childhood socialization even after thirty years have elapsed. The family dynamics of those early years have permanently shaped his sensibility toward women. He still considers “wife” a terrible word. Naipaul underscores the importance of family, alongside school, for self-identity by putting these domains at the center of the novel. Structurally, the colonial education and family relations claim the middle portion – Part Two – of a three-part novel. The structure implies the central importance of family and school for shaping and explaining Singh’s pathos and personality.

Affected as he is by the corrupting influence of colonial education, Singh tries to redefine himself by changing his exotic-sounding Indian name, Ranjit Kripalsingh, to an Anglo-Saxon one while he is still in school at Isabella. The stimulus comes from his white classmate, Deschampsneufs, who is of French extraction and belongs to an old, colonial, slaveholding family that has made Isabella their home. In imitation to Deschampsneufs’ several other names apart from his last one, Singh breaks his own last name, Kripalsingh, in two, and adds another first name, Ralph, to his existing given name of Ranjit: Thus, “[I] signed myself R. R. K. Singh” (93). The mimicry-stricken Ralph

Ranjit Kripal Singh purports to appropriate a bit of European outlook, redefine himself, and compete with his white classmate in this long-winded way. However, the episode takes on a satiric ring for its circuitousness and insinuates the Bhabhaian parody I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. Critic Dexu Zhang, indeed, sees a parody in the incident and comments in his 2016 essay, “Representational Ethics: *The Mimic Men* and the Mimic Men,” that:

Singh’s European way of self-definition . . . is perhaps best captured by the act of anglicizing his name from the Indian Ranjit Kripalsingh to the English R. R. K. Singh. Just as his renaming connotes a difference between being English and being anglicized, his indoctrinated self-definition also radiates the presence of differential cultural meaning beyond racist stereotypes. Following Bhabha’s logic, it can be said that Singh’s flawed mimicry, or mimicry of whatever kind, is necessarily pregnant with an enabling desire that would ultimately work against the authority of colonial discourse. (31)

While Zhang thus tries to open up a space for difference for Singh by leaning on Bhabha, the renaming itself goes nowhere; it sharply ends here, and Singh is glad when the teacher dismisses the incident out of hand in view of the mysterious explanations he, Singh, has given him for the renaming. Nevertheless, the real import of the incident is left to the adult memoirist to underscore, who in his remark circles back to the solemnity of the incident and adds that: “I have given a flippant account of this episode. Flippancy comes easily when we write of past pain; it disguises and mocks that pain” (94). The memoirist establishes the young Singh’s pain beyond doubt.

Singh is not the only person in class who is pained by his non-European name and ancestry and has to resort to desperate measures for self-definition. Hok is another student who goes to extraordinary lengths to preserve his self-worth. He is of mixed Chinese, African, and Syrian descent, and like Singh, he is adversely affected by his colonial education. The myth of England has inculcated self-denigration in him, stifled his spiritual growth, and left him with a fractured self. He tries to nurture his Chinese identity by secretly reading books about China in the school library. Hok has also internalized the racism of color and is embarrassed to acknowledge his mother, who is black, in front of the class. Nevertheless, when the teacher insists that he go and greet his mother upon learning the relationship between the two, Hok starts crying. The memoirist gives the reason for the crying and puts the whole incident in perspective:

It was for [the] betrayal into ordinariness that I knew he was crying. . . . It wasn't only that the mother was black and of the people, though that was a point; it was that he had been expelled from that private hemisphere of fantasy where lay his true life. The last book he had been reading was *The Heroes*. What a difference between the mother of Perseus and that mother! What a difference between the white, blue and dark green landscapes he had so recently known and that street! Between the street and the Chinese section of the Carnegie Library . . . I felt on that street, shady, with gardens, and really pretty as I now recall it, though then to me wholly drab, that Hok had dreams like mine . . . and lived in imagination far from us, far from the island on which he, like my father, like myself, had been shipwrecked. (97)

The point Naipaul makes here is that the students are hopelessly estranged from native reality. The colonial education has kept them from learning about their natural habitat; in fact, metropolitan curriculum has fed fantasies of foreign landscapes and induced self-fragmentation in the young. The students disavow their landscape and people. They live in a make-believe world (“private hemisphere”) of their fantasies, like the one Hok has fabricated through his readings. The disconnectedness between students and island is so grave that they look upon their country as a place of personal ruin – of “shipwreck.”

Indeed, the shipwreck provides the governing metaphor for the novel. Singh sees his life in a matter-of-fact way in terms of a shipwreck: “Shipwreck: I have used the word before. With my island background, it was the word that always came to me” (27).

When he thinks of his father’s early career in missionary circles that begins and ends abruptly, shipwreck is the word that comes to Singh’s mind: “I used to get the feeling that my father had in some storybook way been *shipwrecked* on the island and that over the years the hope of rescue had altogether faded” (88 emphasis added). Even when he considers other Isabellans, such as his schoolmate Hok, Singh comprehends their lot in terms of people that have been doomed on the island: “I felt . . . that Hok had dreams like mine . . . and lived in imagination far from us, far from the island on which he, like my father, like myself, had been shipwrecked” (97).

Meanwhile, if Hok dreams about China, Singh’s fantasies are about his Rajput Indian past. He has delved deep into the history of the Asiatic and Persian Aryans of Northern India. In fact, he visualizes himself as the leader of these ancient Indian nomads, who roamed the Northern Indian plains and beyond in Central Asia:

I lived a secret life in a world of endless plains, tall bare mountains, white with snow at their peaks, among nomads on horseback, daily pitching my tent beside cold green mountain torrents that raged over grey rock, waking in the mornings to mist and rain and dangerous weather. I was a Singh. And I would dream that all over the Central Asian plains the horsemen looked for their leader. (98)

If these fantasies induce pain and frustration in Singh because they ultimately leave him “shipwrecked” on Isabella, they also engender in him an attitude of abeyance. He deliberately keeps himself from engaging social reality which alone may confer a sense of belonging: “I had already begun . . . to simplify my relationships” and “I was consciously holding myself back for the reality which lay elsewhere” (118).

Eden is yet another classmate who, like Hok and Singh, lives in a cocoon of his own fantastical making. He is of African descent and has internalized white racism to the core: he hates black people and wishes them all dead. Through his readings, he has acquired a strange knowledge of rapes in the Japanese army and wants to join it for that reason. However, on widespread disapproval from his peers, he sublimates his wish “to rape foreign women into a wish to travel” (151). Yet he is still fixated on traveling in Asia, and “[h]is deepest wish was for the Negro race to be abolished; his intermediate dream was of a remote land where he, the solitary Negro among an alien pretty people, ruled as a sort of sexual king” (151).

While these students live in their “private hemispheres” divorced from island reality, the only people that seem to have a stake in the island appear to be the Deschampsneufs’. Upon learning that he has been accepted into a school in London, Singh’s classmate Deschampsneufs invites him to his home. As the two friends interact

with Deschampsneufs' father, the latter falls into delivering a speech about the intimacy of bond between humans and the landscape they are born in. His speech comes in particularly befitting because it appears in a novel that abounds in social isolation and rejection of one's heritage: "Oh, yes," says the father:

"[W]e all want to get away and so on. But where you are born is a funny thing. . . . You know, you are born in a place and you grow up there. You get to know the trees and the plants. You will never know any other trees and plants like that. . . . You go away. You ask, 'What is that tree?' Somebody will tell you, 'An elm.' You see another tree. Somebody will tell you, 'That is an oak.' Good; you know them. But it isn't the same. Here you wait for the poui to flower one week in the year and you don't even know you are waiting. All right, you go away. But you will come back. Where you born, man, you born. And this island is a paradise, you will discover." (171-72)

As heartwarming as the speech may seem though, it turns out to be an empty exercise in sentimentality, for the senior Deschampsneufs betrays no shift in character. He refuses to shake Singh's hand upon leave-taking: "Did old Deschampsneufs genuinely not see when I attempted to shake hands? I attempted twice, and when he did give me his hand it was only two fingers" (175). As one of the white makers of the island and the holders of slaves, the senior Deschampsneufs retains his colonialist, racist ideology. The insult he hurls at Singh takes on a particularly hideous aspect because it comes on the heels of an edifying speech – reminding the reader that, in spite of their public posturing, the Deschampsneufs' are a hypocritical family.

Furthermore, the Deschampsneufs' are no different than any other racial or ethnic group on the island in terms of their social isolation. The senior Deschampsneufs points to his French derivation as a matter of racial superiority ("The Niger is a tributary of that Seine" 179). He is known among other Creole whites as a man who irrationally clings to historical times, when a number of French colonists from the French Caribbean settled the island, although it was under Spanish rule at that time. Thus the Deschampsneufs', like everybody else, live in a "private hemisphere" – an ethno-racist bubble of their own. They too are part of the total pattern of fragmentation and alienation of Isabellan society.

Given the widespread alienation and fragmentation, critics have been keen on studying the consequences of these phenomena for individual freedom and identity in *The Mimic Men*. Linda Anderson examines just these consequences in the works of Naipaul and Joseph Conrad in her 1978 article, "Ideas of Identity and Freedom in V. S. Naipaul and Joseph Conrad." According to Anderson, both writers share an outsider status in the English literary tradition. They do not write from within the stability of an accepted relationship with their social contexts. Therefore, their writings tend to be not about the tableaux of highly organized societies, but explore "the relationship between the individual and his society" (510). It is worth pointing out that Anderson relies for her insight into the two novelists on Naipaul's own assessment of Conrad.

A few years before the publication of Anderson's article, Naipaul had, in 1974, written an essay, "Conrad's Darkness," for *The New York Review of Books*. In the essay, which has now been collected in his 1980 *The Return of Eva Peron*, Naipaul acknowledged his intellectual kinship with the Edwardian novelist, noting that Conrad is a writer who "sixty years before . . . had been everywhere before me" (*The Return* 208).

Conrad offers Naipaul a vision of “the world’s half-made societies” (208), as in *Nostromo*; or a view of individuals as “prisoners of their cultures” (202), as in *Karain*, who is circumscribed by his world of phantoms, in “*Karain*.” Therefore, to understand Conrad, writes Naipaul: “[I]t was necessary to begin to match his experience. It was also necessary to lose one’s preoccupations of what the novel should do and, above all, to rid oneself of the subtle corruptions of the novel or comedy of manners” (208). That is how Naipaul came to focus on the interrelation of individual and society and avoid writing about highly organized societies because he had none to write about.

Since the interrelation between individual and society is the main focus of attention in the two novelists, Anderson observes that:

The characters in Conrad’s and Naipaul’s novels are usually depicted as solitary subjectivities in the sense that they are conscious of their separation from the surroundings in which they find themselves placed. Far from being able to accommodate themselves to their societies they experience these as the hostile environments to which their authentic identity is perpetually opposed. The discovery of a social role does not coincide, therefore, with a discovery of self, rather it implies the adoption and maintenance of a mask. (510)

When Singh arrives in London, shortly after World War II, to join the school he has been admitted to, he perfectly embodies a “solitary subjectivity.” He is painfully aware of his discreteness from the environment he finds himself in. If he had embraced snow and London as his favorites in *Isabella*, this is how he perceives them now when he is actually present in the city:

The flakes didn't only float; they also spun. They touched the glass and turned to a film of melting ice. Below the livid grey sky roofs were white and shining black in patches. The bombsite was wholly white; every shrub, every discarded bottle, box and tin was defined. I had seen. *Yet what was I to do with so complete a beauty?* And looking out from that room to the thin lines of brown smoke rising from ugly chimneypots . . . I felt all the magic of the city go away and had an intimation of the forlornness of the city and the people who lived in it. (Emphasis added 6-7)

The snow may still be a benign element, but it no longer claims the protagonist's full attention. Rather, Singh is more concerned about his solitariness, which emerges as the key sentiment in the passage, taking the lead and rendering the beauty of snow, once Singh's element, irrelevant ("Yet what was I to do with so complete a beauty?"). Nor does the beauty of snow disperse Singh's isolation; rather, it aggravates his solitariness by accentuating inanimate objects – discarded bottles, boxes, tins and the like – in his consciousness. The solitariness predicates Singh's perception of London and its inhabitants as being lost ("forlorn").

