

Postcolonial Identity Crisis in the Mimic Men a Novel by V.S.Naipaul

Saman Abdulqadir Hussein Dizayi

Erbil Polytechnic University, Language Center
Hadi Chawishli Strret, Erbil, Iraq

Abstract:

This paper investigates the concepts of Identity and estrangement in the postcolonial novel entitled *The Mimic Men* by V.S. Naipaul. In Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*, Ralph Singh has showed different aspects that reflects his nature of a "prototypical colonial character" who is quite commonly estranged with the biased and pluralistic society he has inhaled most of his breaths in it. For Ralph, identity is a core issue that is depicted by his mimicry of European or Western views on different aspects of life. Also, Ralph's self identification is in strong conflict with that of the Western world. For following the footsteps of colonialists, he has abandoned his home, family and even his self-identity only for the sake of mimicking the West. He has married an Englishwoman and has gone through formal education in the West. The alienation of his identity has resulted in the scattering of his personal being thereby leading towards vulnerability and corruption of his inner self.

Keywords: Identity, Estrangement, Exile, Post colonialism, Postcolonial Novel

1. Introduction

The world has witnessed diversity of exiles, expatriation, mass refugees and resettlement, which have changed the forms of national and individual identities and traditions following the decline of the British Empire and the rise of America as a superpower in the twentieth century. The Third World writing of the twentieth century printed by the emigrants used the dilemmas of the Diasporas with its distinct attributes since every age generates writing which supports and motivates it. A number of these professional novelists, who live as emigrants in either England or America in the postcolonial age, put in to the development of the emigrant writing as well as cope with their homelessness, exiled condition, displacement, and estrangement. An individual living outside his country without legitimate citizenship or feeling the social and cultural void of exile is called an expatriate.

Before writing the novel, Naipaul himself had experienced alienation and different identity changes in his lifetime, clearly depicted in his writings. Trinidad and the Caribbean Islands, share a history characterized as the "bloodiest and most barbaric" [1]. The cultural settings surrounding Ralph can be viewed as ideal places for French and British Empire

to rule. The alienation of people throughout South Asia transformed the regional natives into indentured laborers during the late nineteenth century, under the disguise of sugar production businesses. Trinidad had also gone through several phases of rootlessness, alienation, exile, and oppression during this time, in which Naipaul also wrote his novels. The themes of identity issues, ambivalence, and rootlessness, emerged during colonization.

2. Critical Analysis

In *The Mimic Men*, Ralph Singh shows different aspects that reflect the nature of a "prototypical colonial character" [2], quite commonly confused with the biased and pluralistic society he has inhaled. For Ralph, identity is a core issue, depicted by his mimicry of European or Western views on different aspects of life. His self-identification is in great conflict with how, generally, the Western world views him. In following the footsteps of colonialists, he has abandoned his home, family, and self-identity. He has married an Englishwoman and has been formally educated in the West. His embodiment of Western culture has had a detrimental impact on his life; it has alienated him from his cultural origins, thereby defying the traditional values set forth by his ancestors. The

alienation of his identity has resulted in the scattering of his personal being, resulting in the vulnerability and corruption of his inner self.

Similarly to Naipaul, Fanon and, later, Said have strong beliefs on colonial mimicry, which originated in the disruptive “clear-cut authority of colonial dominance” [3]. The representation of this mimicry can be viewed in the character of Ralph, and the creation of his identity and reality, by accepting colonial language as part of his culture and traditions. Naipaul has imitated the English language by contrasting it with the Hindi language. Words from Hindi language, local reality, and cultural alteration vividly describe the alienation of Ralph’s identity and, most importantly, show his resistance in uprooting his origins, thereby accepting the dominance and authenticity of the English language.

Both Fanon and Said, in their arguments—and Naipaul in his novel—reflect a similar understanding of the acceptance of an alien (colonial) culture. They have warned us of the consequences of the colonized adopting and subsequently accepting the culture of West. Naipaul has deemed this act as an that of “demoralizing their souls” [4], yet he has urged paving new paths for different generations of the complacent state, thus recreating their identity in the complex of the postcolonial era. For this, Naipaul also prefers to communicate in the medium of English, transmitting the colonized person’s feelings and thoughts. Moreover, literary English has been viewed as introducing colonized identity and culture to the world [5].

