

**The Echo of Absence: Tracing Nonentity in V. S. Naipaul's
*The Mimic Men***

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Abstract:

V. S. Naipaul's novel, *The Mimic Men* (1967), is an important depiction of the postcolonial identity crisis within the sphere of twentieth-century fiction. The novel describes the autobiographical memory of Ralph Singh who is a forty-year-old former colonial minister living in self-exile in a London suburb. He aims to rebuild his fractured sense of self through the medium of writing. The profound sense of nonentity is the heart of the novel. It is defined by the emotions of insignificance, a lack of meaningful existence, and a lack of real identity within a world shaped by the power of colonial subordination and cultural dislocation. The diverse expressions of nonentity in *The Mimic Men* are investigated through scrutinizing the roles of mimicry, displacement, alienation, and rootlessness to shape Singh's deep sense of void in this research article.

Mimicry is the representation of the psychic form of nonentity in *The Mimic Men*, whereas displacement is an element that contains both space and geographical representation. The alienation theme exposes the social and psychic mechanisms of nonentity in *The Mimic Men*. Rootlessness is the higher-order issue of not having true origins and lack of cultural or ancestral base that is necessary to construct an intelligible identity. Singh's reaction to his intense feeling of insignificance is encapsulated in his endeavour to compose his memoirs. This act of authorship serves

as his ultimate effort to forge a coherent identity, to impose order upon the tumult of his experiences, and to attain a sense of substantial selfhood that has consistently eluded him throughout his existence.

Key Words: Mimicry, Displacement, Alienation, Rootlessness and Nonentity

Introduction

V. S. Naipaul's novel, *The Mimic Men* (1967), is an important depiction of the postcolonial identity crisis within the sphere of twentieth-century fiction. The novel describes the autobiographical memory of Ralph Singh who is a forty-year-old former colonial minister living in self-exile in a London suburb. He aims to rebuild his fractured sense of self through the medium of writing. The profound sense of nonentity is the heart of the novel. It is defined by the emotions of insignificance, a lack of meaningful existence, and a lack of real identity within a world shaped by the power of colonial subordination and cultural dislocation. Singh's emotional confession demonstrates this sense of emptiness: "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" (Naipaul 26). Such a theme of nonentity is the underlying thread that runs through all aspects of the novel, including Singh's childhood experiences on the Caribbean Island Isabella, the political causes that he championed, and the later retreat to self-exile in London.

The theme of nonentity in *The Mimic Men* goes beyond an ordinary identity crisis to include an ontological void that lies at the very core of the postcolonial subject's being, stemming from the dual wounds of colonial subjugation and cultural displacement. Naipaul depicts the novel as "a book about a vacuum" (Culhaoglu 88), highlighting the meaningful emptiness that typifies the life of Singh. Singh's repeated reference to himself and fellow nationals as mimic men goes to prove Naipaul's pessimistic view that the existence of the postcolonial person is necessarily false, plagiaristic, and lacking real selfhood. Naipaul explores that the result of colonialism is to create persons at once not entirely included amongst their native cultures and not entirely included amongst Western society, ending up living an existence that is that of a perennial nonentity through the confessional testimony of Singh.

The diverse expressions of nonentity in *The Mimic Men* are investigated through scrutinizing the roles of mimicry, displacement, alienation, and rootlessness

to shape Singh's deep sense of void in this research article. This research applies postcolonial theoretical perspectives to illustrate how Naipaul depicts the colonial subject's battle with genuine identity in the wake of imperialism.

Mimicry and the Production of Nonentity

Naipaul's novel title betrays the significance of mimicry to the sense of nonentity that runs through the story. Homi K. Bhabha explained colonial mimicry as "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (86). The phrase encapsulates the fundamental paradox at the very centre of Singh's life. He tries to replicate the colonizer but cannot become whole and instead, is trapped in an intermediary position characterized by incompleteness and lack of essence. Nasrullah Mambrol elaborates further: "When colonial discourse encourages the colonized subject to mimic the colonizer by adopting the colonizer's cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, the result is never a simple reproduction of those traits. Rather the result is a 'blurred copy of the colonizer'" (Grewal and Manuel).

Singh takes part in mimetic acts that diminish his sense of real self-identity from an early age. Even the name change itself is indicative of this process of colonial mimicry. He alters his given name, Ranjit Kripal Singh, to the more Western "Ralph Singh," and takes the signature "R.R.K. Singh" to mimic the Deschampsneufs, the heirs to a prominent French family notable for owning slaves on Isabella. The change of name is not for practical convenience. It is indicative of Singh taking up the colonial ideology that equates European identity with the principles of civilization, dignity, and real existence. Even more so, this is seen with how Singh responds to experiencing snowfall when visiting London: "Snow: At last; my element" (Naipaul 4). Singh labels snowfall his element rather than the sea or shores that are associated with his Caribbean background, highlighting the amazing degree to which colonialism has estranged him from his real surroundings.

