

# The Little Bastard Worlds of V. S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* and *A Flag on the Island*

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The dates that V. S. Naipaul himself provides at the ending of each work indicate that the novella *A Flag on the Island* was written while *The Mimic Men* was in progress. The writing of the novel occupied the time from August 1964 to July 1966, a period of over twenty months, similar to the amount of time Ralph Singh, its narrator, indicates it has taken him to write his story. *A Flag on the Island* was written in 1965. The two works are similar in structure in that each is divided into three parts. In each work Naipaul begins *in medias res*, flashes back in the second part to an earlier period in the history of the islands being described, and takes up in the third part at the point where the first part had stopped.

The works also have similar narrators. Each story is told in the first person by a self-searching, self-accusing individual who is keenly aware of the shortcomings of the society he is describing and of his own complicity in helping create or perpetuate these shortcomings. The similarities between Ralph Singh of *The Mimic Men* and Frankie of *A Flag on the Island* must not be pushed too far however, for they are different in one very significant way. Singh is a West Indian and is therefore himself a product of the "little bastard world"<sup>1</sup> that he describes. His problems in finding himself and in working out his relationship to his island and to the world in general are much more complex than those of Frankie who as an American has helped create Ralph Singh's world, and whose own world, if itself synthetic, is certainly not little. Frankie's predominant emotion is one of guilt for what America has done to the rest of the world, especially to helpless places like the Caribbean. He leaves the island overwhelmed and horrified by the words Hilton and Moore-McCormack, the names of large companies which, confident of their power, have set about recreating the world in their own image.<sup>2</sup> The names of these companies toll out the ending of the story, and the life-in-death continuity of the society which it has described.

*The Mimic Men* ends more hopefully because, although, like Frankie, Singh has lost hope in the society, he has managed to salvage himself. Another crucial difference between the two narrators is that in *The Mimic Men* Naipaul is primarily interested in the development of Singh's personality as he wrestles with the difficulty of finding reality, conditioned as he has been to settle for mimicry. Frankie, on the other hand, is used by Naipaul as a point of view from which to describe a society, which always remains more vivid and more important than its narrator.

It is no accident that the novella which focuses on the society should appear more pessimistic than *The Mimic Men* which concentrates on an individual personality, for Naipaul's technique in these works seems to emphasize his growing suspicion of the concrete world and the growing need which each individual has to isolate and define himself if he wishes to have any permanence in this changing, artificial, and synthetic world. The individual must be his own touchstone.

Whereas in *A House for Mr Biswas* Naipaul had used the house and vegetation to suggest positive and admirable directions in Mr. Biswas's life,<sup>3</sup> he is forced to forsake these symbols in these two works so that his technique can be at one with his vision. Perhaps because Ralph Singh is a younger generation Hindu West Indian than Mr. Biswas—many critics have pointed out that Singh is of the same generation as Biswas's son, Anand—he finds it more difficult to attach his aspirations to a house. It is more likely however that the change of values occurred in Naipaul himself before it did in his characters. In these two works Naipaul seems to be asking himself how can a society which is profoundly mimic produce anything which is not itself mimic; how can a man who is not sure what he is produce anything which is genuinely his own. Biswas achieves some sense of himself because he remains throughout his life largely innocent of the corruption of his environment. Five years after writing *Biswas*, however, Naipaul seems to have come to the conclusion that there are many more potentially creative but confused people like Ralph Singh, who succumb to their environment, than innocents like Biswas, who survive. Unlike Biswas then, Ralph Singh builds a house which is, like himself, profoundly mimic. How can he, being what he is, do otherwise? "I was looking through a picture book about Pompeii and Herculaneum. I was struck by the simplicity of the Roman house, its outward austerity, its inner private magnificence; I was struck by its suitability to our climate; I yielded to impulse" (*Mimic Men*, p. 71). Singh's Roman house, we are told, built itself, as he quickly lost interest in it. The incongruity of a Roman house in a West Indian setting is further emphasized by Singh's fashionable American alterations. The Roman *impluvium* becomes an illuminated swimming-pool.