Hybridity, another kind challenge resulting from colonialism, implies the mixing of discrete and separate modes of living [6]. In multicultural and complex societies, or idealized cultural settings, hybridization of societal aspects occurs quite commonly on the grassroots level, based on mutual respect, equality, and open-mindedness. Most postcolonial writers, including Fanon, Said, and Naipaul, have showcased diversity as an anti-colonial tool of cultural identity and “language shock,” which natives face during the transition phase. Ashcroft et al. [7] have translated this effect as the breaking down of strict imperialistic polarization. This is regarded as the mutual transcultural activities in relation to both colonized and colonials in general.

Hybridity is also referred to as the assimilation of policies that defy the inequality and imbalance of

power relations, thereby masking cultural differences. However, the ideal construct of mutual rather than an equal exchange of cultural diasporas is a part of a colonized community[8]. For Naipaul, Ralph is merely a depiction of someone who has faced severe psychic trauma on the realization that he will never attain the attributes of the colonials he admires. The most significant feature of this trauma includes the impossibility of attaining the whiteness of the colonial imperialist.

For Said, the analysis of colonial vs. colonized relationship, along with their mutual and independent constructions of various subjectivities, is entirely based on the core view of cultural diversity, described as, “No one today is purely one thing” [9]. However, Said and Naipaul consider all cultural systems and statements as part of a space, which Homi Bhabha calls the “third space of enunciation” [10]. Moreover, cultural identity stems out of ambivalence and contradictory space. Thus, Said shares the view that purity of cultural hierarchy is not possible. We might view his *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) as his strongly held views of the importance of useful capacities within the connected space between cultures having both colonial as well as postcolonial provenance.

Considering the notion of estrangement (or alienation) Said (1993) noted the willingness to descend into this area of conflict (“alien territory”), and that this may open the pathway toward international culture conceptualization. Said’s contention about liberation shows its revelation of the contrapuntal nature of identity in the exilic area;

Liberation as an intellectual mission, born in the resistance and opposition to the confinements and ravages of imperialism, has now shifted from the settled, established, and domesticated dynamics of culture to its unhoused, decentred, and exilic energies, energies whose incarnation today is the migrant, and whose consciousness is that of the intellectual and artist in exile, the political figure between domains, between forms, between homes, and between languages. From this perspective then all things are indeed counter, original, spare, strange. [11]

This might also be purely dependent not on the “exotism of multiculturalism” ... “but [also] on the

inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity , [12].

Proceeding with Said's interpretation of cultural diversity, and that "Survival in fact is about the connections between things," Ashcroft et al. [13] have noticed that this notion derives from the "in-between space" that encompasses its meaning and, most importantly, it also includes the "cultural burden" that actually enhances the perception of mixed cultures.

Naipaul shares some views with Said. In *The Mimic Men*, Naipaul has presented a fictional character of Indian Brahmin origins, who has been subjected to alienation from colonial culture during the early 1840s. Rather than accepting the cultural notions and the mechanics of cultural diversity, Naipaul has showed intense dislike for hybridity. He has also shown great discomfort in the intermingling of things [14]. For Naipaul, origin, purity, and essences are everything. Culhaoglu has described Naipaul's view of hybridity as an obsession for purity [15]. Naipaul is convinced that the cultural shock faced by Trinidad and other former colonies is a violation that includes intermingling of cultures that destroys the cultural fabric of that specific society. Naipaul is surely no idealist and knows that the society can never attain a complete and utter degree of cultural purity; however, he incorporates a desire for the attainment of the supreme level of purity through his characters' psyches, along with the awareness that the characters can never attain their original identities and original values. For Naipaul, the question of adjusting within a hybrid societal setting has never been a good idea, and is quite commonly about criticizing the change as part of colonization in post-colonized societies.

Said argues the notion of cultural diversity and identity as part of colonial presence, always, on the one hand, ambivalent and fragmented between its outward appearance as authoritative and original and, on the other hand, its enunciation as different and repetitive. Bearing that in mind, Said has argued that colonial discourse does not commonly demarcate between "self," "a home culture," and more importantly, "an alien culture"; nevertheless, it is about "self," "us" and "other." As he states, "Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental" [16]. The construct of defining a mother culture and its bastards is a

rather strong stance that props up the arguments presented by Naipaul in *The Mimic Men*. These writers interpret similarly diversity and its association with cultural imbalance in colonial societies.