Singh narrates his methodical mimicry of British custom and cultural practice in the course of the novel. Arriving to London to study, for instance, he notices Mr. Shylock's sophisticated manner and takes notice of and imitates the tendency to stroking the earlobe and tilting the head to listen: "I thought the gesture was attractive; I copied it" (Naipaul 3). It is revealed that the real identity is possible through the adoption of external symbols for British civilization. Yet, the mimicry engenders mere superficial expression of the identity. So, Singh is left with the enduring sense that he lacks any true essence or inner core. According to Gorra, Singh not only is an

individual “who mimic[s] but a mimic of a man,” for he is a reproduction without origin (Culhaoglu 94).

The critical assessment of mimicry is overtly expressed in Singh’s famous rumination on colonial life: “We pretended 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 new” (Naipaul 157). The phrase “pretended to be real” sums up the essence of nonentity. Singh and other colonials are lacking real existence. They are performers playing scripts prescribed to them by the colonizers, never achieving real selfhood. Their whole existence is a domain of pretension, represented by the exhausting maintenance of an invented persona that they know to be false. Singh also goes further to elaborate on this situation: “We, here on our islands, handling books printed in this world and using its goods, had been abandoned and forgotten” (Naipaul 157). Such an emotion of being abandoned highlights the state of nonentity for the colonials, overlooked by the metropolis, deprived of a real cultural base, and condemned to a state of constant false pretence.

Mimicry transcends individual behaviour, drawing the larger social and political system of Isabella into suspicion. The institutions within the island, schools, government, social hierarchies, imitate the superficial copies of British institutions, transposed to an environment where they bear no inherent connection to the lives of the locals. Singh’s brief political career is a representative example of this institutional mimicry. The British government of Isabella pretends to follow the example of parliamentary democracy. However, all the concerned parties view the whole process to be inherently performative, lacking actual substance or authority. Such widespread mimicry engenders a society of nonentities, where people play social functions without actual power or real relationship to the responsibilities that they carry out.

Displacement and Spatial Nonentity

Mimicry is the representation of the psychic form of nonentity in *The Mimic Men*, whereas displacement is an element that contains both space and geographical representation. Singh’s life is outlined through constant dislocation, so that he is unable to reside in a place that he might truly call home. Singh was born on Isabella to ancestors imported to the Caribbean Island from India as indentured servants, educated through London, returning to Isabella to seek to follow a political career, and ending up exiled yet again in London. Singh is a representative for what Michael Angrosino describes through a uniquely colonially-oriented form of oppression,

where this includes “psychological loss of identity which is the result of oppression ... within a context of spatial displacement” (Ravi Kumar 77).

Singh’s relationship to Isabella, his place of origin, demonstrates the intimate correlation between displacement and the feeling of nonentity. Instead of perceiving Isabella as an actual home, Singh frames the island as a place of “shipwreck,” a word that he repeatedly uses to suggest feelings of desertion and not-belonging. He reveals further: “Shipwreck: I have used this word before. With my island background, it was the word that always came to me” (Naipaul 26). The repeated usage shipwreck implies both a geographical dislocation and an existent sense of desertion. Singh finds himself deserted on Isabella, stranded at a place that can never truly be understood as home. Joshi explains this metaphor: “This image suggests not only uprooting but also the impossibility of return. The bitter truth is that all these displaced people can never be at home again in the homelands they dream of” (169). Singh’s earliest impressions link the island with turmoil, disorder, and lack of authenticity. Singh describes his childhood years as “a period of incompetence, bewilderment, solitude and shameful fantasies ... a period of burdensome secrets” (Naipaul 97). These childhood encounters with isolation and disorientation develop a recurring model that pervades the duration of Singh’s existence. He is not capable of experiencing true stability within any real-world environment.

