

Identity Crisis in V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*

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Abstract

*This paper explores the identity crisis of the protagonist Ralph Singh in the novel *The Mimic Men* by V.S. Naipaul. With the increasing trend of migration of people in the postwar era, the immigrants who leave their lands and settle in the host lands face multiple problems such as the identity crisis. Ralph Singh who is depicted as the protagonist in the novel suffers from the trauma because of his loss of identity crisis, which gets reflected through his writing of memoirs that indicates the construction of an authentic and dignified identity for postcolonial individuals like his own. His memoirs show how his ancestors had migrated to Isabella, a British colony in the Caribbean, a long time ago. He embraces his reality of being a colonized individual, but is reluctant to embrace his hybrid identity. He regards mimicry and hybridity as negative forces to weaken and endanger the colonized ones' identity. In course of dealing with the identity crisis of Ralph Singh, the postcolonial theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall and Edward Said and the critics such as Saman Abdulqadir H.D., Dr S. Sophia Christinia etc. are used. Thus, this paper deals with the identity crisis of Ralph Singh which is caused by mimicry, displacement, alienation, rootlessness and hybridity.*

Keywords: Postcolonial Novel, Identity crisis, Mimicry, Displacement, Alienation, Hybridity, Trauma, Expatriates, Rootlessness

The Mimic Men is a postcolonial novel written by V.S. Naipaul which explores the protagonist, Ranjit Ralph Singh's identity crisis. Ralph Singh is of the Indian origin whose ancestors had migrated to Isabella, a British Colony in the Caribbean, a long time ago, which indicates that Singh's background is a blending of two cultures. Because of displacement from the East to the West through the migration, his identity is endangered. Saman Abdulqadir Hussein Dizayi writes, "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" (1). It indicates how and when Ralph Singh's ancestors migrated to the Caribbean. According to Frank A. Ninkovich, an identity crisis is a period of disorientation in which values and relationships once taken for granted are thrown into questions such as "who am I?" and "where do I belong?" (16). His novels are the postcolonial novels which deal with the issues of identity such as themes of the Third World cultural uncertainty, which *The Mimic Men* reflects. Ralph Singh's identity crisis is caused by various factors such as mimicry, displacement, alienation, rootlessness, and hybridity.

Mimicry is a major cause of the identity crisis of the immigrants, which is shown by most of the postcolonial writers whether they are theorists or novelists. Ralph Singh imitates his name from the French name. Tahsin Culhaoglu comments on Ralph Singh's name, "He changes this name into Ralph Singh and signs himself "R. R. K. Singh" in the name of mimicking Deschampsneufs, the son of a famous ex-slave-owner French family on Isabella" (12). In *The Mimic Men*, V.S. Naipaul's central character, Ralph Singh coming to London from Trinidad starts mimicking the whites. Naipaul writes:

...I had nothing but admiration. I was not used to the social modes of London or to the physiognomy and complexities of the North, and I thought Mr Shylock looked distinguished, like a lawyer or businessman or politician. He had the habit of stroking the lobe of his ear and inclining his head to listen. I thought the gesture was attractive; I copied it. (5)

Ralph Singh's imitation of Mr Shylock indicates immigrants' mimicry of the British norms, behavior and culture. Even, Dizayi expresses similar views commenting on *The Mimic Men*, "For Ralph, identity is a core issue that is 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" (920). Thus, his mimicry of the Western life style endangers his self-identity. But, Derek Walcott does not take mimicry negatively. In his essay 'The Caribbean : Culture or Mimicry?', Derek Walcott refutes Naipaul's concept of mimicry included in Naipaul's novel '*The Mimic Men*'. Walcott quotes Naipaul's saying 'Nothing has ever been created in the West Indies and nothing will ever be created'. Naipaul's such a saying indicates how he underestimates and devalues the Caribbean people and their culture. As a response to this, Walcott argues 'Nothing will always be created in the West Indies, for quite a long time , because what will come out of there is like nothing one has ever seen before'. In *Critical Theory Today*, Lois Tyson writes, "Thus, colonialist ideology, which is inherently Eurocentric, was a pervasive force in the British schools established in the colonies to inculcate British culture and values in the indigenous peoples and thereby forestall rebellion" (368). It reveals the Eurocentric system as a model that becomes a great temptation for the immigrants or expatriates to mimic, which is also known as their desiring whiteness. Mainly, their imitation of the Whites reflects how even in the postcolonial era the colonized are under the hegemony of the colonizers. In this context, Homi K. Bhabha's theory of mimicry which is a large concept of visualizing the postcolonial situation as a kind of binary opposition between the colonizers (authority) and the colonized (oppressed) is very meaning. In *Of Mimicry and Man*, Bhabha defines mimicry, "Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed recognizable Other, as a subject of 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 excesses, its difference" (86). Thus, Bhabha's concept of mimicry which is central to colonial discourse seems to show how expatriates or the colonized ones like Ralph Singh suffer from identity crisis in the postcolonial era.

