

Fragmented Selves: Exploring Alienation and Postcolonial Identity Crisis in V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*"

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Abstract

The paper aims to determine and investigate sense of postcolonial alienation, estrangement and identity crisis in V.S Naipaul's postcolonial work The Mimic Men. The novel portrays an individual Ralph Singh possessed with a prototypical colonial nature. He lives in a pluralistic society which estranges him with its biased nature, develops venom against colonized individuals, engulfs their identity, depicts them as mimic men, portray their different aspects of life as inferior and finally force them to be victim of identity crisis. Ralph mimics Western attitude towards life, develops a conflict with sense of self identification and Western world, follows the colonialist mindset, abandons self identity, home, family and mimics west. He prefers to get education in west, marries an English woman, alienates himself from indigenous identity, scatters his personal being, exposed to vulnerability and ultimately corrupts his inner self.

Introduction

Countless exiles have been witnessed by world causing disintegration of indigenous identity among the individuals. The phenomenon of expatriation, process of migration, problems of resettlements of mass refugees in migrated territories of the world have caused to change individual identities. The literature, especially the postcolonial literature of every age deals with dilemmas of Diaspora with its distinct attributes. A great deal of writers who have personally witnessed or experienced the exile, immigration, homelessness, displacement and estrangement also experienced the issue of their identity in postcolonial world. Those writers have also experienced citizenship without legitimacy finally became a social and cultural void of exile that lead them towards identity crisis and Naipaul is one of those writers. He experienced alienation, before writing the novel *The Mimic Men*, and faced different identity issues in his life depicting them in his writings.

The colonization, in actual senses was the breeding ground for multiple issues like identity, ambivalence, immigration, rootlessness and displacement. The process of colonization revolves around binaries where the colonizers ascertain their superiority in all walks of life and colonized are labeled with multiple negative adjectives. Their own self seems to be civilized against the uncivilized colonized nations. Even the culture of colonized cannot escape from this invasion of colonizers. This situation results in emergence of a colonized wish to become equal or at least close to the colonizers. Moreover, colonized masses prefer to migrate to colonizers' territories to fulfill their dream of being equal to colonizers. They live with this obsession and fall inevitably to the victim of identity crisis. In this situation, they feel baffled and perplexed about their identity as they do not belong to their own culture, native land, and identity and even do not possess any identity from the migrated land. They have to live without any clear identity.

Present article portrays the issue of identity crisis in the light of V.S Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*. Naipaul, an Indian by ethnicity, a Trinidadian by his nativity and British by education and residence experienced all that a colonized individual may experience in the strict sense of the word. He got exposure of many cultures while at Trinidad that remained a British colony for many years. He got alienated from native land of his birth and lived at place totally different from his cultural roots (Mehni, 2015). He faced many identity issues and wrote his autobiographical novel *The Mimic Men* (1967). Ralph, mouthpiece of Naipaul actually faces the identity crisis during various stages of his life. Ralph faced the same identity issues at Isabella as Naipaul faced at Trinidad.

Western culture has left a great deal of impact on his personality both internally and externally. Ralph adopts the English life style and faces the dilemma of identity crisis constantly.

Literature review

Mann (1988) argues that the novel *The Mimic Men* portrays consequences of imperialism from both psychological and political perspectives. He further argues that it will be a great folly if the novel is analyzed with consideration of political perspective and contrary to this psychological problems left by colonial world on colonized are overlooked. Cudjoe (1988) is of the view that there are multiple perspectives and dimensions in the novel *The Mimic Men* ranging from colonization, decolonization, history, culture, race, as well as politics and through character of Ralph the writer depicts all these aspects. Ralph adds his experience as a colonized subject in colonial world. Ralph's character is a victim of chaos that shifts from past, present and future. In the words of Mann (1988) condition of Singh presents a social and psychological disturbance. He is unable to portray his personality explicitly. His personality, in postcolonial terms has to bear the weight of "otherness" that is half refuse of "self" with reference to Lemaire's (1977) assertions.