Further, Singh's solitariness is so complete that he perceives London to be a mass of fragmented households, a "conglomeration of private cells" (18). Fragmented individuals issue forth from their cells in the morning to go to work and return to their respective cells at the end of the day. There is no human connection among them, and Singh sees no organizing principle – no "god of the city" – above and beyond this fragmented state of affairs, as his Hindu instinct would authorize him to look out for:

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. (18-19)

In this state of isolation, Singh learns the hard way the importance of a social organization – the significance of social norms and values, however imperfect they may be – for providing cohesion and certitude to human life. He recalls with indignation that in:

Coming to London, the great city, seeking order, seeking the flowering, the extension of myself that ought to have come in a city of such miraculous light, I had tried to hasten a process which had seemed elusive. I had tried to give myself a personality. . . . But now I no longer knew what I was; ambition became confused, then faded; and I found myself longing for the certainties of my life on the island of Isabella, certainties which I had once dismissed as shipwreck. (26-27)

Singh further discovers to his chagrin that in the present state of isolation, many a mimic man that came to London to forge a new identity, was reduced to merely convey an attitude, assume a fixed posture, or perform a certain role. No comprehensive personality integrating self's whole experience was possible because there was no affinity between self and its normative context. Each person was diminished in stature:

Those of us who came to it [London] lost some of our solidity; we were trapped into fixed, flat postures. And, in this growing dissociation between ourselves and

the city in which we walked, scores of separate meetings, not linked even by ourselves, who became nothing more than perceivers: everyone reduced, reciprocally, to a succession of such meetings, so that first experience and then the personality divided bewilderingly into compartments. Each person concealed his own darkness. (27)

As inimical as the present state of affairs may be to preserving or construing a whole identity, Singh refuses to be pushed to the edge of despair. In spite of his own analysis of the situation, he assumes a series of roles to try to discover his true self. Each role, however, pushes him further away from his authentic self. Each role widens the chasm between self and the social context in which the self is trying to perform, bringing forth his crisis of identity the more pronouncedly.

Martin R. Dean, a Swiss critic, has taken a closer look at Singh's performing various roles during his stay in London, and beyond. He views Singh's role-playing as issuing forth from his inability to orient himself to his originary culture in the long run. The play-acting, Dean argues, is tantamount to Singh's alienation from his traditional values:

In London verbringt Singh einige Jahre in wechselnden Rollen. Seine tiefe Unsicherheit spiegelt sich in seinem Dandytum; in der Freizeit verfuehrt er wahllos Norwegerinnen, Schwedinnen und Schweizerinnen. Fluechtige Affaeren ohne Bindung und Folgen, die nur eines zum Ziel haben: den von ihm laengst gewuenschten Zusammenbruch herbeizufuehren. Singhs Krankheit is die Kaelte des Herzens. Diese Entfremdung, unter der sein Leben steht, reproduziert ihn als

dauernde Maskerade und VerführungscLOWN, Ausdruck auch dies einer letztlich nie geglueckten Sozialisation an traditionelle Werte. (35)

Singh spends a few years in London playing different roles. His deep uncertainty is reflected in his dandyism; during his leisure, he seduces indiscriminately girls from Norway, Sweden and Switzerland. These affairs carry no commitment and should have no consequence for him, except that they ought to bring about the crash he has been looking forward to for a long time. Singh's affliction is the frozenness of his heart. The alienation that marks his life also renders him a perpetual mask and a seducer, and is, in the final analysis, a consequence of his failed socialization in the values of his tradition.

Dean is spot on with his observation about the cause of Singh's alienation and his role-playing, which may eventually instigate his crisis of identity. But I wanted to add to Dean's observation what I have argued in Chapter 1 that, not only do norms and values provide cohesion and direction in life, they also govern social roles. By taking on these roles, an individual asserts itself and affirms its role identity. Singh's roles encompass his dandyism; the casual relationships with various women, including prostitutes, in London; his marriage to an English woman Sandra and their return to the island; the couple's merrymaking on Isabella and the breakup of their marriage; Singh's subsequent entry into island politics and its spectacular failure; and, finally, his self-exile in London where he writes his memoir.

Characteristically, all these roles, by Singh's own account, are marked by fraudulence. They cannot lead to a discovery of self because they – with Anderson – imply the adoption of masks. Singh befriends continental girls from Norway, Sweden

and Switzerland not because he intends to build a genuine relationship with them; his purpose rather is to seek superficial pleasures and avoid a good faith participation in the interhuman bond: “[T]he 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 farmhouses or their flats in Nassjo . . . or their houses set atop the rocky fiords of geography books” (25). His relationship with Lieni, the Maltese housekeeper at the boarding-house where he stays as a student, is another such example of play-acting coupled with non-commitment. She seems to mentor him, but then he is attracted to her for being a substitute for her ex-lover, who has been an Indian army officer in Italy during the War: “This was how she explained her interest in me. It was disquieting, yet at the same time oddly flattering, to be cherished as a substitute” (21). Above all, he cultivates the relationship because “it imposed no obligation” (21).

It is noteworthy that these relationships should trigger a crisis as the frivolities continue on. Singh the memoirist notes in hindsight that the inability to seriously engage a relationship was, indeed, “a failure, a deficiency” (25). Singh’s aversion to intimacy, in particular, comes across as a type of pathology. Although he admits that he is fond of women, he does not want to be intimate with them: “Intimacy: the word holds the horror”; or “Intimacy: it was violation and self-violation” (25). While he may very well be capable of sexual intercourse, he evinces a strong disinclination for the act: “I was capable of the act required, but frequently it was in the way that I was capable of getting drunk or eating two dinners” (25). Singh’s malady – I make common cause with Dean – is “the frozenness of his heart.” One wonders if the frozenness, like his alienation, is associated with the insecurity emanating from his improper socialization during

childhood when he was torn between his father's house and the family of his maternal grandfather, neither of which offered him a safe space to grow up. Apropos the insecurity, it is worth mentioning that the only person he fully trusts, and who offers him complete security, is his Aunt Sally, his mother's younger sister, with whom he develops an incestuous relationship:

We simply came together; and nothing again was to equal that sudden understanding, that shared feeling of self-violation, which was for me security and purity. I could not conceive of myself with a girl or 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.

(155)

Even his marriage to Sandra that he agrees to in hopes of achieving a measure of security does not come close to offer him the kind of security his relationship does with Aunt Sally. In fact, the marriage to Sandra turns out to be little more than an acknowledgement of their mutual insecurities and alienation, out of which the two try to fashion a common future: if Singh feels estranged from his community and country, “[Sandra] had no community, no group, and had rejected her family” (44). Insecurity and alienation, however, furnish disastrous ingredients for bringing about a unity in marriage, which Singh looks upon as another role he must play in London. Besides, he sees, “its [the marriage's] emotions as, profoundly, fraudulent” (251). Although the couple returns to the island and tries to lose themselves in the social whirl around them, the marriage does not last very long.

If Singh's marriage fails because it lacks commitment and sincerity, his last role as a politician, into which he slips just as his marriage dissolves, equally implies the adoption of a mask. For one, Singh never forges a meaningful link with the island of his birth; it remains, as ever, a place of shipwreck – a site of personal ruin. Even at this late stage when he is representing a political constituency, he sees himself as separate from Isabella. He opines that:

A man . . . fights only when he hopes, when he has a vision of order, when he feels strongly there is some connexion between the earth on which he walks and himself. But there was my vision of a disorder which it was beyond any one man to put right. There was my sense of wrongness, beginning with the stillness of that morning of return [from England] when I looked out on the slave island and tried to pretend it was mine. There was my sense of intrusion which deepened as I felt my power [in politics] to be more and more a matter of words. (207)

Thus, however much he may boast about devising policies for the good of the island with his political partner and a former schoolmate, Mr. Browne, a fundamental insincerity marks Singh's rhetoric. Recording his dishonesty in oratory, he remarks that "those speeches, whose brilliance so many commented on and travelled distances to hear, had as their basis contempt, the knowledge that it didn't matter what was said" (198). Further, Singh and Browne are both well aware of the political and economic precariousness of a colony – any colony – that has recently gained independence, but they keep on making false promises to the public. Singh notes that:

We had spoken, for instance, of the need to get rid of the English expatriates who virtually monopolized the administrative section of our civil service. . . . Each

expatriate cost us twice as much as a local man. One degree less of innocence would have shown us how incapable we were of doing without expatriates: they were so numerous that to pay them all compensation would have wrecked our finances for at least two years, and we were in no position to break agreements. Besides, not a few of the higher technical men, in forestry and agriculture, were subsidized by London, under a generous scheme for colonial aid. (209)

Thus, though Singh and Browne may now genuinely be between a rock and a hard place – as the passage reveals – their personal conduct during their tenure has been far from unimpeachable; and when they fail to deliver on their promises and the economic situation worsens, threatening further to devolve into race riots, the two come to London for negotiations with a delegation.

Considering the multiple tasks colonial politicians have to juggle, apart from governing a newly independent nation, Marjorie Thorpe sympathizes with the role Singh is called upon to play, noting that:

Naipaul's conception of the colonial politician is by no means a flattering one. Yet here, if nowhere else, one feels the author's sense of compassion for would-be revolutionaries condemned by their country's economic insufficiency to expand the energies performing the duties of just so many Public Relations Officers, and striving vainly to hide their futility from their followers by a pathetically vulgar parade of the trappings of power. (58)

Thorpe, it seems to me, misses out on Naipaul's irony when she views Singh as a "would-be revolutionary." Nothing could be further from the truth. Singh is not a "would-be revolutionary." His entry into politics has been more a matter of coincidence

than the outcome of deliberate decision-making. Even after he has been elected to office, he continues to see himself as distinct from the island. His politicking is part of his play-acting and constitutes what John Thieme labels as one of “rather effete roles” he enacts before he settles down to write his memoir (10). Yet Thorpe does hit the mark when she later observes that “in the face of such total and inexorable defeat [as Singh experiences], action becomes increasingly impossible; and, in the end, there remains only the desire to escape, to escape from all attachments, all responsibilities, into the final emptiness” (59).

However, the impetus for escape into “the final emptiness” of London, which he views little more than a “conglomeration of private cells” (*The Mimic Men* 18), does not primarily proceed from Singh’s political failure. Given his play-acting and fraudulence, the political fiasco was more or less a foregone outcome. What matters more in his decision to escape, I think, is a fuller understanding of the nature of his “restlessness” that I mentioned at the outset of the chapter and that comes into prominence during these stressful hours of his political career. Singh knows that his restlessness stems from the geographical displacement of his ancestors. He also knows that the geographical uprooting may have cultural and sociological implications. This knowledge notwithstanding, he does not believe that a return to the land of origins is in the cards anymore. Naipaul does not deal with the question of return *per se* in *The Mimic Men*, but three years before the publication of the novel, he reflects on the finality of the journey his grandfather had made some eighty to ninety years before in coming to Trinidad. In his 1964 travelogue of India, *An Area of Darkness*, he notes that:

To me as a child the India that had produced so many of the persons and things around me was featureless, and I thought of the time when the transference was

made as a period of darkness [. . .] And even now, though time has widened, though space has contracted and I have travelled lucidly over that area which was to me the area of darkness, something of darkness remains, in those attitudes, those ways of thinking and seeing, which are no longer mine. (30)

Singh thus perceives the lasting damage the cultural alienation has inflicted on his identity. Despite the insight, he tries one more time to understand the true nature of his condition as he travels from London back to Isabella after the negotiations. He assumes, during a stopover in Spain, that his “restlessness” might be part of his youth and would vanish as soon as he had slept with a woman.

