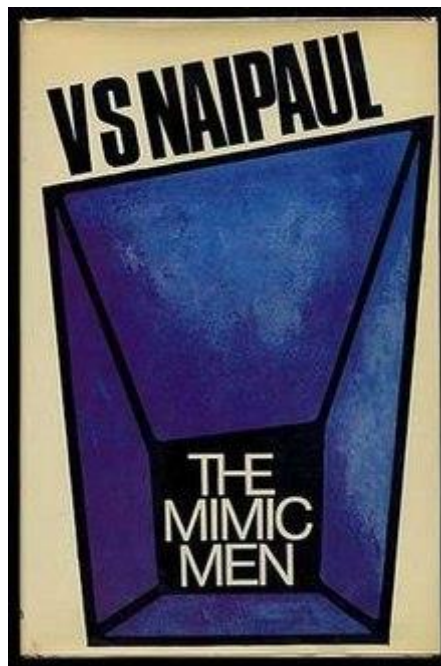


**Identity Crisis and Cultural Displacement in V. S. Naipaul's
*The Mimic Men***

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Abstract

V. S. Naipaul is a Trinidadian writer of Indian descent widely considered one of the greatest and most controversial writers in English language. The crisis in post-colonial communities is regarded to be the most important factor which questions the identity of colonised people. Though imperialism has passed, the destruction made by the colonizers remains as a stain in the minds of the colonized that speaks in volumes. In the works of V. S. Naipaul, he discusses the major themes like alienation of the immigrants, identity crisis, the paradox of freedom and the problems of neo-colonialism. Identity crisis is exhibited as a main theme in V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*. The protagonist in *The Mimic Men* caught up in the adversities of life in the post-colonial era who is unable to create the identity of his own.

Keywords: V. S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men*, Identity crisis, displacement, ambivalence, rootlessness.

The Mimic Men

Some eminent Third World critics concentrate mainly on Naipaul's development as a creative artist who picks up issues relating to the Third World. His works throw light on the Post-colonial and post- imperial realities that have shaped the contemporary societies and provides important insights relating to them.

Naipaul's novels lead to a better understanding of the problems that are faced by the post- imperial generations. In *The Mimic Men*, it has been observed that, as in the novels studied in the previous chapters, the characters as well as situations in *The Mimic Men* are dealt with by an "ambivalent approach". The larger emphasis, however, has been seen to be laid on Singh's attitude which creates "ambivalence" identity crisis by emphasizing his seesaw relationship to Isabella and London. For instance, in the attic scene, Singh has been observed to vacillate between the "magic" and the "forlornness" of "the city," which is London, the "heart of Empire". Then, in the forward scene, Singh on the one hand criticizes his colonial island for being a "transitional" and "makeshift" society that "lacks order," and on the other hand, he describes London as "the greater disorder" and the "final emptiness."

While Singh finds the natural elements of London, such as the snow and the "light of dusk" gorgeous, he detests London's dullness and lack of colour. Soon after Singh has left Isabella with the intention never to return, he states that London has "gone sour" on him and that he longs for the "certainties" of his island, although this is the place from where he once wanted to escape.

Rootlessness

These early scenes, then, which pass during Singh's stay as a student in London, tell about Singh's disillusionment with London, to where he has come, "fleeing disorder," and "to find the beginning of order." In a second flash-forward, however, as Singh arrives at Isabella, he calls his journey to and from London a "double journey" and a "double failure." This "ambivalent situation" indicates that Singh is nowhere at home, and it is an indirect criticism towards the "coloniser", who can be said to be the original cause of Singh's "rootlessness", identity crisis, because he has "displaced" colonial people like Singh. This argument is

reinforced by an example given by Singh, where, to write his biography, he prefers the dull suburb hotel of London to the pastoral cocoa estate on Isabella. Singh calls his return to Isabella a mistake, but he believes that the cause of his mistake has been the “injury inflicted” on him by London, where he can never feel himself as anything but “disintegrating, pointless, and fluid.”