As previously illustrated, Fanon's perspective includes repetition as a strong force that connects mimicry to slavery. In most postcolonial societies that have evolved out of exploitation and slavery, hybridity usually transforms itself into mimicry of an alien culture. As described in Ferdous [17], mimicry is the strategy for attaining colonial knowledge and power." In Said's view, colonial mimicry is the strong urge and desire for attaining recognizable and reformed identity; rather than reflecting the other. Thus, Ralph's assertion that he was fascinated quite less by the act and the labor as compared to the order and calm, that the act might have implied [18]. It is evident that colonial discourse encourages colonized subjects like Ralph to mimic the cultural habits, institutions, assumptions and values of the colonizer by following his footsteps.

Ashcroft et al. ([19] describe mimicry as the blurred copying of the traits that threaten individual identity. Mixing cultures is a mere introduction of synthetic positioning and cultural relativism that includes the resolution of two cultural dialects. It also incorporates a form of "colonial authority, together with its content that has somehow 'terrorized' authority with the deception of identification, along with mockery as well as mimicry"[20].

These definitions also describe the complicated relationship between the colonized and colonizer. But the ambivalence of these two diverse powers describes the fluctuating relationship between mockery and mimicry. Mimicry is an ambivalent condition because it requires different similar and dissimilar aspects. Furthermore, it is also related to the perception of an incomplete as well as "partial transformation of colonized to colonizer"; however, it also includes remaining different under the microscope of Naipaul's creation of Ralph, educated in an alien culture and subsequently married to blend in with colonial society.

Thus, *The Mimic Men* describes a shifting political dynamic of a colonized society. More importantly, it is the story of Singh, a victim of ignorance, poverty, and who lacks natural talent [21]. He has enjoyed great public eminence and materialistic success in his life as compared to otherwise similar literary

characters. As part of his foreign education in London, he recognizes and later articulates the various wrong-doings of his alien and sophisticated society. However, regardless of his acute consciousness and superior nature, he is no less immune to the cultural shock or alienation because of his confusing and, most importantly, fragmented past. In reality, this has enhanced his alienation to the colonized environment rather than helping him blend into the colonized society.

There was no one to link my present with my past, no one to note my consistencies or inconsistencies. It was up to me to choose my character, and I chose the character that was easiest and most attractive. I was the dandy, the extravagant colonial, indifferent. [22]

Naipaul, as Ralph Singh, has also exhibited his West Indian experience, one that is surely a vivid elaboration of the West and East Indian psyche, along with the common reactions of these different and conflicting Creole, English, and Indian cultures. Naipaul as Singh, the confessor, narrator, and visionary, comments on different aspects of postcolonial societies that include politics, power, and racial and social interactions between colonized and colonial beings. In Singh's experience considering the life of London, he soon comes to a realization that a great deal of relentless characterizes his life in his fantasy city. During his stay in his landlord Mr. Shylock's house, he has encountered the same feelings of discomfort of other immigrants experiencing psychic trauma. He describes the house as "a conglomeration of private cells. In the city as nowhere else we are reminded that we are individuals, units" [23].

The suffering of Lien, the Maltese housekeeper with an illegitimate son, has also inspired Singh to handle harsh environments while realizing that "We become what we see of ourselves in the eyes of others" (Naipaul 1967, p. 20)[24]. Lien's predicament forces him to see that he has paid little or no attention to his physical looks, always having reassured himself that he is "no monster" (p. 20). However, the development of his mimicry, considering the colonial environment, has allowed him to move further and to develop an attraction to his home on the island Isabella [25].

Said has mentioned this uneasiness in the characters who reflect colonial discourse, quite commonly

compelled by the ambivalence of environment and interactions between the colonial and the colonized. The core reason behind this is that colonial subjects cannot completely create what Ashcroft et al. (2004, p. 13) [26] describe as the "replica" of different traits and social aspects of an ideal colonizer. Said (1984) has also argued that the detrimental aspect of mimicking a foreigner is the "double vision," or "they are aware of at least two cultures" so that greatly revealing of "the ambivalence of colonial discourse," but also hindering with its authority (p. 148.)[27]. Moreover, this double vision also accounts for a provision for resistance that unsettles the foundations of colonial centrality and subjectivity.