Ralph Singh's sense of dislocation and displacement also explores his identity crisis in the novel. He was born in Isabella, an island in the Caribbean. He has idealized and imitated colonizers' behaviour and lifestyle from the very childhood. As he felt that he was born in the wrong place, he always longed to leave the place and finally went to London where he again faces dislocation. He, living in exile in London, writes memoirs of his life to get rid of the trauma of dislocation and displacement. Naipaul depicts Ralph Singh's devastated and torn psychological state:

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. It was something I had tried more than once before, and waited for the response in the eyes of others. 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. Shipwreck: I have used this word before. With my island background, it was the word that always came to me. And this was what I felt I had encountered again in the great city: this feeling of being adrift, a cell of perception, little more, that might be altered, if only fleetingly, by any encounter. (26-27)

Ralph Singh's feeling of his total loss becomes clear. He felt displaced and shipwrecked at Isabella and London. He felt more devastated in London than he did in Isabella because of his Indian roots. His feelings of displacement or dislocation is similar to Salman Rushdie's. Rushdie also regards displacement as a cause of identity crisis. In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie writes, " my present

that is foreign and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time” (9). According to Dizayi, Naipaul’s novels show the horrible picture of displaced immigrants in the postcolonial era. Dizayi writes, “*The Mimic Men* is not simply a novel; 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” (924). In this context, Michael V. Angrosino comments, “For Naipaul, the “colonial” is not just any oppressed or exploited member of what is frequently called the “Third World.” Rather, to be a “colonial” implies that the psychological loss of identity which is the result of oppression has occurred within a context of spatial displacement” (2). Naipaul seems to project the bitter aspects of displaced state of the immigrants, whose identity according to him is in crisis. However, Stuart Hall gives the dynamic aspects of identity, which means identity is fixed and has no fixed boundary. Hall writes about cultural identity as, “...is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which has made no fundamental mark. It is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return” (395). Ralph in *The Mimic Men* does not seem to accept the movable and dynamic aspects of identity as Hall does. Thus, displacement causes his identity crisis.

One powerful cause of Ralph Singh’s identity crisis is his strong sense of alienation because in place of assimilating himself with the colonized environment, he feels alienated. His description of student life through the flash back indicated how fluid and hollow his past life was because of alienation. Naipaul depicts Ralph’s alienation:

In London I had no guide. There was no one to link my present with my past, no one to note my inconsistencies 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 to scholarship. In fact my income was small, and the allowance I had fixed for myself was half of this; I didn’t think I could be happy spending without earning. (20)

It indicates Ralph Singh’s pathetic plight of suffering from estrangement in London, which was then the center of imperialism in the world. Dizayi comments on Ralph Singh’s alienation as:

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. (923)

Thus, his superior education i.e. his British system of education also becomes unable to help him blend into the colonized environment. Dizayi comments on Naipaul, “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” (924). Naipaul writes Ralph Singh’s trauma of alienation even in his childhood in Isabella:

...childhood was for me a period of incompetence, bewilderment, solitude and shameful fantasies. It was a period of burdensome secrets...and I longed for nothing so much as to walk in the clear air of adulthood and responsibility, where everything was comprehensible and I myself was as open as a book. I hated my secrets. A complying

memory has obliterated many of them and edited my childhood down to a brief cinematic blur. Even this is quite sufficiently painful. (109)

Ralph Singh writes his memoir reflecting his childhood at the private hotel in the Kensington High Street in London, which reflects his nothingness, chaos, darkness, emptiness, meaninglessness, insecurity and homelessness. Ravi Kumar Mishra also comments on Ralph Singh expressing similar views, "In fact, his ability to rationalize his own condition sharpens rather than reduces his total alienation from his environment and his final rejection of an active life" (162). In this context, S. Sophia Christina writes:

In *The Mimic Men*, one comes across a wide and extended knowledge of the writer's concept of isolation as the central protagonist is the victim of the three cultures, Indian, Caribbean and British. The irony of the situation does not prevail in the novel as the central character goes for Indian ancestry nor he is able to reconcile with the Caribbean culture, but decides to be in London for the quest of his identity. The protagonist's failure of searching his roots makes him totally an outlander in any culture. (23)

Thus, according to Christina, the central character, Ralph Singh's alienation is caused by the cultural clash between three cultures, which endangers his identity.