This is another example that shows to what extent Singh has been affected by the coloniser’s practice of “displacing” people. Leaving Isabella, Singh feels relief. But as he arrives in London Singh feels he is “bleeding.” For the second time he senses the “forlornness” of “the city” on which he has twice “fixed so important a hope.” Twice he has come to the “centre of Empire” to find order, but twice he has been disillusioned.

Identity Crisis

The identity crisis that his characters face is due to the destroying of their past and those who eventually overcome the crisis are the ones who have recovered their past or somehow managed to impose an order on their histories and moved on in life. Naipaul’s attitude to culture has always been progressive. It is the Third- World’s blind mimicry of the West that he cannot stomach. He lashes out at the shortcomings of Third- World societies, which have their roots in their traditional cultures, but are unmindful of them in their blind following of the West. They are thus able to maintain a distinct identity.

Born in Foreign Soil

But, for the generation born in exile, life in the foreign soil proves almost fatal, as they have not been blessed with the insularity of their forefathers, who went there from India. For the new generation, India loses the sense of reality that it had conveyed to their ancestors. The major themes that emerge from a reading of his novels are related to the problems of the colonized people: their sense of Alienation from the landscapes, their identity crisis, the paradox of freedom and the problem of neocolonialism in the ex-colonies. The people who can no longer identify with a cultural heritage lose the assurance and integrity which the locating racial ancestor provides. In addition, the harsh conditions of colonialism have left the West Indian bad conditions under the burden of poverty and ignorance.

Culturally and Spiritually Dispossessed

Because psychological and physical conditions correspond so closely, the unhoused, poverty stricken West Indian is so often culturally and spiritually dispossessed as well. His only alternative is to strive after the culture of his ex-colonial masters even though he is unable to identify with their traditions and values. In *The Mimic men*, however, Kripal Singh is not handicapped by poverty, ignorance, a lack of natural talent or the persecution of a grasping Hindu family. He has gained the material success, public eminence and apparent independence that Ganesh, Harbans and Biswas all longed to have. In addition, because of his university education and his exposure to a more sophisticated society in London, he is better able to recognize and articulate the many ills of his native back ground. but his clearly superior status and acute consciousness do not make him any less vulnerable to the subtle, yet over powering consequences of his psychologically fragmented and confusing past.

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.

Reaction to the Three Cultures, Indian, Creole and English

The Mimic Men, however, is more than a mere elaboration of Naipaul's' previous West Indian novels: it is a profound re enactment of the growth and nature of the East Indian, west Indian psyche and its reaction to the three cultures, Indian, Creole and English, which influence it. In the process, Kripal Singh, the narrator, confessor and visionary, comments on power, politics, social and racial interactions, sex, education, displacement, isolation and identity crisis as experienced by the ex-colonial. Each topic is used to illuminate a facet of his mind.

Conclusion

To summarise what has been argued above, Singh is disillusioned about both Isabella and London, because he is a member of a colonised people that has been “displaced” identity crisis on a colonial “slave-island,” with a racially and culturally mixed population. In the period before Singh comes to London, he vacillates between his longing to escape from the island, where he feels “displaced” and “rootless”, and the feeling that experience past on the colonial island nevertheless attaches him somehow to it. During Singh’s political career, the “ambivalent attitudes” in Singh and Browne have shown that, while they seem to criticise the “colonised” and the colony, their “ambivalent attitude” actually indicates that the real source of the faults criticised in individuals and the society is to be found with the “coloniser”.

Finally, Singh escapes from his “artificial home” to the “imperial centre” and claims to have found fulfilment there, but his “ambivalent attitude” again shows that these are not real fulfilments, but only excuses used by Singh to find a “sense of attachment” in a certain “location” of the earth. However, even during this seeming compromise, Singh makes his important statement that finally attaches him to his own culture and not to the one of the coloniser.

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(First published 1967).

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