The mimic house of *A Flag on the Island* is even more vulgar, plastic, and Hollywood American: "Selma's house was in the modernistic style of the island. Lawn, garden, a swimming pool shaped like a tear-drop. The roof of the veranda was supported on sloping lengths of tubular metal. The ceiling was in varnished pitchpine. The furnishings were equally contemporary. Little bits of driftwood; electric lights pretending to be oil lamps; irregularly shaped tables whose tops were sections of tree trunks complete with bark" (*Flag*, p. 206). House and decor have nothing to do with Selma, whose former world was poor but tasteful and dignified, and everything to do with the image of the tropics which the Americans have created in their own country, and, more unfortunately, in the Caribbean itself. The narrator, Frankie, says: "We brought the tropics to the island. Yet to the islanders it must have seemed that we had brought America to them" (*Flag*, p. 144). How can the islanders, struggling with a chaotic environment created by slavery and colonialism, convinced, as one of them puts it, that "This place is nowhere" (*Flag*, p. 174), be expected to withstand America? They grab at what they think has been offered them and they actually believe they like living in this modern, unreal world which is the product of American vulgarity and West Indian fantasy. Having no standards of their own, they crave "the guidance of other men's eyes" (*Mimic Men*, p. 19). It is not until a hurricane threatens that the islanders get an opportunity to express the profoundness of their detestation of their new way of life. This hatred though not conscious is real nevertheless. "The world was ending and the cries that greeted this end were cries of joy" (*Flag*, p. 211). There is genuine dismay among the people of the islands when the hurricane passes by without obliterating them, and they are forced to accommodate themselves "to the life that had not been arrested" (*Flag*, p. 213).

This craving by the islanders to escape the horrors of their modern world is shared by Singh of *The Mimic Men* who yearns for "the final emptiness" (*Mimic Men*, p. 10). An attempt to destroy Singh's world is made on the night

of the housewarming party for the Roman house by Singh's bored, rootless, middle-class friends. Without understanding why, they proceed to smash the fittings of the new house: "Damage was satisfying and easy. There rose excited laughter; it seemed that at the first, releasing sound of breaking glass and china a sort of hysteria had set in among our guests" (*Mimic Men*, pp. 74-75). This hysteria is similar to that which Henry of *A Flag on the Island* experiences when he begins to destroy the expensive interior of his nightclub in anticipation of the hurricane.

These pathetic attempts at escape bring only momentary release, but the hurricane and the scenes of destruction do introduce drama into the lives of the people and in doing so they help sharpen their "perception of the world" (*Mimic Men*, p. 214). When the hurricane threatens, the characters of *A Flag on the Island* remove the masks they have assumed for the Americans and become themselves again. And Ralph Singh drives furiously away from the destructive party at the Roman house to the ruins of an old slave plantation to make contact with the reality of the West Indian past. This reality cannot be undone by the simple creation of false Roman or American worlds, or even, once these worlds have been created, by the simple desire to destroy them again.

Naipaul's distrust of the concrete world in the Caribbean goes further than this. Even the vegetation which might seem to the casual observer to be of the soil is shown to have been introduced from elsewhere. Trees and beautiful flowers in all Naipaul's works up to *A House for Mr Biswas* are used to distinguish the creative person from the uncreative, the sensitive from the philistine. Sugar cane, the vegetation of slavery, and ugly flowers which require no care grown by the Tulsis are distinguished from the mango tree of the early Ganesh in Naipaul's first novel and the flowering laburnum at the end of *Mr Biswas*. Naipaul's probing of West Indian history, and the inability of his more recent protagonists to accept unquestioningly the artificiality of their surroundings make it necessary for him to foresake West Indian vegetation and landscape as something positive which West Indians should strive to make contact with. It comes as a revelation to Ralph Singh that the colorful tropical world around him is not a natural one, and that it has not been created by West Indians, but has been conceived by foreign visitors for their own amusement:

He told me about the coconut, which fringed our beaches, about the sugarcane, the bamboo and mango. He told me about our flowers, whose colours we saw afresh in the postcards which were beginning to appear in our shops. The war was bringing us visitors, who saw more clearly than we did; we learned to see with them, and we were seeing only like visitors. In the heart of the city he showed me a clump of old fruit trees: the site of a slave provision ground. From this point look above the roofs of the city, and imagine! Our landscape was as manufactured as that of any great French or English park. But we walked in a garden of hell, among trees, some still without popular names, whose seeds had sometimes been brought to our island in the intestines of slaves. (*Mimic Men*, pp. 146-147)

The young Ralph Singh is shocked that he is looking at his birthplace with the eyes of a foreigner. Frankie the American in *A Flag on the Island* feels remorse that the American imposition of its concept of the tropics on the West Indies further alienates the West Indian from his environment and provides food for mimicry and fantasy:

I used to feel in those days that it was we who brought the tropics to the island. When I knew the town, it didn't end in sandy beaches and coconut trees, but in a tainted swamp, in mangrove and mud. Then the land was reclaimed from the sea, and the people who got oysters from the mangrove disappeared. On the reclaimed land we built the tropics. We put up our army huts, raised our flag, planted our coconut trees and hedges. Among the great wooden buildings with wire-netting windows we scattered pretty little thatched huts. (*Flag*, p. 144)