However, his sexual visit with a prostitute in Spain instructs him that he is misguided in his assumption because:

It [the sexual intercourse] was a moment which, when release without fruition came and perception widened again, defined itself as an extended moment of horror. It is a moment that has remained with me. After three years I can call it back at will: that moment of timelessness, horror, solace. . . . Through poor, hideous flesh to have learned about flesh; through flesh to have gone beyond flesh. (237)

Singh learns about the frailties of human flesh through the sexual act, but the act also helps him realize a more fundamental truth about his condition. Once the act is complete and the perception broadens, he discovers that he is just as worried and uneasy as ever. His restlessness, therefore, cannot be part of his youth, as he had assumed; nor is it purely geographical or cultural. It is psychological – it permeates his consciousness, extends over his entire being, and moves with him wherever he goes. It takes on the character of

“an extended moment of horror.” With this discovery – which is his inexorable defeat, but also a possibility (“solace”) – he continues on to Isabella, only to return to London in due time after a safe passage has been granted him by the new politicians. It is ironic, though, that Singh should learn about a fundamental truth about his existence through the very act he has shown a disinclination for and that he regards as “violation and self-violation” (25).

At any rate, when Singh finally arrives in London, his work is cut out for him. In view of his perpetual restlessness that he variously equates with “disorder” (32), “despair” (242), “shipwreck” (118) and the like, he wants to gain an upper hand of the condition. Put differently, he wants to undo the restlessness and impose order on his life events. To do so, he submits to writing in hopes of collecting into an intelligible whole what he considers a bevy of random and haphazard experiences of his life and winning, in the process, a new sense of identity as a writer. Essentially, Singh assumes yet another role, of a writer, to accomplish his goal, except that his role identification this time around is not fraudulent, though he may miss fulfilling other criteria of identity formation, as will be seen. He painstakingly searches and analyzes select experiences and incidents out of his memories. He attests to the strict discipline, “the anaesthetizing order,” of a writer’s life who, despite the rigors of writing, hangs on to his hope of producing something worthwhile in the long run: “After eighteen months of the anaesthetizing order of life in this hotel, despair and emptiness had burnt themselves out. And it was with a delicious sense of anxiety and of being employed again that I got the hotel to give me a writing-table, set it beside the window, and composed myself to work” (242).

Notwithstanding his complete dedication, it takes Singh fourteen more months – another tribute to his newly assumed role of a writer – before his work is complete. At the completion of the memoir, he testifies to the peace-dispensing and self-investigatory powers of writing by resorting to his first encounter with snow in London. This encounter, as I discussed earlier in the chapter, had turned out to be disturbing for Singh (“Below the livid grey sky roofs were white and shining black in patches. The bombsite was wholly white. . . . Yet what was I to do with so complete a beauty?” 6-7). But now after he re-imagines the incident, he affirms that “[b]y this re-creation the event became historical and manageable; it was given its place; it will no longer disturb me” (243). He turns this technique of searching the hidden memories to his preferred method of operation, his *modus operandi*, as a writer. He declares that “this became my aim: from the central fact of this setting, my presence in this city [of London] which I have known as student, politician and now as refugee-immigrant, to impose order on my own history” (243).

Yet however sincere his dedication may be to the role of a writer, Singh does not interact with his social environment as he researches his past. Wherever he goes, he reduces the interhuman communication to one-sided observation – as when he visits the bar, which he often does, in the hotel where he lives: “I frequently go down to the bar before dinner to have a drink and watch television. . . . I have my own table in the dining-room. It is behind a square pillar, clad with varnished pine. I like being behind the pillar. It is as wide as my table and gives me privacy of a sort” (245). The social interaction, however, is a key requisite for the construction of identity I maintain in Chapter 1. Singh replaces the need for social interaction with setting up an alternative

“order” of his own: he intercommunicates with his memories. He affirms, “[H]ere is order of a sort. . . . In a city already simplified to individual cells this order is further simplification. It is rooted in nothing; it links to nothing” (36). That is to say, his order of intercommunication – by its very nature – is imaginative; it is not entrenched in any real social norms and values: it anchors in nothing and links to nothing. Yet Singh, seemingly, derives a measure of satisfaction from the order; he professes his future life in terms of a writer: “It never occurred to me that the writing of this book *might* have become an end in itself, that the recording of a life *might* become an extension of that life” (244 emphasis added). The claim, nonetheless, is more of a dream than reality, and Singh appropriately couches it in conditionality. He does not squarely achieve the identity of a writer-in-exile because he does not fulfill the criteria of social interaction of identity formation.

The spurious nature of his claim is further reflected in the concluding words of the novel when Singh engages in doublespeak about his identity. He admits that he has renounced his Indian heritage by writing his memoir because the process has enabled him to see through the debasing influence of his fantasizing: “I no longer yearn for ideal landscapes and no longer wish to know the god of the city [as he once did during his early youth]. This does not strike me as loss” (250). Yet as he acknowledges this fact, he also sees his life in terms of the fourfold division of existence practiced by ancient Hindus: “It gives me joy to find that . . . I have also fulfilled the fourfold division of life prescribed by our Aryan ancestors. I have been student, householder and man of affairs, recluse” (250-51). Singh is confused as to the true nature of his identity. He oscillates between his Indian roots, on one hand, and allegiance to the purported values of a writer-

in-exile, on the other – values that are wholly imaginative and are “rooted in nothing” and “link to nothing” (36). There is no clear solution to his problem of identity. He has to live with this ambiguity of self.

Incidentally, many a Caribbean writer in the modern era belongs in the category, though their allegiance to the culture of origins may vary. These writers include, among others, Wilson Harris from Guyana, Sam Selvon from Trinidad, George Lamming from Barbados, Andrew Salkey from Jamaica, Vidiadhar S. Naipaul from Trinidad, and Neil Bissoondath from Trinidad as well.

CHAPTER VI

DIFFERENCE, IDENTITY, AND MULTICULTURALISM: THE CASE OF *OMEROS*

(1990)

This chapter discusses the epic poem, *Omeros* (1990), by Derek Walcott as he uses the value of difference for a base to construe a multicultural self. Intermingling in the poem occurs across various axes of difference – social, racial, economic, and geographical. However, the idea of difference as a discrete value goes back to the work of culture critic Stuart Hall in cultural studies. I begin by covering the discussions leading up to, and including, the point where Hall broaches the subject of difference as a discrete value in 1987 in his work and subsequently develops it. The diasporic, postcolonial self in Hall emerges as a social entity that comes into being, and is sustained by, difference. This theoretical construct, which I lay out in detail, is at the root of my analysis. I argue that *Omeros* literalizes the idea of a multicultural self as conceived by Hall. I further complicate this notion of a multicultural self by intertwining it with ideas borrowed from Fanon and Walcott.

To begin with: when Homi Bhabha characterized the dynamics of approximating the colonizer's identity in 1984 in terms of "mimicry" – a phenomenon that enabled the colonized to mirror back neither "difference" nor "identity" of the colonial master but

manifested, instead, a “partial” presence of the colonizer (“Of Mimicry and Man” 86), he may well have been accommodating the growing call of postcolonial critics, who since the 1950s had been advocating for an equitable representation of the colonized. In Bhabha’s treatment of the mimicry, difference emerges as an enduring feature of the relationship between colonizer and colonized. In spite of conformity and compliance with the colonizer’s desire for imitation, the colonized manage to retain their subjectivity, because colonial mimicry turns on an ambivalent motive of the colonizer: if he wishes the colonized to imitate him, the colonizer also wants to see the colonized as a separate entity in the end. That is to say, there is no merging of identities of the colonizer and colonized. Colonial mimicry takes on the form of the colonizer’s desire for “a reformed, recognizable Other,” who – as Bhabha puts it – is “*a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (“Of Mimicry and Man” 86). Difference therefore persists, suggesting a separate and distinct existence of the colonized; it adumbrates, as will be seen, the creation of a people that may exist in its own right and on its own terms.

Postcolonial critics, in fact, had always insisted on an autonomous existence of the colonized; they had, on that account, also pleaded for treating the colonized on their own terms. Frantz Fanon in the 1950s and ‘60s analyzed the independent, albeit warped, psyche of the colonized. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), he suggested ways to heal the bruised psyche that would lead to the erection of a national culture from the ground up: a national culture that was rooted in indigenous values as distinct from the values of the colonizer. “We must not therefore,” warns Fanon:

[B]e content with delving into the past of a people in order to find coherent elements which will counteract colonialism’s attempts to falsify and harm. . . . A

national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people's true nature. It is not made up of the inert dregs of gratuitous actions, that is to say actions which are less and less attached to the ever-present reality of the people. A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence. (233)

The Trinidadian novelist, Samuel Selvon, contributed to the sphere of thought by publishing in 1956 his novel, *The Lonely Londoners*, entirely in dialect – acknowledging the full humanity of fellow West Indians and granting their speech a parity and equity with Standard English. Other West Indians did their part in creating the sense of a new people and elevating its status, if ever so slightly. Caribbean historian Cyril Lionel R. James, for instance, lauded the achievements of the Haitian Revolution in *The Black Jacobins* (1938). In the “Appendix” he attached to the book twenty-five years later, in 1962, James referred to the shared history and aspirations of West Indians and designated their revolutionary potential as a search for national identity. He observed that “West Indians first became aware of themselves as a people in the Haitian Revolution. Whatever its ultimate fate, the [more recent] Cuban Revolution marks the ultimate stage of a Caribbean quest for national identity” (391). What emerges through these efforts in the sphere of thought is the idea of a people that exists – in fact, has always existed – in its own right and on its own terms.

Elsewhere the colonized in Africa were conducting their own conversations that dwelt on difference and emphasized the unique character of Africans. The Nigerian critic and novelist, Chinua Achebe, underscored the need for local concern in literature from

Africa. In the essay entitled “Colonialist Criticism,” read first as a paper at Makerere University, Uganda, in 1974, he took umbrage at Western critics who condescendingly described African concern with local issues as a form of provincialism. These critics arrogated to themselves the label of “universalists,” whose work purportedly superseded local interests and embraced issues of supposed global, humanitarian import. Achebe deflates the “universalist” claims of these critics by laying bare their pretensions. “Does it,” he wonders aloud:

[E]ver occur to these universalists to try out their game of changing names of characters and places in an American novel, say, a Philip Roth or an Updike, and slotting in African names just to see how it works? . . . It would never occur to them to doubt the universality of their own literature. In the nature of things the work of a Western writer is automatically informed by universality. It is only others who must strain to achieve it. So-and-so’s work is universal; he has truly arrived! As though universality were some distant bend in the road which you take if you travel out far enough in the direction of Europe or America, if you put adequate distance between yourself and your home. I should like to see the word “universal” banned altogether from discussions of African literature until such a time as people cease to use it as a synonym for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe, until their horizon extends to include all the world. (76)

Essentially, what Achebe does is call out Western critics on their veiled demand for assimilation into the West under the guise of universalism: “As though universality were some distant bend in the road which you take if you travel out far enough in the direction of Europe or America, if you put adequate distance between yourself and your home.” If

Achebe thus, inversely, advocates for local concern in African literature in 1974-75, the Kenyan author, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, highlights the importance of indigenous languages in African literature in the mid-1980s.

In his highly acclaimed essay, "The Language of African Literature" (1986), which I discussed at length in Chapter 1, Ngugi sees language as not only a means of communication and conceptualization; it becomes for him a repository for culture that incorporates the ways people perceive reality. These ways accumulate over time and pass on from generation to generation, shaping the existence of a people – their identity – along the way: "The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe" (4).

As these critics continued pleading their cases, their discussions contributed to describing the colonized's difference in ever more distinct terms. In fact, if we trace out the line of development from the 1950s through the '80s – from Fanon, Selvon, and James through Achebe, Ngugi, and Bhabha – it becomes clear that the initial call for an autonomous identity of the colonized in the 'Fifties made by Fanon increasingly gains ground over the years – until it culminates, in the 'Eighties, with a clearly defined sense of difference between colonizer and colonized in the works of Bhabha and Ngugi. Indeed, the 1980s embody a turning point in terms of the politics of difference of the colonized: no longer are critics concerned with making a case for an independent existence of the colonized; they all focus on consolidating the difference arrived at over the past thirty years. The stage is set for the discreteness of the colonized.