According to Kelly (1989), Ralph remains in search of occasions to reduce the pain of being an alienated and displaced colonial individual and for the expression of self and reduction of this pain he adopts profession of writing memoirs that seems to him as final solution for his disoriented, digressed and dislocated personality. Meanwhile, Morris (1975) is of the view that Ralph has to sacrifice his Indian identity and secures and lives in an imaginative world that is in contrast to his original and real world. He portrays that in Isabella, where Ralph as an Indian lives, loses Hindu rituals and connection with Indian rituals, customs, and traditions hence doomed to dislocation, alienation and isolation. His originality is diluted with the passage of time and attains its peak through his interracial marriage that causes alienation and dislocation that is further termed as genetic dislocation and alienation by Rob Nixon (1922). Moreover, there is nostalgia in his character and Ralph idealizes his past. According to Nixon, by idealizing his past history Ralph actually aims to reconstruct and re-establish his identity. But, in real sense of the word the sense of emotional security and identity are unachievable in that society where he lives at present.

Although these critics have opined on different postcolonial issues in the selected novel but the study argues that their assertions and analysis are not full and final. There are still gaps when looking the novel from psychological point of view looking it from the perspective of identity crisis and sense of alienation. The study aims to fill gaps in the light of contemporary research.

Methodology

Present research is qualitative in nature where the text of novel has been analyzed in the light of postcolonial theory. There are following research questions formulated to analyze the issue of alienation and postcolonial identity crisis in *Mimic Men*

Research questions

1. How does writer deal with the issues of alienation and identity the novel *The Mimic Men*?
2. How do different circumstances lead Ralph to become the victim of identity crisis?

Theoretical concerns

This research is based on postcolonial theory with special reference to identity crisis issue. The colonizers are with a mindset to exploit the colonized by making them reveal that they are inferior, uneducated and have no manners of civilization. In this way the colonizers engulf the identity of colonized individual. The very identity that involves the values, beliefs, experiences and relationships that further shapes the sense of subjective and personal self. The person with real identity continues to live with a continuous developing self image that strengthens overtime. But

the individual living in postcolonial world becomes the victim of identity crisis and questions his sense of self or place in the postcolonial world. The concept of identity crisis develops in the psychological works of Erik Erikson who believes that formation of identity was one of the important conflicts that people face during the course of their lives.

Data analysis and discussions

The Mimic Men (1967) is set in a newly independent country named Caribbean that is island of Isabella and presents its pessimistic picture. Although the colony has got independence and secures autonomous position but it is still out of order due to colonized experience of its inhabitants. This colonial experience has caused the inhabitants to feel inferior against the colonizers and exist with this perception. The system of education existing previously and cultural colonization has portrayed the English world and its culture as rich and colonized as poor. The colonial world is the filled with order, sense of achievement, success and discipline. As a result, the natives consider their own culture, customs and traditions, religion, and race to be inferior to those of their master and try to identify themselves with the empire. They are far away from their original homeland so their own traditions seem to them as meaningless and void. But on the other hand they cannot identify themselves fully with the empire as they are culturally, religiously, traditionally different race and have different background. They cannot fully associate themselves with the colonizers and in this sense they suffer from the sense of dislocation, fragmentation, loss of identity, placelessness and all that can be associated with the postcolonial and alienated identity. As a result of all they prefer to become mimic men and start imitating their master's life style, views and values. These are psychological states of minds that limit the word of independence mere to the word but not a real experience. The colonized are lost in their postcolonial society without the colonizers as this society fails to offer them a sense of national unity and identity.