Passages like these impress the reader with the unreality of the worlds Naipaul is describing in these two works. Tourism has contributed to this unreality in other ways as well. The calypso, which Naipaul admired as the only point at which the Trinidadian touched reality, has now been taken over by people "dressed like calypsonians in the travel brochures" (*Flag*, p. 137). Frankie has no difficulty seeing through their sham: "They're not real. Look, I could put my hand through them. The man with the guitar lifted his arm; my hand went through" (*Flag*, 138). Naipaul's distress at this kind of corruption is expressed through his narrator Frankie who is referred to on one occasion as Frankenstein. Frankie and other Americans like him have created a monster which they can no longer control. Frankie's remorse is contrasted with the self-satisfaction of the monstrosity itself. Miss Emelda, Henry's wife, who has sacrificed her perfectly sound teeth for false ones, is proud because "That mouth cost almost a thousand dollars, you know" (*Flag*, p. 205). The preference for the artificial over the real has become rampant.

The artificial masks that so many people wear make it practically impossible for any real human relationships to develop. People make others into objects they want them to be, lacking any understanding of or regard for their individual dignity. In his imagination Ralph Singh transforms Sandra, the woman he marries, from an insecure and vulnerable person who hides behind a mask of cynicism and aggressiveness into a positive and strong person, because he needs someone to prop him up. Sandra's own selfish transformation of Singh is no more commendable. The reasons for the failure of the marriage are obvious.

Not even sex provides a bridge or a bond between individuals. "We seek sex, and are left with two private bodies on a stained bed. The larger erotic dream, the god, has eluded us. It is so whenever, moving out of ourselves, we look for extensions of ourselves" (*Mimic Men*, p. 18). The failure of Ralph Singh's marriage is a departure from Naipaul's treatment of marriage in his earlier novels such as *The Mystic Masseur*<sup>4</sup> and *A House for Mr Biswas* in which Ganesh and Leela and Biswas and Shama develop loveless marriages into opportunities for learning to respect and understand each other. In both cases, this understanding comes after the married partners have outgrown the need for sexual passion. In *The Mimic Men*, Naipaul describes a number of sexual encounters explicitly, something he has never attempted before, but these scenes, cold and passionless, reassert Naipaul's attitude in his earlier books that sex introduces more barriers between people than it brings down.

Just as dangerous to relationships in the mimic world is the tendency of people to submit themselves to roles invented for them by others. After Sandra goes out of his life Singh replaces her with his friend Browne who plans a political future for him. "He presented me with a picture of myself which it reassured me to study. . . . He presented me with my role"

(*Mimic Men*, p. 188). Singh's relationship with Browne is bound to fail because neither of them is real at this point. Many masks still stand between them. All of Singh's other relationships, from his schoolboy ones to his political ones, are hindered by the mimic nature of the world he lives in.

All the characters in *A Flag on the Island* allow themselves to be transformed to fit the parts the Americans plan for them. First to succumb is Mano who commits suicide because, although he has always secretly wanted to be a runner, he becomes a champion walker under American coaching. Blackwhite, becomes H. J. B. White a writer of angry novels of racial protest at the instigation of his American patrons and publishers. Mano's decision not to live with his new man-made self is more commendable than Blackwhite's, which is to exploit this new gold mine. The real Blackwhite reemerges very briefly at the height of the hurricane: "We saw Blackwhite dancing with Leonard. Blackwhite not white, not black, but Blackwhite as we all would have liked to see him, a man released from endeavour, released from the strain of seeing himself (portrait of the artist: the tribal subconscious) at peace with the world, accepting, like Leonard" (*Flag.*, p. 211). Here as elsewhere Naipaul asserts that real self-awareness releases one from the cells imposed by racial, social, and other obsessions. The individual establishes contact with others on the level of humanity, unhindered by the barriers of race and class. However, the hurricane abates and Blackwhite reverts to being White; the name is significant because although he claims to be an angry black writer, his work is done for and encouraged by white patronage. It is for the sensational palates of white readers.

In both *The Mimic Men* and *A Flag on the Island* Naipaul suggests that unreal worlds are usually inhabited by unreal people, and that meaningful relationships are never possible between mimic men. Many readers, especially West Indian readers, of Naipaul, find this kind of statement about the West Indies depressing and hopeless. In fact, throughout both these novels there is great sympathy and understanding for the predicament of the modern West Indies. How can a small country lacking in resources be expected to withstand the onslaught of the American plastic world? How can a society nurtured in mimicry and self-disgust by a history of slavery and colonialism remain uncontaminated by the unreality of its controllers? In both works Naipaul's sadness at the plight of the small and insignificant is moving indeed.