I have discussed the ways postcolonial writers consolidate the difference in Chapter 1. A writer like Salman Rushdie, who is Indian-born but writes in English in Britain, repurposes his difference from the mainstream to stimulate literary cross-pollination, which he believes will lead to the creation of great literature for great “Imaginary Homelands.” In his 1982 essay of the same title, he rationalizes the cross-pollination by stating that:

Art is a passion of the mind. And the imagination works best when it is most free. Western writers have always felt free to be eclectic in their selection of theme, setting, form; Western visual artists have, in this century, been happily raiding the visual storehouses of Africa, Asia, the Philippines. I am sure that we must grant ourselves an equal freedom. (20)

Homi Bhabha, who championed the cause of difference in 1984, broadens it out four years later, in “The Commitment to Theory” (1988), to include what he terms the “hybrid” sites that open up and facilitate “translation” or “negotiation” between antagonistic elements in theoretical discourse (25). There is no need to rehash Bhabha’s expansion of the difference here – I have discussed it in detail in Chapter 1. Suffice it to say that, with the onset of the 1980s, the idea of difference gathers a momentum that has not been seen heretofore in postcolonial studies – a momentum that, in turn, prods critics to further probe into the possibilities of difference.

In this context of ever-consolidating difference between colonizer and colonized, then, culture critic Stuart Hall broaches the subject of difference as a discrete value upon which identity could be based. In a 1987 article entitled “Minimal Selves,” he sets out to reconfigure his intellectual biography within the black diaspora of the West. Within the

article, he foregrounds “displacement” as an important, critical concept facilitating identity:

If you live, as I’ve lived, in Jamaica, in a lower-middle-class family that was trying to be a middle-class Jamaican family trying to be an upper-middle-class Jamaican family trying to be an English Victorian family . . . I mean the notion of displacement as a place of ‘identity’ is a concept you learn to live with, long before you are able to spell it. Living with, living through difference. (135)

Displacement emerges as not only a literal, physical phenomenon that moves people around in location, direction, position or status; it also takes on the quality of a metaphor, a trope – so to speak – in that it claims for itself the status of an independent concept forming identity. That is, one could base one’s identity on displacement as a trope. Displacement, though, is always akin with difference by its very nature – displaced people are always unlike those that did not have to move around. This inherent difference, according to Hall, helps define displaced self (“Living with, living through difference”). Hall’s personal life circumstance directly applies to the condition of many postcolonial societies – they too are products of massive displacements. Difference is a way of life for them as well. Difference thus is firmly ensconced as a positive value in postcolonial thought.

In a further move, Hall hones in on the nature of difference and diversifies it to use it as a base for cultural identity: on the one hand, he identifies cultural and social difference the colonized, diasporic societies (such as the ones in the Caribbean) possess vis-à-vis their colonial masters and within themselves. On the other, he also recognizes difference as the gap the displaced peoples have opened up against their communities of

origin since they were first transported to the New World. This second sense of difference acknowledges both continuity and rupture between New World societies and their originary communities. Since history has intervened – and history is always subject to transformation – the displaced communities may for a cultural self depend as much on their originary past as on the immediate present. Hall in the essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” writes that:

Cultural identity . . . is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being.’ It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. . . . Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, [cultural identities] are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power. (225)

It is striking how Hall’s idea of cultural identity here is prefigured in Fanon’s thoughts on national culture I cited earlier in the chapter. There in his *The Wretched of the Earth*, the latter critic observes, “[a] national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people’s true nature. It is not made up of the inert dregs of gratuitous actions . . . which are less and less attached to *the ever-present reality of the people*” (emphasis added 233). The ever-present reality of the people in the Caribbean becomes all-important to both critics; it takes precedence over the reality of where these people originally came from and what history in those places today may look like.

This logic of the ever-present reality requires that individuals position themselves within the narrative of current history to forge a cultural self, even as the narrative tries to position them; the individuals have to espouse a politics, a metaphorical home, from which they speak, however provisional the politics may be – which will account for their

provisional sense of identity for that very moment. Cultural identity thus comes to being in a continuous, dynamic process of positioning the self; it is not located outside production in an essentialized past. Moreover, since it relies on a complex, nuanced notion of difference – one that encompasses racial, social, economic and ethnic difference – cultural identity here rejects monoculturalism and endorses multiculturalism.

Derek Walcott's epic verse, *Omeros*, which came out in 1990 in the wake of the consolidating debates of the '80s, builds on and affirms this notion of multiculturalism in the Caribbean. By necessity, the affirmation entails embracing difference – accepting the culture of the former colonizer, along with other cultures, existing in the West Indies. The affirmation also calls for welcoming the social, economic and ethnic diversity in the Caribbean, whereby economic diversity does not necessarily imply class domination: Major Plunkett, who is white and owns a ranch in *Omeros*, employs Helen, who is black, as a domestic servant; but he is also sexually attracted to her as a co-equal mate. Walcott's leitmotif becomes forging an identity that is a mixture of traditions and cultures.

As a poet working with disparate materials and fusing together diverse cultures and traditions, Walcott has been from early on cognizant of the monumentality of the task he was up against. He laid out his aesthetic in a 1974 essay, "The Muse of History," in which he took on the problematic of history, time, language and literature. According to Walcott, the poets in the New World have always produced literature. Depending on their lineage and point of view, they have created "a literature of revenge" – written by the descendants of slaves, or "a literature of remorse" – written by the descendants of masters (39). While this literature – all literature – may be an effect of history, serving

“historical truth” where applicable, it does not do particular justice in a New World context. The tough aesthetic of the New World demands that literature do not (and should not) purport to “explain” or “forgive” history, according to Walcott (39). Nor does (or should) literature in the New World recognize history “as a creative or culpable force” (39).

In consequence, the poet in the aesthetic of the New World is left with a sense of annihilation of history. His task does not consist in explaining or forgiving history; nor does history act like a creative or reproachable force for him. His mission in the new aesthetic comprises of naming and ordering the New Reality. In Walcott’s own terms:

It is this elemental privilege of naming the New World which annihilates history in our great poets, an elation common to all of them, whether they are aligned by heritage to Crusoe and Prospero or to Friday and Caliban. . . . A political philosophy rooted in elation would have to accept belief in a second Adam, the re-creation of the entire order, from religion to the simplest domestic rituals. (41)

This “Adamic” vision of man, according to Walcott, is what all the great poets of the New World adopt – from Whitman to Neruda to Borges. This vision coincides in these poets with “elation” or “exuberance.” That is, the vision coincides with their enthusiasm for re-creating the entire order; and they see everything in the New World as renewed (39). *Omeros* is an encapsulation of this poetic “elation” or “exuberance”: it engages in re-creating the entire order. The poem delights in describing everything – from the most mundane rituals of domestic life of felling trees and making canoes, to rendering the diversity and difference of characters and places, to the most complex tasks of studying the poetic mind and making myths about the Caribbean island of Saint Lucia.

The poem comprises four main narrative threads that crisscross one another throughout its length. The first involves the Homeric rivalry of two island characters, Achille and Hector, who fight over their love for Helen – a beautiful, black girl from the island of Saint Lucia. The second thread establishes the other characters that operate through the poem and add texture to it. These include the old woman Ma Kilman, who runs a bar on the island and possesses supernatural powers of healing – she is considered as a guardian or sibyl by others; the blind man Seven Seas, who is a veteran fisherman and has gone blind – he symbolically represents Homer; and Philoctete, who lives on the island and is friends with Ma Kilman, Hector and Achille. He is a fisherman as well and has a wound that will not heal. His wound parallels that of Philoctetes in Greek myth; however, the islander’s wound is not caused by a snake-bite as in the ancient story. His is the result of either an accident at sea while fishing, or represents, figuratively, a scar from slave chains in historical times: “The sore on his shin / still unhealed, like a radiant anemone. It had come // from a scraping, rusted anchor” (Book One, Chapter II, Section I, l. 11-13).

The third thread involves the interwoven story of Major Dennis Plunkett, a retired military officer and an Englishman, who owns a ranch and lives with his Irish wife, Maud, on St. Lucia. The couple must reconcile themselves to the history of British colonialism of St. Lucia. The Major does so by writing a history of the island, acknowledging the humanity of once colonized people and willing to live and mingle among them as a co-equal St. Lucian. Strikingly, this kind of cultural assimilation from colonizer to colonized has not occurred in any of the works I have discussed thus far.

The fourth and final thread concerns the autobiographical details of Walcott. These details embody the poet's assimilation in all directions as he participates as a character within the poem. The autobiographical dimension represents yet another feature that sets *Omeros* apart from the prose works I have discussed thus far. No narrative thread is more important than any other is – they are all equally weighted. The narrator takes the different threads up, continues them, and drops them, only to take them up again as he sees fit and as the threads conform to narrative unity in his mind. There is no linearity of time or narration in the poem: *Omeros* is supposed to take place in the late twentieth century, but there are sections of the poem that harken back to historical times – as when Achille makes a dream-return to Africa, in Book Three, to see his father Afolabe. The narrative threads themselves may branch out, suggesting further historical motifs. In Book Four, for instance, the autobiographical thread ramifies. As the poet visits North America in this book, he flies over the Great Plains. Looking through the airplane's window, he sees the ghost of Catherine Weldon – a nineteenth-century American activist, who worked on behalf of the rights of Lakota Sioux Indians in the Dakotas.

Critics have noted this ever-proliferating thematic complexity and commented on it since the publication of *Omeros* in 1990; but little has been attempted in the way of a sustained analysis of the poem from a cultural studies perspective that would account for difference and diversity in the Caribbean. The critical-theoretical context I have established above, with the help of Hall, Walcott and others, provides a tool to look at *Omeros* and explain its intricacies from this viewpoint. This context is particularly useful because it also illuminates – as I will demonstrate – the theme of home and identity in the

poem. As Walcott embarks on re-creating the world of *Omeros*, he relies on his dictum from “The Muse of History” that “maturity is the assimilation of the features of every ancestor” (38). Thus, he borrows from all ancestors in the Caribbean – whether they are black, white, or brown; rich or poor; high or low; descend from Europe or Africa, or are otherwise native to the Caribbean. Characters assimilate in all directions: from the colonizer to colonized; from the Caribbean to Africa; from Africa to Europe – and vice versa. The narrator integrates diversity and difference and blends various traditions to fashion a new reality – on aesthetic, personal, and cultural levels.

On the aesthetic level, the narrator draws on the elevated verse of the epic in the West. *Omeros* derives its title from the Modern Greek name for the poet Homer, whose two epic poems, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, it loosely echoes in terms of style and characterization. The poem is divided into Seven Books, containing a total of sixty-four (LXIV), thoroughgoing Chapters. Each Chapter is given in a Roman numeral and consists of three Sections or Cantos. The Sections are further grouped in tercets – a three-line verse form that another Western poet, Dante Alighieri, used for his epic poem, *The Divine Comedy*. Dante interlinks the three-line stanzas by a regular rhyme scheme – “with the second line of each stanza rhyming with the first and third of the next,” as Alex Scott notes in his commentary on *Omeros* (1).

However, Walcott’s form is much looser than Dante’s. When the poem opens, the narrator sets the scene in Book One. In stanzas 12 and 13 of Section I, Chapter I of this book, the reader encounters fishermen that are felling trees on the beach while tourists look on with their cameras on them:

Although smoke forgets the earth from which it ascends,

and nettles guard the holes where the laurels were killed,
an iguana hears the axes, clouding each lens

over its lost name, when the hunched island was called
“Iounalao,” “Where the iguana is found.”

But, taking its own time, the iguana will scale [.]

The narrator delineates the beauty of the island in these verses – an island that was once equated with an iguana because of its topography and fauna. He hopes that the island (“Iounalao”) will one day rise to the top (“taking its own time, the iguana will scale”); but the narrator is – unlike Dante – not beholden to any strict rhyme pattern. Further, he writes in hexameters, echoing Homer’s *Odyssey*, but his treatment of the meter is freer than Homer’s: while each verse in stanza 12 begins with an unstressed syllable, the order is reversed in stanza 13.