The story of the novel *The Mimic Men* is narrated by Ralph Singh who is a forty years old colonial minister and lives in exile in the suburbs of London. He is a writer and produces memoirs to fulfill his wish of imposing an order in his life. He struggles to reconstructs his identity and moreover wants to remove his crippling sense of dislocation and displacement and in this way he advocates all displaced colonial individuals who are disillusioned. Moreover, the novel presents colonization a process that engulfs the history, culture, identity, sense of place and makes the colonized psychologically displaces, alienated and victim of identity crisis.

Ralph Singh is much aware of his alienated identity that is why at times he reevaluates his life with the hope of achieving an order in it. He is aware that the identity and place in which he is born is associated with much chaos therefore he asserts, "To be born on an island like Isabella, an obscure New World transplantation, second-hand and barbarous, was to be born to disorder" (*The Mimic Men*, 118). There is lack of any chronicle order in Singh's life and it moves backward and forward. He is the center of his small world, as asserted by Smith(1991), that is why he writes about his past, present, future, marriage, education and political career so that he may shape his life.

As a child there is expression to his sense of abandonment and he dreams of india the homeland and the place of his origin. In the novel this sense is expressed in the extract like, "he reads books on Asiatic and Persian Aryans and dreams of horsemen who look for their leader (*The Mimic Men*, 98). Moreover, he is also concerned to his ideal past that is in conflict with his real life and condition in Isabella. To shape his past he prefers to "go to the beach house owned by his grandfather and one day he sees the death of three children who are drowned in the sea while the fishermen do nothing to save them (*The Mimic Men*, 108-109).

To shape an identity needed for his existence Singh becomes a politician. He struggles to shape his life, bring it into order, and fills it with meanings and to become a successful political figure.

To achieve a real view of himself and the world around him he participates in politics and tries to satisfy his ego. In actual senses it is a psychological need of his self to secure power, identity and sense of ownership. This sense of ownership, thirst for identity and power in Isabella is illustrated as, "So I went on, naming, naming; and, later, I required everything - every government building, every road, every agricultural scheme - to be labeled. It suggested drama, activity. It reinforced reality. It reinforced that sense of ownership which overcame me whenever I returned to the island after a trip abroad (*The Mimic Men*", 215)

There is irony in his character that is depicted by changing his name Ranjit Kirpalsingh. In fact he changes his identity for which he has been craving desperately. He realizes that he is separated from his people and he has to play a role to preserve his position. Since he is aware that as a colonial politician he is futile personality, he is incomplete and meaningless figure. The novel portrays this condition of Ralph in the following manner, "The politician is more than a man with a cause, even when this cause is no more than self-advancement. He is driven by some little hurt, some little incompleteness. He is seeking to exercise some skill which even to him is never as concrete as the skill of the engineer (*The Mimic Men*, 37).

Singh is very much aware that expecting peace and order into the island where he lives in postcolonial scenario is nothing but a dramatic illusion of order. He is also aware that there are social, economical, and racial problems into the postcolonial island world and society is to suffer the economic unrest. Finally there is made a decision by the government that only solution to this issue to negotiate with stockholders of sugar estate owned by upper-class English man called Lord Stockwell. He has potentials to unite people and solve economic problems that are faced by the inhabitants of island of Isabella. Moreover, as a representative of the government Singh is sent to England to negotiate the issue but he fails to persuade English and humiliated by ministers in the meeting. This is the worst occasion where he faces a great deal of identity crisis and thinks that he belongs to nowhere. The ministers address him in the meeting with a humiliating way and they also discuss about his manners. They exclaim about Singh, "His manner indicated clearly that our game had gone on long enough and he had other things to do than to assist the public relations of colonial politicians. ... I said, "How can I take this message back to my people?" He said: "You can take back to your people any message you like." And that was the end. (*The Mimic Men*, 224)