For Naipaul the promise of political independence offers no real opportunity for the West Indian to achieve self-knowledge and by this means an identity of his own. Instead it affords richer opportunities for mimicry and self-deception. A flag on the island can have no meaning as long as the economy and style of life of the island is controlled by vast foreign companies such as Hilton and Moore-McCormack. One of the characters of the novella sums it up: "I prefer the old Union Jack. It look like a real flag. This look like something make up" (*Flag.*, p. 132). An unreal flag for an unreal island! Neither exists in its own right.

Ralph Singh of *The Mimic Men* quickly learns about the hollowness of his island's independence when he turns politician. For a time he deludes himself that the smell of the sweat of the masses is a more real source of power than the money of foreign investors. This leads him to romanticize his role as leader and liberator, to find virtue in the poverty of the people, and to reduce them again to the level of slaves, a status possibly more dangerous than their original slavery, since they remain unconscious of it: "Whatever was said, the

end was always the same: applause, the path made through the crowd, the hands tapping, rubbing, caressing my shoulder, the willing hands of slaves now serving a cause they thought to be their own" (*Mimic Men*, p. 198). The mature, self-analysing Ralph Singh, who is writing his memoirs, understands this. "So long as our dependence remained unquestioned our politics were a joke" (*Mimic Men*, p. 190). The predicament of the politician in newly independent, economically dependent countries is presented honestly and sympathetically. The reader understands clearly the plight of the politician who finds himself condemned by circumstance to play a role which can only perpetuate the bastard status of his little world. It takes more than flags and politicians to create real independence.

Neither can independence be achieved and mimicry overcome by attempting to romanticize the past and to forge artificial links with India or Africa. Ralph Singh's fantasy that he is an Aryan chieftain being sought by horsemen all over the Central Asian plains has nothing to do with the circumstances under which indentured laborers were brought from India to the West Indies. This fantasy does little to explain to him his relationship to the island on which he considers himself shipwrecker. Similarly ineffectual are the pictures of Haile Selassie which hang in the homes of the Browne family in *The Mimic Men*, and of Blackwhite in *A Flag on the Island* and which seem to represent "a longing for another world" (*Mimic Men*, pp. 167-168) instead of a desire to come to some kind of terms with the history and landscape of the West Indies. Naipaul is convinced that the history of the West Indies is one of brutality and exploitation and he is too rigorous a thinker to allow himself to glamorize and thus ascribe virtue to slavery or colonialism. The bastard world cannot be dealt with by pretending that it is not bastard.

How then can it be dealt with? *A Flag on the Island* offers no real solutions. In the three parts of this novella Naipaul gives us three brilliant pictures of the same place. In Part One, we get a picture of an unreal plastic world which is what the modern West Indies has become as a result of prostituting itself to the tourist and the foreign investor. In Part Two, the picture is that of a real and distinct if limited world. Here Naipaul captures some of the innocence which makes his first work, *Miguel Street*,<sup>5</sup> so attractive. In this section, the people, though not yet known as "characters," are distinctly and interestingly individual. In Part Three, we are plunged into a surreal world. Its tone of hysteria is induced by the approach of the hurricane which the islanders hope will annihilate them. Annihilation is the only hope offered in the novella, and when it does not take place, Frankie, the American narrator, departs from the island. Furthermore, one has the disquieting impression that this departure is not escape, as he is going out into a world as plastic as its bastard offspring.

Frequently, in the *Mimic Men* Ralph Singh tells us that he yearns for extermination. This would be an easy way out of the frustrations of his unreal world. But more powerful than his yearning for extinction is his yearning for order. The novel is about his search for and eventual achievement of this order. His whole life spent moving from "little bastard world" to "little bastard world" has been devoted to this search though he has not always been conscious of this. We meet him first as a foreign student in London living in a household of displaced persons on the fringe of London's reality, wanting desperately to make contact with the city, but unable to. He goes from there back home to Isabella where he joins a group of well-to-do, rootless, foreign inhabitants of the island and lives a life that manages to ignore the history and physical environment of the West Indies, and chooses

to pattern itself on the group's impression of Hollywood. His life becomes even more like that of Eliot's Prufrock, and his tone in recalling the period echoes some of Prufrock's desperation.<sup>6</sup> "And, indeed, after the champagne, the caviar on buttered toast, the barbecue, what was there to do?" (*Mimic Men*, p. 14). We are then told of his schoolboy world where each boy's fantasy life is cultivated to mitigate the narrowness of his real existence. The world of his home is dominated and shattered by the fact that his mother's family are the island's bottlers of Coca-Cola. His privileged position in the society is derived from his association with this foreign product. The next world described is that of independent Isabella, hamstrung and self-deceiving because of its economic dependence on wealthy countries. The last of his succession of little worlds is that of the hotel room to which he retreats and in which he becomes a recluse. It is as unattractive as all the other worlds, but it is a convenient place for him to achieve the detachment that is so necessary to him.