Isabella is described as an inherently false place and as a man-made landscape where even the plants are not native. The powerful descriptive portrait of uprooted trees illustrates this scenario: “Here lay the tree, fast in the sand which was deep and level around it, impossible now to shift, what once had floated lightly on the waters” (Naipaul 120). The use of trees “washed up by the sea” scattered along the beach at Isabella is not simply a descriptive flourish. It is also a symbol for Singh himself and for all the island people, uprooted from their origins and planted on foreign shores, unable to go back. The island population is made up of the rejected and the forgotten of three continents, men and women displaced from Africa, Asia, and Europe and cast up on a Caribbean island without native cultural roots to anchor it. Singh describes this situation:

It was my hope to give expression to the restlessness, the deep disorder, which the great explorations, the overthrow in three continents of established social organizations, the unnatural bringing together of peoples who could achieve fulfilment only within the security of their own societies and the landscapes hymned by their ancestors. (Naipaul 32)

The result is this cosmopolitan dislocation and an “intrinsically anarchic” society, ungovernable due to the lack of any communal cultural grounding (Thorpe). True identity is impossible. All the inhabitants are reduced to nonentities, men and women with minimal relationship to place or to society within dislocated and fractured framework. Bongie also notes that the island is regarded by Singh as “fragmented, a part of some greater whole from which it is in exile and to which it must be related—in an act of (never completed) completion that is always also, as it were, an ex-isle, a loss of the particular” (18).

Singh’s feeling of displacement intensifies instead of easing throughout his trip to London. The capital city, where previously he envisioned the possibility of “order” and “miraculous light” and found “the flowering, the extension of myself,” reveals itself ultimately to be another space of ruin and dislocation (Naipaul 26). His descriptive account of his sojourn in London summarizes the spatial category of nonentity: “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 … this feeling of being adrift, a cell of perception, little more, that might be altered, if only fleetingly, by any encounter” (Naipaul 26). His image as simply “a cell of perception” is a heart-wrenching representation of Sing’s view that he is without importance. He has been reduced to the lowest level of awareness, without any real sense of identity or meaningful connection to the world around him. In going back to Isabella, Singh first, for a moment, realizes some sense of comfort: “this return … was a failure and a humiliation. Yet this, together with all my unease, I buried away” (Naipaul 52). However, this is momentary, for Singh is not able to shake the “panic at not being able to tear down the unreality about him to get at the hard, the concrete, where everything becomes simple and ordinary and easy to seize” (Naipaul 75).

The novel recommends that displacement begets a feeling of nonentity, for real identity requires an identification with a particular place and culture. Hussein Dizayi notes, “*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” (924). Singh’s continued displacement suggests that he is unable to enhance the deep cultural knowledge and inherent ties that might give him a firm sense of self. He is always outsider, looking in, painfully conscious of his alienation. The spatial nonentity is augmented through Singh’s obscurity within London, where the narrator lives “modestly and without recognition in small semi-detached suburban houses” (Naipaul 7), an appellation that highlights the reduction to obscurity and lack of exposure to the urban environment.

Alienation and Psychological Nonentity

The alienation theme exposes the social and psychic mechanisms of nonentity in *The Mimic Men*. Singh is a man with extreme estrangement from the places that he lives in and the social communities with which he strives to identify. The alienation that results from this feeling is traced to childhood and grows with age, reaching penultimate form with an overwhelming sense of isolation that exacerbates the sense of nonentity. The obstacle to the adoption of a real identity for Singh “is his sense of not belonging to the ‘shipwrecked island’ of Isabella” (Mehni et al. 98).

Singh’s account of his London academic background reveals the extent of his alienation: “In London I had no guide. 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” (Naipaul 19). The above quote indicates an integral component of Singh’s lack of visibility; that is, lack of persons with whom to confirm his existence and sense of self. Without the presence of these social confirmations, Singh is free to find that he is unsubstantial, free to adopt whatever persona is beneficial, due to lack of actual self under the multitude of guises that he assumes. Singh goes on to clarify: “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” (Naipaul 19). The above quotation indicates the performative quality of Singh’s self. His assumption of guises that are unrelated to the fact with which he is aligned. Mahood describes how, for Singh, “role-playing … is a defence against disturbance” (Culhaoglu 94).

The alienation that Singh undergoes functions on various cultural levels. As noted by Hussein Dizayi, “Naipaul 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). This triple alienation from his Indian heritage, from Caribbean society, and from British culture, creates an intense form of nonentity. Singh is unable to establish authentic roots in any cultural framework, resulting in his existence to be a state of cultural homelessness. Singh’s awareness of this predicament is apparent in his statement: “We become what we see of ourselves in the eyes of others” (Naipaul 20). This acknowledgment implies that identity is not innate but rather formulated through social acknowledgment and for Singh, such acknowledgment is consistently denied across all cultural settings.