The Mimic Men reflects Ralph Singh's rootlessness as this term is related to the immigrants' life in diaspora. People have always tried for a better life since the beginning of human civilization. They have been migrating leaving their homes to better countries in quest of better opportunities. So, they face dislocation, exile and rootlessness, which cause their identity crisis. When people leave their homeland which reflects the root and settles in a foreign country, it is natural that they become rootless. Because of the rootlessness, the immigrants do not have even feelings of recognition. Naipaul shows Ralph Singh's search for identity in *The Mimic Men*. The question of identity is difficult for all, but for the immigrants like Ralph Singh, it is very intricate. Naipaul's statement, "There are many of us around living modestly and without recognition in small semi-detached suburban houses" (8) indicates Ralph Singh's problem of identity. Mishra also discovers Ralph Singh's trauma of rootlessness and comments, "Like a lost soul in search of a resting place, this rootless, homeless progeny of the New World wanders on. But Singh is really a body in search of a soul; a life in pursuit of an authentic identity; a personality in need of approval and reassurance" (163). Bruce King comments:

After the failed attempt to reconnect himself to India and then return to England, Naipaul had become like Singh an uprooted colonial, a permanent homeless exile, wedded to his writing and his desk, seemingly writing about the upheavals and turmoils of the colonial and postcolonial world, but in actuality giving order to his own life through writing. Singh continually refers to disorder and the need to find order. He claims that colonial societies lack the cultural, racial and historical homogeneity, and the resources to satisfy expectations. (73)

Bruce King means to say that Ralph Singh's problem of identity is like Naipaul's, so *The Mimic Men* reflects Naipaul's autobiographical element as well.

One major reason why Naipaul's protagonist Ralph Singh suffers from the problem of identity crisis is he does not accept and enjoy his hybrid identity. Being an expatriate in Isabella and London, marrying a white girl and mimicking the White culture, he lives a hybrid life. Hybridity is one of the most important postcolonial concepts to understand the mixed culture of the immigrants. Homi Bhabha is a leading theorist in postcolonial studies whose theory of hybridity is highly

influenced by Western poststructuralists and theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and Michael Foucault. According to Bhabha, there is an element of cultural negotiation between the culture of the colonizers and the colonized when they come together. He states that cultural production is always most productive when it is most ambivalent. In *Location of Culture*, he writes his theory of hybridity as:

Colonial hybridity is not a problem of genealogy or identity between two different cultures which can then be resolved as an issue of cultural relativism. Hybridity is a problematic of colonialist representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledge enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority- its rules of recognition. (114)

Bhabha focuses on the historical movement of hybridity. The whole novel shows his quest for identity because he suffers from identity crisis. According to Dizayi, "Rather than accepting the cultural notions and the mechanics of cultural diversity, Naipaul has showed intense dislike for hybridity" (922). Naipaul's Ralph Singh like the writer hates hybridity as he regards cultural purity as the essence of cultural identity. Tahsin Culhaoglu's comment, "Ralph and Naipaul's idea, is a model of constructing an authentic and dignified identity" shows how Naipaul or Ralph Singh values cultural purity going against hybridity. Dizayi again argues, "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" (922). According to Edward Said, the positive aspects of hybridity should be embraced. Said argues, "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). Said's book *Culture and Imperialism* focuses on the impossibility of cultural purity. Thus, as Ralph Singh does not embrace the positive and real aspects of hybridity as Bhabha and Said do, he thinks that the vulnerability and corruption of his soul is caused by hybrid identity.

Literature is said to be a mirror of human society. Postcolonial novels such as *The Mimic Men* reveal the postcolonial state of the colonized states, where the colonized immigrants feel the traumatic experience of identity crisis. Hence, *The Mimic Men* should not be read merely as a novel. Instead, it is a novel which depicts the life, identity and culture of the immigrants or expatriates in the colonized world. The identity crisis of the immigrants such as Ralph Singh gets reflected through the novel. Besides, postcolonial theoretical concepts such as mimicry and hybridity become very powerful ideas to use in showing Ralph Singh's identity crisis. Likewise, different theorists such as Bhabha, Said, Hall etc. and critics strengthen the writing. Thus, *The Mimic Men* reflects the protagonist Ralph Singh's quest for identity as he thinks his identity is endangered by mimicry, displacement, alienation, rootlessness and hybridity.

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