As varied as his worlds are the roles he plays when he inhabits each world. And each role combines both the desire to escape from and to impose order on his life. The Aryan Chieftain of his schoolboy fantasy, the dandified and exotic playboy of his London student days, the husband who relies too heavily on the strength of his wife, the successful businessman, the politician who revels in the game and glamor of politics, and the recluse are all roles adopted in various attempts at controlling and ordering the chaos in which he flounders for most of his life.

As he writes his memoirs, Ralph Singh relives all these roles and all these worlds. He understands that his life which has always seemed to him to be chaotic and directionless has in fact been dedicated fairly relentlessly to a search for order. He knows that he has been distracted in this search by the landscapes of his various worlds, and by his relationships with his fellow inhabitants of these worlds. "I felt again that the reality of landscape and perhaps of all relationships lay only in the imagination" (*Flag.*, p. 132). Frankie makes that comment but it might just as well be Ralph Singh.

The imagination, then, and the personality are what must be isolated and controlled if the individual is to have any control over the worlds that they perceive. Ralph Singh's ruthless honesty and indeed his brutality to himself and his own fantasies help him eventually to learn to distinguish "the lead of reality" from "the gold of the imagination" (*Mimic Men*, p. 10). While the imagination can change any landscape from lead to gold, "the personality hangs together. It is one and indivisible" (*Mimic Men*, p. 183). In his hotel room, as a recluse, Ralph Singh finds in himself something constant which permits him to transcend the meaningless flux of his various bastard worlds, and to make real contact with real things around him. This has only been possible because, unlike Prufrock, he has had the courage to peel off the numerous layers of his masks, and that done, to submit himself to his own scrutiny.

Naipaul's handling of point-of-view in this novel is very delicate. Singh is tentative and groping as the novel opens. Sometimes he is even dangerously like the poseur of his fantasies, but as the process of writing educates him and as he approaches the truth about himself his tone gradually changes and he becomes more confident, more humble, and more tolerant. Many of the statements he makes at the beginning of the novel, he would probably retract at the end, but they have been necessary steps in the process of isolating himself.

But what is hopeful and encouraging about this isolation is that it is not an end in itself. "I have cleared the desks, as it were, and prepared myself for fresh action. It will be the action of a free man" (*Mimic Men*, p. 251). This freedom is significant because throughout the novel one has the sense that Ralph Singh has been imprisoned by his successive roles and worlds. Singh's comment about his friend Browne indicates that he senses that others share his feeling of entrapment: "The role imprisoned him, as once his house . . . had imprisoned him" (*Mimic Men*, p. 211). The freedom achieved by isolation of self is in fact the only effective implement for coping with the world on a basic level. Ultimately, the bastard world can even prove a stimulus to a personality which is aware of its own reality: "So it frequently happens—that many have discovered—that in conditions of chaos, which would appear hostile to any human development, the human personality is in fact more varied and extended" (*Mimic Men*, p. 214). Far from being hopeless about the predicament of the modern West Indian and of modern man, Ralph Singh, by his example, shows how modern man can transcend and be extended by his plastic world. While Frankie of *A Flag on the Island* accepts the inevitable dominance of the synthetic world, Ralph Singh in *The Mimic Men* finds in his own personality an "elemental complexity" (*Mimic Men*, p. 36) which helps him put the plastic world in perspective.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*The Mimic Men*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969. p. 122.

<sup>2</sup>*A Flag on the Island*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969. See p. 127: "Moore-McCormack, Moore-McCormack. Man had become God," and p. 135: "Hilton, Hilton: man as God."

<sup>3</sup>*A House of Mr Biswas*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969. See for instance, pp. 241, 346, 583-4, and 589.

<sup>4</sup>*The Mystic Masseur*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964.

<sup>5</sup>*Miguel Street*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971.

<sup>6</sup>T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," 1917. See, for instance, the following lines:  
 After the cups, the marmalade, the tea  
 Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,  
 Would it have been worth while . . .