S. Sophia Christina indicates how this alienation from the culture reduces the identity of Singh to that of a nonentity: “The protagonist’s failure of searching his roots makes him totally an outlander in any culture” (Ravi Kumar 78). The word “outlander” precisely characterizes Singh’s position. He is outside of each cultural sphere without the feeling of belonging and recognition from the others. Such extreme alienation recreates Singh into a non-person, a subject that is physically there but without any social presence. Singh’s feeling to be “faceless” and further identifying himself as “a mimic of a man” instead of “somebody who mimics” exposes him to be a copy without an original, a performance without an essence (Culhaoglu 94).

Singh’s alienation is also manifested through his personal relations, particularly through his marriage with Sandra, an English woman. The marriage, like Singh’s other attempts at building relations, is unable to grant him a real sense of identity or genuine intimacy. Instead, it serves as another form of mimicry, an attempt to adopt British identity through the process of marrying a British woman. Singh’s alienation and sense of nonentity are further highlighted when the marriage is broken up.

Ravi Kumar Mishra comments that Singh’s “ability to rationalize his own condition sharpens rather than reduces his total alienation from his environment and his final rejection of an active life” (78). A profound paradox is revealed through this observation. Intelligence and self-consciousness serve to heighten the sense of nonentity, instead of offering an escape route from alienation. His analytic skills give him the clarity to recognize the parody and pointlessness inherent in his many attempts to construct an identity. This clear sight, however, is not an exit route to the realization of true selfhood. He is trapped within what is described through the barren cycle of events, the epitome of existence under the colony. Singh bemoans this trapped state: “It was from simplification such as this that we wish to escape, to return to a more elemental complexity” (Naipaul 36).

Rootlessness and the Failure to Have Real Beginnings

Rootlessness can be said to be the very essence of nonentity in *The Mimic Men*. While displacement highlights the spatial dislocation, rootlessness is the higher-order issue of not having true origins and lack of cultural or ancestral base that is necessary to construct an intelligible identity. Sense of rootlessness felt by Singh can be traced to the ancestors’ migration to the Caribbean from India to serve as indentured servants. As Hussein Dizayi demonstrates, “The alienation of people throughout South Asia transformed the regional natives into indentured labourers

during the late nineteenth century, under the disguise of sugar production businesses" (920). The traumatic memory stemming from the involuntary migrations severed the link between Singh's family and Indian cultural roots. At the time of Singh's birth, the sense of cultural loss is immense as several generations were gone and the link to Indian roots became distant. Singh reflects this way: "To be born on an island like Isabella, an obscure New World transplantation, second-hand and barbarous, was to be born to disorder" (Naipaul 127). The phrase "second-hand" is especially potent here. It recommends that Caribbean culture is subordinate, an inferior imitation of European civilization, lacking real origins or content.

The novel clearly illustrates the ways the Hindus' customs and rituals have lost their significance within the Caribbean environment. Singh depicts Isabella as "the locality where accident had placed me" (Naipaul 127), highlighting his circumstances on the island are rootless, without plan. Bruce King explains: "The process of losing one's Indianness started with leaving India. That was the original sin, the fall. After that Indian traditions could only either decay into deadening ritual or become diluted, degraded and eventually lost through outside influences and intermarriage with others" (Asangaeneng and Udoette 61). Singh is unable to possess the rich heritage that otherwise might have granted him a sense of actual identity through this loss of culture. Singh craves this lack acutely, characterizing it through the emotional currency of being flung off the world and cut off from actual cultural roots.

Singh lacks origins with Caribbean and British cultures. His education and ambitions direct him toward Britain; yet, his racial and cultural roots obstruct him to realize an authentic integration with British society. Correspondingly, he scorns the Caribbean culture represented in Isabella, seeing it to be disarrayed and false. Mishra reveals that Singh is "a body in search of a soul; a life in pursuit of an authentic identity; a personality in need of approval and reassurance" (Ravi Kumar 78). The searching is ultimately inconclusive, for Singh is without the cultural foundations that might support him to return to or from which he might draw sustenance.

Naipaul's expression of rootlessness is particularly somber in character. Unlike postcolonial authors extolling the notion of cultural hybridity or advocating the emergence of fresh, syncretic identities, Naipaul recommends that the giving up of real cultural roots creates an irreplaceable void. Singh is not able to construct an efficacious sense of identity from the disjointed cultural bits that are open to him; instead, the bits simply highlight his lack of real ties to any particular tradition. His condition of rootlessness condemns him to an ongoing state of nonentity, an existence

that is characterized not through the presence of a hybrid or transcultural identity, but through the process of lacking an actual sense of self. Singh describes this desolate situation this way: “The empires of our time were short-lived, but they have altered the world forever; their passing away is their least significant feature” (Naipaul 32). Naipaul suggests that the worst damage done through colonialism lies not through the political subjection, but through the later, lasting dislocation of cultural roots and real identity.