This is not to imply that Walcott has no ear for patterned rhyme or music of elevated verse – critics who study the technical aspects of his poetry attest to the virtuosity of Walcott’s art. Andrew Singer observes that:

With *Omeros*, Walcott is doing something that was previously regarded almost universally as impossible: rendering a full-length English epic in . . . hexameters of fully natural English sentences, infused moreover, with such dignity, inclusiveness, musical scope, sheer formal play and incandescent beauty, that it brings the classical epic definitively away from its origins in glory, carnage and conquest, toward a fully realized intellectual work enshrining psychological

complexity and nuance, coexistence, empathy and healing, and societal redemption. (6)

Singer's testimony speaks for itself: where it extols the technical prowess ("musical scope," "sheer formal play") of the verses, it also underscores the psychological depth and inclusiveness of Walcott's poetry. What I wanted to suggest though is that, by adopting the epic conventions to re-create his New World, Walcott relies, predominantly, on the formative function of the epic – without, however, ignoring the other aspects of the genre. By formative function, I mean the capacity of the epic to create a people: to confer a certain character – an identity – on the members of a nation or region. An epic is a long narrative poem relating the heroic exploits or adventures of a hero that contribute to the formation of a people or society. Meyer H. Abrams defines the epic as a "long narrative poem on a serious subject, told in a formal and elevated style, and centered on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, a nation, or (in the instance of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*) the human race" (53).

Though *Omeros* does not contain one single "heroic or quasi-divine figure," around which the action revolves, the poem nevertheless explores the lives of a string of characters, the sum total of whose activities should bestow an identity on them as Saint Lucians. Walcott apparently democratizes the epic tradition. He stretches and reinvents or reworks the epic conventions to fit his goals. In one brief section – Section III – of Chapter XXXIII in Book Four, the narrator completely breaks with the three-line stanza. In this section, he describes the house he lives in during his visit to New England in rhyming couplets. These couplets are written in tetrameter, having eight syllables:

House of umbrage, house of fear,

House of multiplying air

House of memories that grow

Like shadows out of Allan Poe

House where marriages go bust,

House of telephone and lust [.]

These couplets dwell on Walcott-as-character's sorrow over the loss of his lover – a sorrow that grows like proliferating gloom out of the work of the American macabre poet, Allan Poe. The poet-narrator describes his sorrow in terms of the house, and the objects within it, by striking an unconventional lullaby-like cadence, which for that reason captures his gloom more efficiently and contrasts starkly with the rest of the poem. Furthermore, Walcott mentions his sorrow not for its own sake. His grief connects immediately, in the section that follows, with the suffering of Catherine Weldon and Plains Indians I referenced earlier in the chapter, so that the innovative prosodic feat on the part of the poet-narrator ends up integrating the cause of diverse people. Walcott blends motives and ideals to recreate his New World.

Omeros, further, echoes Homer's epic, *The Iliad*, in that it begins *in medias res*: if the characters in *The Iliad* are warriors that are proceeding to war, the characters in *Omeros* are simple fishermen, who are following their daily routine – they are busy felling cedar trees to make new boats: “‘This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes.’ / Philoctete smiles for the tourists, who try taking / his soul with their cameras” (Book One, Chapter 1, Section I, l. 1-3). Walcott thus significantly stretches European

epic form to serve his purpose of exploring the everyday, lowly life on a Caribbean island. In so doing, he not only affirms the European aesthetic and cultural tradition but also inscribes the process of national myth-making. His ultimate goal is to forge a new Caribbean identity.

Various instances of national myth-making abound – among them the Battle of the Saints in Chapter XV of Book Two. The battle took place off the coast of St. Lucia in 1782 and ended with the British Fleet, under the command of Admiral George Rodney (who appears in the poem), defeating the French. Robert Hamner distills in his book – *Epic of the Dispossessed: Derek Walcott's Omeros* (1997) – the essence of the battle accounts of a number of historians of the war, including Davis Chandler, James Anthony Froude, and Reginald Hargreaves. He sees in the victory of the English its strategic importance for the British Empire in the region and beyond, but notes that the imperial expansion is not what Walcott is interested in for his narrative. Rather:

Since his objective is to focus on the St. Lucian present, he uses this famous Anglo-French confrontation for his own evolving narrative. First, the Battle of the Saints is concrete evidence of the importance of St. Lucia in the European scheme for the New World; second, the introduction of a young Midshipman Plunkett [in Book Two, Chapter XIV] makes available a predecessor for [the retired Major] Dennis Plunkett; and third, a bottle washed overboard from the foundering [French flagship] *Ville de Paris* provides the local museum with a pyrite-encrusted artifact about which local legend can grow until it acquires mythical status. (60)

Hamner is spot on with his observations about the uses of the Battle of Saints for *Omeros*. I wanted to add to Hamner's perceptiveness that Walcott uses the details to also locate his characters and events in the narrative of world history so he can give them a place, an identity, on world stage – for as Stuart Hall says, cultural identity “is subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power” (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 225).

I also wanted to draw attention to the brilliance of the verses, but not for its own sake. Evidently, these verses are written in hexameter and rival those of the classical epic. My concern, however, is with the way in which the technical brilliance, through its allusion to classical antiquity, helps integrate and evolve the poem: as Book Two, Chapter XV draws to a close, the battle account in the concluding three stanzas of Section III reads:

From the Hull of the *Ville de Paris*, wine-bottles
bobbed in the wake, crimson blood streamed from the wood
as they drifted in the mild current from the battle's

muffled distance. The casks and demijohns' blood
stained the foam faintly, and now one of them settles
on the sea-floor, its pyrite crusted and oblate

with the sea-blown, distended glass. Huge tentacles
rolled it as a cat boxes its prey. Then it was left –
a chalice hoisted by a diver's rubber claws.

Apparently, the crimson-red of the wine casks here directly evokes the blood and gore of the battle of Troy. The narrator seizes on the classical allusion to develop his own narrative: he refers to the beleaguered St. Lucia as “the Helen of the West Indies” (a Homeric reference). The reference reminds the reader that colonial control of St. Lucia during the eighteenth century frequently changed hands between the French and English who fought over the island due to its strategic location vis-à-vis North America. The technical skillfulness thus contributes to integrating the content of the poem. But then, interestingly, Helen is also a beautiful, black domestic servant in the household of the retired, white English officer – Major Plunkett – and his wife Maud, both of whom have decided to stay on the island after the British have left.

Apparently, the narrator thus brings together characters originating in different continents, colors, and traditions to fashion a new, multicultural Caribbean reality. The matters get complicated, though, because the housemaid Helen is also a cause of disagreement between two islanders – Achille and Hector – both of whom compete for her love. Consider the following, extraordinarily rich *double-entendre*: “Helen needed a history, / that was the pity that Plunkett felt towards her. / Not his, but her story. Not theirs, but Helen’s war” (Book One, Chapter V, Section III, l. 46-48). The verses are rooted in Plunkett’s desire for writing a history of the island of St. Lucia (I shall have more to say about this move a little later.). To this end, he researches his past as far back as the eighteenth century, when one of his forbears, Plunkett the midshipman, fought and died in the Battle of the Saints to capture “Helen” the island. But then we know from the Major’s own admission that he is attracted to the housemaid Helen as well. The narrator mirrors the muddled state of affairs among the Major, Helen, Hector, and Achille in a

master stroke in the verses above: he dexterously moves out of human affairs and into the biography of the island, and vice versa. He prefers fluidity and a lack of borders as he aesthetically puts together a new reality.

Plunkett's desire for writing a history of St. Lucia is, in and of itself, an important gesture; it signifies that the Major is ready to make amends to the island for his colonialist past: "Helen [the island] needed a history, / that was the pity Plunkett felt towards her." He, appropriately, envisions the undertaking as a tribute to St. Lucia. This is the first time in the works I discuss that a character own up to his past behaviors toward the colonized. In this sense, Plunkett acknowledges and reconciles with the culture of the colonized. He assimilates in the direction of the oppressed, contributing to positive universality and multiculturalism of the world of *Omeros*.

If the narrator prefers fluidity aesthetically, he also blurs frontiers as he fashions a new Caribbean reality on the cultural level. Obviously, the cultural past of characters here figures the most. When Book Three opens, Achille is transported in a dream to the continent of Africa in Chapter XXV. The return in a dream is striking but not coincidental. As a black man in the Caribbean, Achille takes his blackness for granted. But the journey to his ancestral lands stirs up some painful memories. He realizes that he has forgotten the names of the gods:

[...] And Achille felt the homesick shame
and pain of his Africa. His heart and his bare head

were bursting as he tried to remember the name
of the river- and the tree-god in which he steered,

whose hollow body carried him to the settlement ahead. (Section I, l. 35-39)

As he finally stands before his father Afolabe, the elder asks him about his name and the meaning of his name. Upon hearing the answer in the negative, the father replies to the son, instructively, that “A name means something” (Section III, l. 28); and that if he did not have a name or did not know the meaning of his name, then “you, nameless son, are only the ghost // of a name” (Section III, l. 57-58). Walcott here clearly sets up a contrast between the identities of white folk and the people of African descent: while Major Plunkett can trace his ancestry back two hundred years, Achille does not even know the meaning of his name in the present. There is a disconnect between the person and his identity. In this context, Singh’s cannibalization of his name in *The Mimic Men* comes to mind and helps put Achille’s plight in perspective.

In *The Mimic Men*, the young Singh torturously tries to give himself a Western identity by mangling his Indian name, Ranjit Kripalsingh, to an Anglo-Saxon sounding Ralph R. K. Singh. He tries to assimilate to the culture of the colonizer – a movement that directly contrasts with that of Major Plunkett. Even Singh, who is just as much a victim of colonial transplantation and alienation as Achille, retains some sense of the importance of name for personality. Achille has forgotten everything; he free-floats in the sea of amnesia.

Even so, Achille refuses to be disheartened by the sorry state of affairs. In a rejoinder that is a *tour de force*, he confides to his father that “Everything was forgotten. You also. I do not know. / The deaf sea has changed around every name that you gave / us; trees, men, we yearn for a sound that is missing” (Section III, l. 25-27). Critic Mary Lefkowitz reviews *Omeros* for *The New York Times*. She praises the poem for its

references – like the one in the quote above – to the ancient past. She notes in her piece that:

The gods brought order to Homer’s world, but in Mr. Walcott’s epic, Odysseus (and all of us who like him are exiles) must return to a home whose character has changed over time, even to the point where we can no longer recognize it. Yet these references to the ancient past, brief and insubstantial as they may seem, form the foundation of Mr. Walcott’s poem. They endow his new characters and situations with heroism; they suggest that their experiences, particular as they are to specific places and present times, are also timeless and universal. (3)

Lefkowitz’s remarks are apt in every respect. She bestows courage on Walcott’s characters who must continue on with their lives in the face of the oblivion perpetrated on them by the forces of history (“The deaf sea”). While her understanding of the historical forces and the ravages of time is befitting, Lefkowitz does not explain just how the historical references function in the poem and bestow Walcott’s characters with heroism. Nor does she elaborate on the timelessness or universality of the experiences of Walcott’s characters.

The mechanics of history in the poem, though, are straightforward. As Achille speaks to his father, he acknowledges that his life in the Caribbean has opened up a gap between him and his people in Africa (“Everything was forgotten.”). History has intervened since he was first brought to the Caribbean. Since history – “the deaf sea” of time – is never static and is always subject to transformation, it has twisted every name, altered every concept in its sweep (“changed around every name . . . us; trees, men”). The guiding voice of Mother Africa has faded out of their lives; its echoes, though,

reverberate in their collective memory. Achille confides to his father that he has come to him through the aid of this memory: “It was prediction, and memory, / to bear myself back, to be carried here by a swift” (Book Three, Chapter XXV, Section III, l. 44-45).

Yet however useful the memory is in connecting him to his cultural past, it only goes so far. It cannot replace Achille’s Caribbean present. This is why, I think, the return to Africa takes place in a dream and not in fact: there can be no factual going back, no homecoming – anymore. Again, Singh’s words from *The Mimic Men* come to mind and acquire an especial resonance in this context: “The empires of our time,” says Singh, “were short-lived, but they have altered the world for ever; their passing away is their least significant feature” (*The Mimic Men* 32). Achille, like Singh, is a casualty of the Empire, which may no longer exist as such, but its legacies of transplantation and alienation live on in their lives to date. Achille and his fellow St. Lucians have to learn to live with their Caribbean present. This learning endeavor – of positioning oneself in the narrative of current history to find one’s place in it, as Stuart Hall would say – is what endows Walcott’s characters with heroism. This is how history functions in the poem. The characters derive their cultural identity by continually adjusting themselves to the forces of current history, their present.