A follow-up of Said's arguments of postcolonialism, Naipaul has further explained the problems faced as part of Ralph's split identity in *The Mimic Men*. Regarding this phenomenon, Naipaul has taken the position that there exists no alternative that can stop a colonized person from becoming a mimic man, within the mere depiction of centralized colonial power. This analysis clearly shows his perception of cultural power in literature. Naipaul's approach to mimicry has a somewhat striking resemblance to Said's views, for example, "exile is never the state of being satisfied, placid, or secure" (Said 1984, p. 148)[28], thus "the performance of mimicry is masked by ambivalence" (Ferdous 2015, p. 4)[29]. For the multilayered and ambivalent idea of mimicry in *The Mimic Men*, depicting the complex nature of mimicry, Naipaul, as Singh, says,

I paid Mr. Shylock three guineas a week for a tall, multi-mirrored, book shape room with a coffin-like wardrobe . . . I thought Mr. Shylock looked distinguished like a lawyer or business person or politicians. He had the habit of strolling the bot of his ear inclining his head to listen. I thought the gesture was attractive; I copy it. (Naipaul 1967, p. 7)[30]

This passage elaborately depicts the layers and complex nature of mimicry. It reflects not only Singh copying the traits of his landlord but touches on the remorse of post-war Europe regarding the Jews, the guilt embedded in the name Shylock. As a narrator, Ralph has been encouraged to follow the footsteps of a person who has exploited him. The mockery that has been presented as a quiescent version, surely; it is not Shylock's mockery that forms a part of narrator's mimicry but the process of

colonization incorporated as part of cultural understanding. Considering the above example, Ralph's character finely depicts an object of the colonial chain; however, it is also an appropriate colonized subject [31].

The Mimic Men is not simply a novel; rather, it is an attempt to magnify the conditions and surroundings of displaced expatriates within a colonized world. In his novels, Naipaul has used to great degree a confessional tone as part of his exploration, together with in-depth analysis of problems and woes faced by expatriates. They are fine examples of authenticity and the genuine, emphasizing the protagonist's sense of discontent, alienation and, most importantly, the search for stable values and rooted identity. In *The Mimic Men* he has presented a profound understanding of alienation within three different cultures. Singh has neither rejected his previous values and traditions of Indian origin, nor has he completely adjusted to the Caribbean culture. Finally, Naipaul's protagonist character has failed to become a part of London and, more precisely, the colonial empire. His failure to do so has turned him into a deracinated individual with an uprooted identity.

The vision of a three-time exile and his alienation has brought Singh into a newly formed dimension, as reflected in *The Mimic Men*. Singh has acquired success, money, and power following the easiest way. Like any other pragmatic politician, he decries dishonesty, but hides his feelings, making him a mimic man and a character who has identity issues. He presents the picture of a person with a pretentious nature concealed behind the face of intellectual sophistry, having shallow or a lack of values in his character. Nevertheless, Singh is also quite aware of his mimicry in life. Surely, he has little or no affection and commitment to society or to his life. Defining his mimic obsession he says, "We pretend to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New world, one unknown corner of it, with all its reminders of the corruption that came so quickly to the news" [32]. The fragility and uncertainty of his character clearly reflect the corruption of the human soul.

It is worthwhile to note that the educational system also constitutes what is called a "privileged instrument" [33], which allows colonized individuals to follow the same cultural steps as the colonialist, playing their roles as if colonials. This implies wearing masks that do not fit in any way,

considering the characters' daily lives in the empire. However, problems start arising whenever the colonized individual starts believing the roles and characters he imitates. This mimicry and imitation, following both Said and Naipaul, achieves the goal of the imperial strategy. Said, in *Reflections on Exile*, recalled that mimicry of colonial culture is the desire to attain recognition and be reformed; however, the differences between the colonized and the colonizer are quite similar but not the same in all contexts. This idea of not attaining the level of perfection, and the impossibility of becoming the same, also highlights the alienated nature of the colonized. On the other hand, it also pronounces the degree of the cultural ambivalence of colonized people, considering their struggle for an authentic identity they strive to attain for the rest of their lives. On one end, the complexity and demarcation of mimicry and hybridity are quite difficult to define; on the other, some cases define the extent to which mimicry has an impact on diversity.

Through examination of Naipaul's novel, it is well evident that the discourses of slavery and subordination are quite fickle among colonized people in both colonial and metropolitan settings. Apart from that, the significant impact of education appears, along with other degrees of mimicry on some colonized subjects' mimicry and their identity diasporas within the postcolonial period. This is reflected in Naipaul's protagonist Singh. He has tried to mimic and make himself into a colonizer since his childhood, which has hindered his ability to assess his behaviors and to create an authentic identity until his early forties.