The correlation between rootlessness and nonentity is succinctly described in Singh’s reflection: “There are many of us around living modestly and without recognition in small semi-detached suburban houses” (Naipaul 7). The statement reveals both the anonymous and the ordinary existence of the rootless colonial person. Singh, among other persons with a similar situation, is rendered insignificant and lives a life of silent nonentity for the reason that the lack of cultural and ancestry roots, that might have provided him with a sense of being and recognition, never came to him.

Writing as Response to Nonentity

Singh’s reaction to his intense feeling of insignificance is encapsulated in his endeavour to compose his memoirs. This act of authorship serves as his ultimate effort to forge a coherent identity, to impose order upon the tumult of his experiences, and to attain a sense of substantial selfhood that has consistently eluded him throughout his existence. As noted by Kelly:

It is through the expression and presentation of the events that he can reduce the pain of being a displaced colonial man: the act of writing his memoirs provides him the final solution to his sense of dislocation, for through writing he is at last able to take control of the fragments of his past and shape them into a spiritual and psychological autobiography. (Jayachandran 1538)

The organizational framework of Singh’s memoir encapsulates his sense of nonentity. Singh “constantly moves backwards and forwards, writes about his childhood and adulthood, his life in Isabella and in England, his political career and marriage, and his education to give shape to the past and his experiences, and to understand himself” (Jayachandran 1537), refusing the linear chronological pattern. Such a non-linear narrational design is an echo to the fractured character and randomness present in Singh’s identity. He is unable to form a coherent account of how he lived because of the absence of an organizing identity. The individual components of his narrative are a reflection of the broken character of his selfhood.

In spite of this, writing is a method through which Singh is able to find some form of structure and meaning. White describes how, for Singh, writing is “a means of releasing” him from the “barren cycle of event” through which his being has been divided (White 180). Singh strives to elevate his experiences from simple occurrences to some form of cohesive chronicle, and thus to develop an actual sense of identity through composition. The memoir is Singh’s attempt to construct, through words, the meaningful sense of self that he has not been able to forge through action.

Naipaul himself describes *The Mimic Men* as “a book about a vacuum” (Culhaoglu 88). Such a characterization powerfully sums up the novel’s chief concern with nonexistence, underlining the abiding sense of emptiness that characterizes the existence of Singh. The memoir that Singh writes is both an acknowledgement of the vacuum and an attempt to fill it through the very process of writing. However, the novel suggests a dubious position about the possibility that writing is ever able to move outside the space of nonexistence or if it simply fosters another iteration of mimicry, a textual attainment of identity that remains necessarily unauthentic.

Bruce King contends that Naipaul transplants his own relations with alienation and displacement onto the character Singh:

After the failed attempt to reconnect himself to India and the 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. (73)

This mode of interpretation suggests that for Naipaul, writing is a means to endure the feelings of worthlessness due to colonial dislocation. Through the imposition of literary form, the imaginative writer tries to give form to formlessness, to forge an intelligible identity from the broken pieces of fragmented cultural heritage.

Conclusion

The theme of nonentity in V. S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men* is an important one among the most powerful and somber explorations of the postcolonial subject within the canon of the twentieth-century fiction. In the confessional account of Ralph Singh, Naipaul demonstrates the colonial and postcolonial subject to be inherently lacking subjecthood, existing as a nonentity trapped between conflicting cultural domains and unable to develop meaningful identity within any of these. The state of nonentity originates among the multitude traumas inherent to colonialism: the mimicry that implants within the colonized an internal sense that their native culture is inferior, leading them to seek out identity through the mimicking of the colonizer;

the displacement that dislocates affinities with the ancestors' homeland, causing a lasting sense of spatial dislocation; the alienation that isolates the subject from all cultures and societies; and the rootlessness that causes the subject to lack real cultural origins.

Singh's reality shows the manner the various aspects of nonentity interact with one another and with each other's exacerbations, giving rise to an overwhelming sense of hollowness that characterizes postcolonial existence. His trials to transcend nonentity through avenues such as education, matrimony, politics, and, finally, writing do not yield the real sense of self that he yearns for. Instead, each individual effort further reveals his inherent hollowness and the lack of a real sense of selfhood that characterize his existence as a colonial subject. Singh's enlightenment succinctly summarizes this state: "I no longer knew what I was; ambition became confused, then faded ... this feeling of being adrift, a cell of perception, little more" (Naipaul 26).

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