This present comprises remnants of diverse narratives originating in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Caribbean: Achille has a memory that pulsates with echoes from Africa, but he speaks English – a European language. Although he may be ignorant of its origins, his name suggests European lineage. Even so, he lives in the Caribbean and interacts with – among others – descendants of indentured laborers from India and China; with indigenous people and Europeans. His is a complex identity that absorbs influences

from around the globe in all directions. This complexity renders his experiences universal because it is all-inclusive. By comparison, Singh was fixated singly on the culture of the colonized. His assimilation was exclusively in one direction – that of the West – and was, therefore, restrictive. The assimilation in *Omeros* is multi-directional and additive. It comports with Achebe's notion of universality when he – as cited earlier – rails against those that use the term as “a synonym for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe” and pleads for broadening it out to “include all the world” (Colonialist Criticism” 76).

The all-inclusiveness of the characters' universality in *Omeros* helps point up another difference between these figures and their peers in the other works I have discussed thus far. G., Trumper, Boy Blue, Shoemaker, Pa and the rest – we remind ourselves – rely for their selves on a shared African past in *In the Castle*. So do Mr. Biswas and the other Tulsis husbands in *Mr. Biswas* fall back for an identity on their Hindu heritage, even as they try to reconcile this heritage with the evolving Creole reality of contemporary Trinidad. All these characters, in other words, depend on an “essence” or “purity.” In this sense, their identity is a “fait accompli” – an already established fact. In contrast, the characters in *Omeros* do not have a single dependable past – an essence. They have a *mélange* of narratives to draw upon. Their identity comes to being as they adjust themselves to the demands of these narratives. Put differently, their identity comes to being in production; it is not an already-established fact, and it is obviously non-essentialist in nature. Walcott confounds frontiers on the cultural level to dramatize this non-essentialist identity as he puts his characters in motion across dream and reality, land and ocean, and Africa and the Caribbean.

Finally, the narrator blurs boundaries on the personal level as well suggesting the mosaic, multicultural nature of the reality he is forging in *Omeros*. Much of the poem is narrated in an impersonal, third-person voice. At critical junctures, the impersonal narrator gives way to a string of other voices that enhance the unity of the narrative; dramatize the situation at hand; diversify the theme; add variety to the world of the poem; or otherwise grant an insight into the workings of the poetic mind. In Book Four, the impersonal narrator cedes control of the narrative to Walcott the poet, who is visiting the United States in this book. The poet is struck by the loss of his lover when, at an opportune moment, the thought of Catherine Weldon – a nineteenth-century Swiss-American activist whom I mentioned above and who suffered immensely on behalf of Plains Indians – enters his mind and alleviates his pain by way of comparison. Walcott's first-person narrative voice in stanzas 12 through 14 of Chapter XXXV, Section III sounds like this:

When one grief afflicts us we choose a sharper grief
in hope that enormity will ease affliction,
so Catherine Weldon rose in high relief

through the thin page of a cloud, making a fiction
of my own loss. I was searching for characters,
and in her shawled voice I heard the snow that would be blown

when the wind covered the tracks of the Dakotas,
the Sioux, and the Crows; my sorrow had been replaced.

Like a swift over water, her pen's shadow raced.

Not only does Catherine's suffering ease the poet's pain, Walcott also draws inspiration from the tenacity of her character ("in her shawled voice I heard the snow that would be blown"). The first-person voice in these verses contributes to knitting the poem tighter, diversifying the theme, and granting a peek into Walcott's poetic consciousness in terms of self-reflection. The move also, as I have suggested earlier, represents Walcott the poet's effort to integrate in his person – to personify, if you will – the experience of marginalized characters and cultures. He imagines difference and diversity, but he also embodies these traits.

The back-and-forth between Afolabe and Achille I referenced earlier, similarly, takes place in a first-person, direct dialog between father and son. As Achille succumbs to amnesia and betrays signs of complacency toward his African past, Afolabe employs his analogy-rich African idiom to shake off the son's indifference in Book Three. He urges Achille in Section III of Chapter XXV that:

No man loses his shadow except it is in the night,
and even then his shadow is hidden, not lost. At the glow
of sunrise, he stands on his own name in that light.

When he walks down to the river with the other fishermen
his shadow stretches in the morning, and yawns, but you,
if you're content with not knowing what our names mean,

then I am not Afolabe, your father, and you look through

my body as the light looks through a leaf. I am not here
or a shadow. [. . .]

The dialog dramatizes the situation, goads Achille to self-reflect, and adds variety to the world of *Omeros*. The self-reflection causes Achille to discern the connection between his present and past, leading him to assimilate the African dimension of his identity. The direct dialog also lends immediacy to the exchange, furthering the integration of the narrative. A similar immediacy is evident in the direct voice of the village elder, “the griot,” whose song Achille hears on his dream-visit in Book Three, Chapter XXVIII. The griot laments that:

“We were the colour of shadows when we came down
with tinkling leg-irons to join the chains of the sea,
for the silver coins multiplying on the sold horizon,

and these shadows are reprinted now on the white sand
of antipodal coasts, your ashen ancestors
from the Bight of Benin, from the margin of Guinea.”

The verses unmistakably bemoan the Middle Passage, and the sorrow is overwhelming. Achille perceives the association between his imperfect memory – which he calls “prediction” – that has brought him to Africa and the echoes of the “tinkling leg-irons.” He sees the link between past and present and can integrate the past into his present. The narrator keeps on employing an array of voices that help reflect the diversity of the New World not just in terms of mere number of characters, but also how they – such as, Achille, the poet himself, and Major Plunkett – achieve complexity in terms of their

transformative assimilation in all directions. The characters truly become universal and timeless, as critic Lefkowitz would say.

Isabella Maria Zoppi has discussed the intricacies of narration in *Omeros*. In her sprawling study of the poem in which she updates the various aspects of the classical epic against Walcott's poem, she notes of the narration that:

One of the few structural constants of the poem [*Omeros*] is the play of the narration superimposed on historical foundations, which draws the reader into an odyssey through time and space, from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean, from Europe to North America, from the Caribbean to Africa, from the present of a fishing village on the island of St. Lucia to the distant past of the Middle Passage, by way of the recent past of the colonies. The figure of the narrator can be seen as the pivot round which the odyssey revolves. (509)

This figure, I should like to add, is an amalgam of narrative voices that dovetail with the gnomic precept Walcott sets in "The Muse of History" – namely, that "maturity is the assimilation of the features of every ancestor" (38). Each voice contributes to assimilating the features of an ancestor in its own way. All together, they create a world that is Caribbean-centered but allows for features from around the world: Achille is a man of the Caribbean, but retains the African dimension of his character. He speaks English, the language of his former oppressor, but coexists with descendants of indentured laborers from Asia and with natives. Major Plunkett is a member of the former colonizer class, but moves toward the culture of the colonized and dedicates a book to the history of St. Lucia. He calls St. Lucia his new home. Walcott the poet imagines difference but also lives it in his own person: he incorporates into his

experience the suffering of Native Americans. *Omeros* emerges as a truly multicultural world that lives with “difference,” as Hall would say, and prospers by literary and cultural “cross-pollination” (Rushdie).

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

The search for identity is a major theme in modern literature. Whether writers are based in metropolitan centers or write out of peripheral settings, they want to explore who they are as human beings or where and what their home is like in society. In metropolitan writers, the search for identity has shaped up battling the economic and psychological consequences of modernization impacting their lives; it has broadly taken the form of creating an anchor against the flux caused by rapid advances in technology, industrialization, and urbanization. The provincial or colonial writers likewise contend with the economic and psychological challenges of modernization. In addition, they reckon with the consequences of a physical removal from their surroundings if they migrate to the metropolis, which exercises a strong pull on them, to come write in the artistic freedom that prevails there.

Andrew Gurr has studied the phenomenon of geographical dislocation in colonial writers, who move to metropolitan centers for artistic freedom. In his 1981 book, *Writers in Exile*, he scrutinizes the existential and artistic circumstances of such writers and observes that:

The[se] creative exiles, those born in the *Gemeinschaft* and educated for the *Gesellschaft*, are a distinctive type of modern writer. They tend to write realistic prose fiction where their contemporaries born in the *Gesellschaft* write poetry. Their concerns tend to be primarily social and only secondarily philosophical and cultural in the narrower sense, the sense of elite art. Moreover, because their alienation is not only psychological and economic in the Freudian and Marxist meanings of the word but also physical – a geographical removal from their origins – their situation impels them most readily towards the “higher consciousness,” the sense of a personal and social identity which is the basis and sometimes the end of modern art. (7-8)

Most of Gurr’s propositions map onto the authors I examine in this project. George Lamming and Vidiadhar S. Naipaul who are self-confirmed exiles do write realistic prose fiction, and their artistic concern tends to be primarily social, too. Derek Walcott’s case is somewhat anomalous. While he is not a self-proclaimed exile, he did spend a good deal of time abroad teaching creative writing at Boston University for two decades. Besides, he also had other, shorter scholarly and teaching stints at the University of Alberta, Canada and the University of Sussex, England, respectively. Thus, while he may not be a creative exile in the sense Gurr defines the term, Walcott is not a complete stay-at-home either. At any rate, he is someone, who was – like his contemporaries Lamming and Naipaul – born in a provincial, *Gemeinschaft* kind of society in the Caribbean but educated for the metropolis. Unlike Lamming and Naipaul, though, who write realistic prose fiction, Walcott primarily publishes poetry and plays. His poetic concern

nevertheless remains social and communal: *Omeros* is, first and foremost, an attempt at bestowing an identity on a people.

In fact, the theme of identity and home runs through the works of all three and binds them together in a group. This theme also creates an affinity between them and Gurr's model. But whereas Gurr does not define the terms home and identity for his analysis and group of writers, I begin my discussion by laying out in detail the meaning of the terms in order to then study how identity and home manifest themselves in the selected works of the three writers.

Chapter 1 provides a psychosocial explanation of identity. By leaning upon the work of German sociologist, Hans Peter Dreitzel, it argues that identity – as a signification of belonging – is always contingent upon and sustained by the social norms and values in which it is embedded. Just as an individual creates a sense of self (“Ich-Bewusstsein”) early in life by internalizing the norms and values of its family and environment, so also the individual affirms its social identity later in life by engaging in social roles, which are by necessity governed by social norms and values. Identity and social norms and values are, thus, inseparable. When we say who we are, we also say what we are and what we believe in. It is in this mutually supportive sense of self and its normative context that I use the term identity in the project. The values the self shares with the context – be it a cause, creed, community, color, class, clan, culture, or country – is what signifies home in the discussion. Home is, thus – figuratively speaking – a location from which one speaks. However, I also deploy the term as a material entity. After all, Mr. Biswas stakes out his life struggle on acquiring a house where he can live

with his nuclear family separate from the extended clan of the Tulsis. The house here clearly encompasses the material as well as metaphorical values of the entity.

However, if norms and values are at the center of identity, sabotaging them would mean undermining identity. This is, in fact, what has happened in the case of the colonized. I argue that regimes of colonization – ranging from literary and philosophical domination to the imposition of metropolitan language and representation – have adversely affected the values of the colonized. As Chinua Achebe testifies to, the Western literary tutelage has tried to subvert the role of community in the African novel. So has the metropolitan language resulted in fracturing the colonial self in two, as Ngugi wa Thiong'o persuasively argues in "The Language of African Literature." Edward Said demonstrates the devastating effects of metropolitan representation – of "Orientalism" – in which the colonial subjects do not recognize themselves; worse than this, they seem to be standing beside themselves in the "Orientalized" version. The self-fracture reaches its apogee when Frantz Fanon dramatizes the conflict within the split-identity of the colonized as a battle between the authentic, colonial self, on one hand, and its "Orientalized" version, on the other.