Most of the negative outcomes of Ralph's mimicry have stemmed from the deconstructive representation he has formed on Isabella. He has spent most of his life on little more than this island, on which he forms, or is formed with, an outlook for achieving the colonialist dream. His family links with Coca-Cola business owners give him some measure of social prestige. Otherwise, the island is a place with a severe lack of opportunity, deprivation, and homelessness. Thus, his origins there amount to a self-created prison from which he eagerly escapes by creating a sphere outside it, thinking about his glorious ancestors. He has also done so by changing his name, without telling his parents, and has tried to identify himself with wealthy relatives. Moreover, he has also detested his father's actions and behavior toward his maternal family, mainly because of its higher social status within colonial society.

Thus Ralph has imagines himself as a fictional character to aid him in coping with the homelessness and origins he has felt quite ashamed of since the beginning of his story. In conjunction with the negative images of island, he has faced quite the opposite and yet aggrandized reality. For this reason he has not realized any ridicule behind most of his attitudes. He has instead showed a level of imitation when on his first trip to London, he copies Mr. Shylock's habit, for example, of stroking his ear lobe and then inclining forward to listen.

At the outset of the novel Singh has started to express his fragmented feelings using pen and paper. He describes his experience in the boarding house as a way to bring about some meaning in his life, moreover, for overcoming or finding a way of redemption for the crisis he faced as a child. The deepest feelings of his life are his loneliness and his sense of being adrift, also experienced by his father, but in a more diverse perspective. With the narration of Ralph's life in flashback, he shows his disorganized memories, depicting his father as a figure idealized by various missionaries who have dwelled on Isabella. For instance, a missionary lady describes his father as the person who "had the marks of grace" and someone who has never "hesitated for the protection of missionaries" so that most of the people could "receive the Gospel of grace" [34]. Thus, Ralph has not much to rely on in terms of grace; he must continue building an identity from something besides his memories.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the inception of Naipaul's Ralph Singh brings forward different outlooks of an alienated life under colonial dominance. From the very outlooks of mimicry to complete loss of identity; Ralph has gone through different phases in his life. His early life as a Ranjit Singh along with his transformation as Ralph Singh has brought forward different aspects of the identity crisis, ambivalence and hybridity. The character's sense of mimicry and identity issues was not present at the very beginning. His early life education in English school has alienated him from his very Indian roots and ancestral culture and tradition. The development of such diversified outlook has left in complete despair and turmoil. Bhabha theory also strongly adheres to Naipaul's outlook for an alien – a person who mimics foreign culture with no cultural background left him. V.S. Naipaul's identity formation and its crisis of a postcolonial subject

through the character of Ralph in *The Mimic Men*, related to self consciousness of his reality. *The Mimic Men* undoubtedly is a novel of postcolonial identity creation; it is quite about ideas and negotiations of minds and conceptualizing the world throughout self awareness.

References

- [1] Çulhaoğlu, T. Construction Of Identity In Vs Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*, *Journal of International Social Research*, Vol. 8. No.38, pp. 88-102, 2015.
- [2] Ferdous, F. Hybridity and Mimicry: The Location of Culture and Identity in V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* and *The Mimic Men*, *Express, International Journal of Multi Disciplinary Research*, pp. 1-16,2015.
- [3] Naipaul, V.S. *The Mimic Men*. London: Andre Deutsch.1967 Print.
- [4] Ashcroft, B. Gareth G, and Helen, T.(1989). *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures*, London: Routledge. 1989.
- [5] Said, Edward. *Culture and imperialism*, Vintage publishers. 1993.
- [6] Bhabha, H. *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994.
- [7] Gourevitch, Philip. Naipaul's World, *Commentary*, 98(2), pp.27-32. 1994.
- [8] Mishra, K. Sense Of Alienation And Identity Crisis In Naipaul's Fiction: *The Mimic Men*, pp. 161-167, 2013.
- [9] Martins, A P. Transgenerational crises of identity: growing up as colonial subjects in VS Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* and Luís Cardoso's *the crossing: a story of East Timor*, pp. 1-18. 2011.



Saman Dizayi received the PhD degree in English Literature from Istanbul Aydin University in 2017 and MA degree in Salahaddin University in 2007. During 2007-2012, worked as dean assistant at Erbil Polytechnic University, from 2017-2018 Head of Translation Department at Cihan University-Erbil, currently director of Language center at Erbil Polytechnic University.