Lord Stockwell refuses to negotiate seriously about the problems of labor and sugar estate issues rather he treats Singh like a child by saying that he has got nice hair. Since the ministers and Stockwell are representatives of imperial power so they impose their racial supremacy on Singh and make him aware that he is nothing more than a child. This is how Singh is push to an inferior status instead of a political figure. The imperial powers never recon the importance of his political task and consequently he is pushed to the political dislocation and he is made aware of his failure. On the other hand Singh is unable to help and find any solution for his country's problem without the help of English. The nationalization becomes mere a word that has nothing to do with reality and this is how he faces his private loss and cannot help without master's approval. Singh describes his condition as, "My sense of drama failed. This to me was the true loss. For four years drama had supported me; now, abruptly, drama failed. It was a private loss (*The Mimic Men*, 221)

Moreover, imperial powers show that there is lack of awareness in political figures of Isabella. Although they have freed from colonization but they do not have this potential to run their government without the English help. The politicians are absurd characters and suffer from insignificance and political displacement. Since there is no political reality of this territory so there is no sense of identity and political figures of the place belong to non arid region that limits them

to the non existence. The colony is still being controlled, ruled and exploited by empire. They colonized have no political history of their own.

Singh becomes a mimic man due to his educational background as he is the victim of colonial educational system that encourages him to imitate empire. Singh's colonial education has taught him to consider England, the mother country, the symbol of order. When he studies the culture of colonizers and compares his own, if he has any, it looks inferior to that of colonizers. That education, taken from the colonial land caused him to think as homeless man having no self image. He keeps questioning to himself, recognizes colonizer's culture as superior then criticizes colonial mimicry and finally becomes self aware that he cannot help being a mimic man. According to the words of Cudjo(1988) Singh is "a specific product of socioeconomic formation called colonialism"(p.100). In search of identity and an ideal land Singh goes to London as he never accepts being an East Indian colonial subject. That is the place where he realizes that in spite of his public school education in London he can never identify himself equal to English and one may be English in the condition if he is born there. In the wake of all these circumstances he becomes a victim of psychological problems and he cannot find any solution of these problems. Even the moods of disillusionment, sadness and displacement are reflected from writings. He is alienated from his own society and to overcome his feelings of isolation he travels to different places but according to Naipaul he has to face "imminent homelessness" (*The Mimic Men*, 249) everywhere. As a result of all his psychological states he develops a new awareness of his self. He becomes fully aware that the feelings of abandonment and displacement can never be separated from his colonial background. To be fully identifiable entity in colonial world he has to secure a real identifiable historical background that he lacks. He is a desolate figure, victim of postcolonial identity crisis, a dislocated figure who is eager to impose an order to his past, present and future. There are so many illustrations about the final state, the state of awareness of emptiness of his being. This state emerges due to his loss of identity or the identity crisis. About his final condition Robert Morris (1975) asserts that Singh's final state is a real and final emptiness. He is a loser figure who has lost everything at the age of forty. Moreover, Moghimi (1988) has also the same assumption about the final state of Singh that the awareness of loss of identity and emptiness detaches him from his past life and he is ready to start a new life. He becomes aware that he is a homeless citizen that is the new perception of himself.

Conclusion

After the textual analysis of *The Mimic Men*, opinions of the critics, and theoretical concerns it is depicted that Ralph is a victim of identity crisis. He has split personality, torn individuality, and disintegrated inner self. There is non ending conflict happening into the very existence of this character that exists in that society with the sense of non belongingness. Moreover sense of alienation descends throughout the novel that further enforces the climate of identity crisis in Ralph. Singh examines both colonial and postcolonial periods in all senses and faces problems like historical, economical, cultural, and political and finally falls into psychological conflicts causing identity crisis and postcolonial alienation. He finally becomes aware that colonial societies suffer so many lacking in it including racial, cultural and historical hegemony. He does not belong to any place either to India or London. He fails to reconnect himself to his motherland and causing him to control his sense of dislocation as he becomes aware that there is no ideal place for him to live and identify himself. Inside him there is final expression of detachment and lack of any vivid national identity hence making him a victim of alienation and postcolonial identity crisis.

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