As self-conflict and self-division intensify, however, and difference between colonizer and colonized becomes ever more pronounced, the existential condition of the colonized opens up fresh avenues of renewal. Strategically, critics hail the difference between colonizer and colonized as a blessing for the oppressed. As Homi Bhabha points out, the difference enables the colonized to accept and reject the values of the colonizer at the same time. Characters (such as Singh), at times, become icons of mimicry and mockery, relativizing the values and authority of the colonizer. Difference also spurs

counter-colonial resistance, as *In the Castle* evidences. Furthermore, difference may prod cross-cultural and cross-literary experimentation to explore new avenues of identity formation. Salman Rushdie superbly demonstrates the experimentation with reference to his “Imaginary Homelands,” which are synonymous with generating fresh norms and values, in which to anchor the self. Difference may, additionally, inspire negotiation between antagonistic elements within a culture or political initiative. Homi Bhabha calls such negotiation or translation “hybridity.” Mr. Biswas engages in just such a negotiation as he accommodates the values of his Hindu past to the evolving Creole reality of colonial Trinidad. His house veritably symbolizes hybridity.

Finally, difference – as a stubborn and defining feature of the colonized – may in and of itself function as a discrete value upon which identity could be based. Culture critic Stuart Hall demonstrates this possibility as he takes stock of his intellectual biography within the black diaspora of the West. The diasporic self emerges as a social entity that comes into being through, and is sustained by, displacement that – by its very nature – is synonymous with difference. Hall maintains that:

If you live as I’ve lived, in Jamaica, in a lower-middle-class family that was trying to be a middle-class Jamaican family trying to be an upper-middle-class Jamaican family trying to be an English Victorian family . . . I mean the notion of displacement as a place of ‘identity’ is a concept you learn to live with, long before you are able to spell it. Living with, living through difference. (“Minimal Selves” 135)

Derek Walcott enacts Hall’s notion of difference and its permutations (as the culture critic develops them in the broadening of the concept) in his epic verse, *Omeros*. Indeed,

I discuss the poem and three other Caribbean works in terms of how they, each in its own way, use colonial difference to launch into exploring the theme of identity in their characters and communities.

Chapter 2 examines George Lamming's 1953 debut novel, *In the Castle of My Skin*, as he uses colonial difference, and the condition of the colonized it spawns, to embark on exploring the identity of Creighton's village over a period of nine years. During these years, the village community moves from a state of colonialism to something resembling self-rule. As the villagers undergo social and political change, they create – however imperfectly – new norms and values, in which to ground their new selves. Essentially, the transformation involves shedding one form of identity and taking on another one. My analysis of the village's transformation is rooted in the Marxian notion of historical materialism – in the assumption that social being determines consciousness (and not the other way round): it is the actual life circumstances of men and women in Creighton's village, the inequality in every sphere of life, that incite them to rebellion. This materialist premise has let *In the Castle* emerge – in opposition to the claims made for its un-historicity – as a social document that is infused with history. The history encapsulates a class struggle in which diverse social groups – rich and poor, high and low, white and black, colonizer and colonized – fight out their differences to articulate a new identity for themselves. Within the framework of class struggle, the novel isolates religion as one of the ideological forces used to perpetuate the status quo. Colonial education is singled out as a decisive institution that inculcates inauthenticity in native population; it does not help integrate human personality – rather, it tears it asunder. The fractured self becomes a colonial subject's especial legacy and constitutes,

ultimately, a driving force in the novel. The novel also calls attention to the slave past that is intentionally pushed into oblivion. Through Pa's dream, Lamming keeps alive the slave past in order for it to inform the present and future struggles of West Indians for self-definition.

Embedded in the mesh of communal re-definition (and running parallel to it), is the personal theme of the hero-narrator's artistic identity. At the same time that G. witnesses communal transformation, he also toils to ingest and shape his impressions of it. To a great extent, the novel owes its fascination to the dexterity with which these two aspects – personal and communal – are made to work together. Lamming skillfully depicts personal, artistic and public, political experiences in one narrative.

Chapter 3 deals with colonial difference and its legacies in the lives of indentured sugar laborers from India in another Caribbean novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), by Vidiadhar S. Naipaul. Naipaul traces the colonial legacies in the dissolution of Hanuman House, a symbol of Hindu social order in the book, which is home to a number of Tulsis husbands. These individuals emblemize cultural displacement, and Naipaul chronicles their struggle for a social identity as they undergo transformation from the early 1900's through the mid-century. Comparatively, if Lamming views colonial legacies in the context of slavery and the slave past, Naipaul discusses them in terms of indenture and the Indian diaspora; and whereas Lamming accentuates revolutionary struggle in his treatment of colonial difference, Naipaul's emphasis is on cultural dislocation and cultural syncretism and the resultant phenomena of psychological bewilderment and loss of identity. Naipaul, thus, replaces Lamming's political motives with his psychological concerns.

Associated with Hanuman House, however, is also Mr. Biswas, the hero of *A House for Mr. Biswas*, who lives and seeks refuge there for much of his adult life, but is hell-bent on shaking off its paternalism and striking out on his own. Discretely, his life-story may be looked upon as an encapsulation of Bhabha's idea of "hybridity" ("The Commitment to Theory" 1988), or as Rushdie's notion of an "Imaginary Homeland" (1982). Evidently, Mr. Biswas embodies difference as a colonial subject. Being a second-generation Indian born to migrant laborers in colonial Trinidad, he engages in cross-cultural dialog as he, over the span of his forty-six years, attempts to reconcile ("translate" or "negotiate") the values of his Hindu past with the evolving, Creole reality of colonial Trinidad. The outcome of this dialog, "the third space" (Bhabha 1990), is metaphorically embodied in Mr. Biswas's house that incorporates and fuses the histories of diverse cultures and continents into a new, independent whole – a new "structure of authority" ("The Third Space" 211). The new structure of authority is self-sufficient in its own right: "Soon it seemed to the children [Mr. Biswas's children] that they had never lived anywhere but in the tall square house in Sikkim Street. From now their lives would be ordered, their memories coherent" (*Mr. Biswas* 581).

Authentic as the new structure of authority is, it appropriately furnishes a fresh base for new political initiatives – for creating new "Imaginary Homelands," or for exploring new "hybrid" sites. Anand, Mr. Biswas's son, a third-generation Trinidad Indian and the implied author of *A House for Mr. Biswas*, takes up this initiative when he observes at the end of the novel that: "[. . .] Later, and very slowly, in securer times of different stresses, when the memories had lost the power to hurt, with pain or joy, they

[the memories] would fall into place and give back the past” (581). He, Anand, explores this past and inscribes it within the pages of *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

If *In the Castle* and *Mr. Biswas* use colonial difference for primarily exploring communal identities of their respective worlds with differing emphases – a social revolution in one, the psychological bewilderment in the other – *The Mimic Men* (1967), another novel by Vidiadhar S. Naipaul, scrutinizes colonial difference and its consequences solely for the personal identity of its protagonist, Ralph Singh. Singh feels that his existence, as a colonial, has been truncated and reduced to mimicking the values of the colonizer, though the selfsame mimicry at times enables him to mock colonial authority as well. Chapter 4 takes up Singh’s cause as he details these colonial experiences in a memoir in order to better understand their cause-and-effect nature and, in the process, win a new sense of personal identity. Singh has been a colonial politician before he settles down to write his reminiscences.

The chapter argues that *The Mimic Men* is not a self-reflective parody of a (post)colonial politician, who ironizes his own statements and thus mocks colonial authority – as has been claimed by some critics. Instead, the chapter demonstrates that the novel genuinely reifies assumptions of colonial discourse: Singh’s life experiences – his affect of misery and restlessness; his disidentification with the island of his birth; the attitude of abeyance; his “shipwreck”; self-alienation and fragmentation; the myth of England; play-acting and fantasizing – are all rooted in reality. To a great extent, these experiences emanate from his colonial education. In part, however, Singh’s pathos and personality are also determined by his improper socialization in the family during childhood. Singh is cognizant of his misery from early on, but a deeper awareness of the

identity crisis does not surface until late in his career, at which point he is forced to leave the island. It is ironic that his relationship roles, which he has either plainly ignored or treated poorly, should help him identify his crisis.

Singh devotes his subsequent life to addressing his existential condition. His methodology of finding a solution to his problem of identity through writing is highly individualistic. But it is also highly precarious because it is not grounded in a genuine interaction with a social environment, or is based in actual social norms and values – which alone can vouch for a lasting sense of identity, as I maintain in Chapter 1. His methodology, rather, is rooted in an imaginative interplay with his memories. Although he may testify to achieving a measure of satisfaction through writing, Singh's achievement is, at best, temporary and his identity as a writer all but ambiguous.

If the works discussed thus far use colonial difference as a springboard to launch into communal and personal identities, *Omeros* (1990) – an epic poem by Derek Walcott and the last work in the project – construes identity on the value of difference itself. Chapter 5 discusses these dynamics with reference to culture critic Stuart Hall's notion of displaced selves that constitute and sustain themselves through perpetual difference they symbolize among themselves and against their communities of origin. Achille, as a displaced, diasporic self in the Caribbean, expresses this truism, axiomatically, when he informs his father Afolabe that: "Everything was forgotten. You also. I do not know" (*Omeros*, Chapter XXV, Section III, l. 25). He pleads his difference against his elders since he was first transported to the Caribbean. History has since intervened and transformed every name and concept in its purview. Achille has had to draw on a present that comprised not only his African past, but contained influences from Europe, Asia, and

the Americas as well. He epitomizes this diversity and difference in his person: he is a black man that speaks English, a European language, but lives and interacts with indigenous people, Europeans, Indians, and Chinese in the Caribbean. His is a truly multicultural self that comes into being in production by constantly adjusting itself to the demands of diverse narratives that feed into his present. He does not rely on the luxury of one single narrative, as do characters in *In the Castle* or *Mr. Biswas*. His identity, in this sense, is not dependent on an essence or purity; it is non-essentialist and multicultural.

What is true of Achille is also true of other characters in *Omeros*: Major Plunkett, a white Englishman and former colonizer, moves toward the culture of the colonized: he devotes a book to the history of St. Lucia and calls the island his future home. Walcott as a character-participant in the poem sympathizes with oppressed people, the Dakotas and the Sioux, in North America. The characters in *Omeros* integrate diversity and difference in all directions; they truly represent multicultural identities.

Apropos of difference and diversity, I want to defer the last word to Walcott the Nobel Laureate, who symbolizes these values in his own person. As he addresses his Nobel audiences in 1992, Walcott underscores the importance of his commitment to difference, identity, and multiculturalism by extending these values to be the poetic concern of every Caribbean writer. He reminds the attendees that “[a]ll of the Antilles, every island, is an effort of memory; every mind, every racial biography culminating in amnesia and fog. Pieces of sunlight through the fog and sudden rainbows, *arcs-en-ciel*. That is the effort, the labour of the Antillean imagination, rebuilding its gods from bamboo frames, phrase by phrase.”

WORKS CITED

- Abrams, Meyer H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 6th ed. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt, 1993. Print.
- Achebe, Chinua. "Colonialist Criticism." *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*. New York: Anchor, 1990. 68-90. Print.
- . "The Novelist as Teacher." *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*. New York: Anchor, 1990. 40-46. Print.
- . "The Writer and His Community." *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*. New York: Anchor, 1990. 47-61. Print.
- Ahmad, Aijaz. "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory.'" *Social Text* 17 (Autumn 1987): 3-25. *JSTOR*. Web. 21 Aug. 2018.
- Ahmad, Naheed F. "The Quest for Identity in the West Indian Novel with Special Reference to John Hearne, George Lamming, Roger Mais, Dennis Williams, and V. S. Naipaul." B. Litt Thesis. Wolfson College Oxford U, 1973. Print.
- Anderson, Linda R. "Ideas of Identity and Freedom in V. S. Naipaul and Joseph Conrad." *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature* 59. 1-6 (1978): 510-17. Print.
- Augier, F. R. et al. *The Making of the West Indies*. London: Longmans, 1960. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi. K. "The Commitment to Theory." *The Location of Culture*. London:

- Routledge, 1994. 19-39. Print.
- . "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. 85-92. Print.
- . "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Ed. Jonathan Rutherford. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990. 207-21. Print.
- Booker, M. Keith, and Dubravka Juraga. *The Caribbean Novel in English: An Introduction*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001. Print.
- Brathwaite, L. Edward. "Roots." *Bim* 10.37 (July-December 1963): 10-21. Print.
- Brown, Carolyn T. "The Myth of the Fall and the Dawning of Consciousness in George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*." *World Literature Today* 57.1 (1983): 38-43. Print.
- Cudjoe, Selwyn R. *V. S. Naipaul: A Materialist Reading*. Amherst, MA: U of Massachusetts P, 1988. Print.
- Dean, Martin R. "Die Schrecken des Anfangs." *Du: Die Zeitschrift der Kultur* 10 (October 1993): 32-35. Print.
- Dooley, Gillian. *V. S. Naipaul, Man and Writer*. Columbia, South Carolina: U of South Carolina P, 2006. Print.
- Dreitzel, Hans P. "Ich-Identität und Rollen-Identifikation." *Die gesellschaftlichen Leiden und das Leiden an der Gesellschaft: Vorstudien zu einer Pathologie des Rollenverhaltens*. 3rd ed. Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1980. 173-82. Print.
- Erikson, Erik H. *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: Norton, 1968. 40-50. Print.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York:

- Grove, 1967. Print.
- . *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. New York: Grove, 1963. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1979. Print.
- Garebian, Keith. "The Grotesque Satire of *A House for Mr. Biswas*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 30.3 (1984): 487-96. Print.
- Ghisalbherti, Giosue. "'And the World Continues Our Private Fabrication': An Autobiography of 'Shipwreck' and Disorder in V. S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*." *The Journal of Caribbean Literatures* 6.1 (2009): 73-92. Print.
- Gurr, Andrew. *Writers in Exile: The Identity of Home in Modern Literature*. Brighton, Sussex: Harvester, 1981. Print.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Ed. Jonathan Rutherford. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990. 222-37. Print.
- . "Minimal Selves." *Studying Culture: An Introductory Reader*. Eds. Ann Gray, and Jim McGuigan. London: Edward Arnold, 1993. 134-38. Print.
- Hamner, Robert D. *Epic of the Dispossessed: Derek Walcott's **Omeros***. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1997. Print.
- James, Cyril L. R. "Appendix: From Toussaint L'Ouverture to Fidel Castro." *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. Rev. 2nd ed. New York: Vintage, 1989. 391-418. Print.
- . *Beyond a Boundary*. New York: Pantheon, 1983. Print.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism."

- Social Text* 15 (Autumn 1986): 65-88. *JSTOR*. Web. 21 Aug. 2018.
- Jung, Carl G. "The Stages of Life." *The Portable Jung*. Ed. Joseph Campbell. New York: Viking, 1971. 3-22. Print.
- Kelly, Richard. *V. S. Naipaul*. New York: Continuum, 1989. Print.
- King, Bruce. *V. S. Naipaul*. New York: St. Martin's, 1993. Print.
- Kirpal, Viney. "George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*: A Modern West Indian Novel." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 28.2 (1997): 103-14. Print.
- Kom, Ambroise. "*In the Castle of My Skin*: George Lamming and the Colonial Caribbean." *World Literature Written in English* 18 (Nov. 1979): 406-20. Print.
- Kortenaar, Neil T. "George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*: Finding Promise in the Land." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 22.2 (1991): 43-53. Print.
- Lamming, George. "The African Presence." *The Pleasures of Exile*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992. 160-210. Print.
- . "Caribbean Politics from the 1930s to the 1970s: An Interview with Robert Lee." *Conversations George Lamming: Essays, Addresses and Interviews 1953-1990*. Eds. Richard Drayton and Andaiye. London: Karia, 1992. 264-71. Print.
- . "*In the Castle of My Skin*: Thirty Years After." *Conversations George Lamming: Essays, Addresses and Interviews 1953-1990*. Eds. Richard Drayton and Andaiye. London: Karia, 1992. 46-56. Print.
- . *In the Castle of My Skin*. Harlow, England: Longman Caribbean. 1986. Print.
- . "The Garden and the Empire: Religion and Caribbean Society." *Conversations*

- George Lamming: Essays, Addresses and Interviews 1953-1990*. Eds. Richard Drayton and Andaiye. London: Karia, 1992. 212-16. Print.
- . "The Occasion for Speaking." *The Pleasures of Exile*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992. 23-50. Print.
- . "The Sovereignty of the Imagination: An Interview with George Lamming." *Small Axe* 6.2 (2002): 72-200. *Project Muse*. Web. 29 Dec 2018.
- Lefkowitz, Mary. "Bringing Him Back Alive." *The New York Times*. New York Times. 7 Oct. 1990. Web. 28 June 2018.
- Lewis, Gordon K. *The Growth of the Modern West Indies*. London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968. Print.
- Liotard, Jean-Francois. "Defining the Postmodern." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: Norton, 2001. 1612-15. Print.
- Marx, Karl. "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy." *Critical Theory since Plato*. Ed. Hazard Adams. Rev. Ed. Fort Worth: Harcourt, 1992. 624-27. Print.
- Moretti, Franco. "More Conjectures." *New Left Review* 20 (Mar.-Apr. 2003): 73-81. Print.
- Mukherjee, Bharati, and Robert Boyers. "A Conversation with V. S. Naipaul." *Salmagundi* 185/186 (2015): 584-606. Print.
- Munro, Ian. "George Lamming." *West Indian Literature*. Ed. Bruce King. Hamden, Connecticut: Archon, 1979. 126-43. Print.
- . "The Theme of Exile in George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*." *World Literature Written in English* 20 (Nov. 1971): 51-60. Print.
- Naipaul, Vidiadhar S. *An Area of Darkness*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1968.

- Print.
- . "Conrad's Darkness." *The Return of Eva Peron with the Killings in Trinidad*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981. 197-218. Print.
- . *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969. Print.
- . "Jasmine." *The Overcrowded Barracoon and Other Articles*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976. 24-31. Print.
- . *The Middle Passage: Impressions of Five Societies – British, French and Dutch – in the West Indies and South America*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1969. Print.
- . *Miguel Street*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1971. Print.
- . *The Mimic Men*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969. Print.
- . "Writing *A House for Mr. Biswas*." *The New York Review of Books* 24 Nov. 1983: 22-23. Print.
- Nair, Supriya. *Caliban's Curse: George Lamming and the Revisioning of History*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1996. Print.
- Ngugi, Thiong'o wa. "George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*." *Critics on Caribbean Literature*. Ed. Edward Baugh. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978. 47-57. Print.
- . "The Language of African Literature." *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: James Currey, 1986. 4-33. Print.
- Nightingale, Peggy. *Journey through Darkness: The Writing of V. S. Naipaul*. St. Lucia: U of Queensland P, 1987. Print.
- Ormerod, David. "Theme and Image in V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*." *Texas*

- Studies in Literature and Language: A Journal of the Humanities* 8.4 (1966-67): 589-602. Print.
- Paquet, Sandra Pouchet. *The Novels of George Lamming*. London: Heinemann, 1982. Print.
- Plato. "Republic, Book X." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: Norton, 2001. 67-80. Print.
- Ramchand, Kenneth. *The West Indian Novel and Its Background*. London: Faber, 1972. Print.
- . "The World of *A House for Mr. Biswas*." *Caribbean Quarterly* 15.1 (1969): 60-72. Print.
- Rohlehr, Gordon. "Character and Rebellion in *A House for Mr. Biswas*." *Critical Perspectives on V. S. Naipaul*. Ed. Robert D. Hamner. London: Heinemann, 1979. 84-93. Print.
- . "The Ironic Approach: The Novels of V. S. Naipaul." *The Islands in Between: Essays on West Indian Literature*. Ed. Louis James. London: Oxford UP, 1968. 121-39. Print.
- . "Predestination, Frustration and Symbolic Darkness in Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*." *Caribbean Quarterly* 10.1 (1964): 3-11. Print.
- Rushdie, Salman. "Imaginary Homelands." *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London: Granta, 1991. 9-21. Print.
- Rutherford, Jonathan. "A Place Called Home: Identity and the Cultural Politics of Difference." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Ed. Jonathan Rutherford. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990. 9-27. Print.

- Said, Edward W. "Imaginative Geography and Its Representations: *Orientalizing the Oriental*." *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979. 49-73. Print.
- Scott, Alex. "Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, and the Significance of the River of Ancestry." angelfire.com/md2/timewarp/omeros. Web. 8 Dec. 2019.
- Selden, Raman, Peter Widdowson, and Peter Brooker. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. 4th ed. London: Prentice Hall, 1997. Print.
- Selvon, Samuel. *The Lonely Londoners*. London: Penguin, 2006. Print.
- Singer, Andrew. "Deus in Machina: Poetic Technique in Derek Walcott's *Omeros*." *Open Letters Monthly: An Arts and Literature Review*, 1 May 2012. Web. 28 Aug. 2016.
- Thieme, John. *V. S. Naipaul: The Mimic Men*. London: Collins, 1985. Print.
- Thorpe, Marjorie. "The Mimic Men: A Study of Isolation." *New World Quarterly: A Quarterly Journal of Caribbean Affairs* 4.4 (1968): 55-59. Print.
- Tikasingh, Gerad. "Toward a Formulation of the Indian View of History: The Representation of Indian Opinion in Trinidad, 1900-1921." *East Indians in the Caribbean: Colonialism and the Struggle for Identity. Papers Presented to a Symposium on East Indians in the Caribbean, The University of the West Indies, June 1975*. Ed. Bridget Brereton and Winston Dookeran. New York: Kraus, 1982. 11-32. Print.
- Walcott, Derek. *The Antilles, Fragments of Epic Memory: The Nobel Lecture*. New York: Farrar, 1992. Print.
- . "The Muse of History." *Critics on Caribbean Literature*. Ed. Edward Baugh. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978. 38-43. Print.

- . *Omeros*. New York: Farrar, 1990. Print.
- Warner-Lewis, Maureen. "Cultural Confrontation, Disintegration and Syncretism in *A House for Mr. Biswas*." *Critical Perspectives on V. S. Naipaul*. Ed. Robert D. Hamner. London: Heinemann, 1979. 94-103. Print.
- Weeks, Jeffrey. "The Value of Difference." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Ed. Jonathan Rutherford. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990. 88-100. Print.
- Wheat, Celeste A. "Examining Colonialism and Exile in George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), *The Emigrants* (1954), and *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960)." *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 10.3 (2009): 1-28. *Project Muse*. Web. 29 Dec. 2018.
- White, Landeg. *V. S. Naipaul: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Harper & Row, 1975. Print.
- Williams, David. Introduction. *In the Castle of My Skin*. By George Lamming. Harlow, England: Longman Caribbean, 1986. v-xv. Print.
- Yarde, Gloria. "George Lamming: The Historical Imagination." *Literary Half-Yearly* 11.2 (1970): 35-45. Print.
- "Youth in Barbados." *Times Literary Supplement* 27 Mar. 1953: 206. Print.
- Zhang, Dexu. "Representational Ethics: *The Mimic Men* and the Mimic Men." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 57.1 (2016): 29-40. Web. 24 May 2019.
- Zoppi, Isabella Maria. "*Omeros*, Derek Walcott and the Contemporary Epic." *Callaloo* 22.2 (1999): 509-29. *Project Muse*. Web. 24 May 2018.

VITA

HARBHAJAN S. HIRA

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation: IDENTITY AND HOME IN THREE CARIBBEAN AUTHORS

Major Field: ENGLISH

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in English at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in July, 2020.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts in Education at California State University, Dominguez Hills, Carson, California in 2007.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts in English at California State University, Stanislaus, Turlock, California in 2001.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts in English at Hamburg University, Hamburg, Germany in 1987.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Science at Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, Punjab/India in 1974.

Experience:

Graduate Teaching Associate in the English Dept. at OSU Stillwater from Fall 2012- Spring 2020.

High School English Teacher in California from 2001-2008.

Graduate Teaching Associate in the English Dept. at California State Univ., Stanislaus in Spring 2000.

High School Science Teacher in Punjab, India from 1975-78.