

**Displacement, Fragmentation, and Identity Crisis in Naipaul's
*The Mimic Men***

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Abstract:

This paper investigates how Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* engages with some important postcolonial issues of displacement, hybridity, fragmentation and crisis of identity. The novel demonstrates how colonialism systematically divested the slaves and the indentured labourers of their cultural roots, forcibly displacing and relocating them in remote colonies solely for commercial gain. Inhuman and exploitative practices governed these culturally and racially heterogeneous settlements. The novel underscores how colonial institutions' idea of civilising these societies is merely an ideological façade, masking the real intention of wiping out cultural and civilisational values of the colonised in favour of Western hegemony. The political system after independence turns chaotic, unstable, and corrupt due to the inefficiency of leaders like Ralph Singh, whose capabilities are disabled under colonial education to recognise the unifying culture and organic self of their community and society, leaving the ruling elite as merely a mimic man without roots and substance. Drawing on the critical framework of postcolonialism, the paper explores how the post-colonial subject trained in the colonial institutions faces a perpetual displacement, psychological trauma and identity crisis. The narrator Ralph Singh's escape from the chaotic island of Isabella to the so-called ordered London leaves him deeply disillusioned and alienated as his colonial upbringing and imperial fantasy shatter him. His act of writing an autobiography enables him to introspect and organise his fragmented self by reclaiming his identity.

Keywords: Colonialism, Postcolonialism, Fragmentation, Identity, Mimicry.

Introduction:

V.S. Naipaul, a Nobel laureate, is a towering literary voice in postcolonial English writing. Despite his standing as a giant literary figure, he was nonetheless controversial. Born and brought up in an Indian indentured labourers' family in Trinidad, he moved to England on a Commonwealth scholarship to study at Oxford

University during the 1950s. His Indian roots, Trinidadian upbringing and Oxford education shaped his complex postcolonial sensibilities. His works deeply engage with Diasporic experiences of rootlessness, displacement, identity crisis, “hybridity” and colonial mimicry.

“The ambition as well as the despair and dislocation of such post-colonials were intimately connected to Naipaul’s own story. He often said of himself that, despite a desire to be a writer, as a member of a dispossessed Indian substratum on a colonized Caribbean island with a majority black population, he lacked the grounding in the cultural compost from which great literature grows.” (Powers)

The Mimic Men, published in 1967, encompasses the post-colonial complexity of the protagonist Ralph Singh, a “shipwrecked” politician from the island of Isabella in the Caribbean. By situating the novel within the framework of postcolonialism, this study demonstrates how the system of colonialism was a devastating force during and beyond its timeframe. Naipaul’s novels portray a comprehensive picture of the Caribbean nations’ evolution into post-colonial nation-states. These nations gained their independence from the colonial yoke, but their political systems remained stooges in the hands of former colonial powers, pushing them to instability and disorder. “Since Naipaul has a pessimistic view of the possibility of escape from this situation, he views the mimicry implicit in the post-colonial condition and, hence, its literary text, as permanently disabling, because of the disorder and inauthenticity imposed by the centre on the margins of empire.” (Ashcroft et al. 87) A system based on injustice and cruelty cannot be an ideal model of governance to lead a nation. The novel underscores that the divisive policies of empire generate conditions of animosity among diverse social groups, which automatically become advantageous for the empire. The ethnic tension between East Indian indentured labourers and the descendants of African slaves is indicative of the fragmentation and disorder that Ralph Singh feels his personality was shaped by. According to William Walsh the beginning of the fiction with Ralph Singh “an exiled or rather a withdrawn politician, fatigued by disillusion rather than failure, writing his memoirs in an aseptic, placeless London suburb.” (Walsh 54)

Ralph Singh, the son of an Indian-origin underpaid schoolteacher, changes his original name from Ranjit Kripalsingh to Ralph Singh under the influence of colonial education. This act of renaming validates colonial objectives. The past of the impoverished and dispossessed social groups is gradually denigrated, causing detachment from their own roots and culture:

“We had converted our island into one big secret. Anything that touched on everyday life excited laughter when it was mentioned in a classroom: the name of a shop, the name of a street, the name of street-corner foods. The laughter denied our knowledge

of these things to which after the hours of school we were to return. We denied the landscape and the people we could see out of open doors and windows, we who took apples to the teacher and wrote essays about visits to temperate farms.” (MM 95)

Ralph Singh and Browne's pride in the Isabella Imperial School symbolizes the internalization of European values, history, and ideals, thereby strengthening their disconnection from their island home. These educational institutions sow the seeds of division between the privileged and the impoverished majority population of Isabella, validating the former as civilized, cultured, and destined for a prosperous future. Ralph Singh imposes order on the disorder in his memoirs by narrativizing his misleading fantasies and imagination about his romantic ancestral history of the Aryans, his mother owning cows in English-style pastures, and London as a paradise in contrast to the harsh realities of his life. His escape to the romanticised Aryan past was an effort to cover the real hardship and difficulties in Isabella. His connection to the Aryan past enables him to imagine the Rajput nobility and its glorious history with warriors on horseback in pastures, but he finds all such fantasies meaningless in his exile in London. His father's hate to the romanticised Aryan myths is a reflection of his realistic understanding of the miserable condition of indentured labourers. Ralph's maternal family owns a soft drink factory and makes a huge fortune, but his father's hate to them shows inherent jealousy among families. Despite Ralph's exploitation by and tense relationship with his affluent maternal uncle Cecil, he ostentatiously flaunts his connections with Cecil to gain prestige among the people of Isabella during school. Later in London, he impersonates an elite. The colonial education and hybrid identity of Ralph Singh ensure his connection to the larger structure of the British Empire rather than just his confinement to an unromantic and impoverished Isabella. The entire flashback uncovers the formation of false identities under the influence of escape. Fantasy and illusion were caused and created by the colonial powers. The awarding of scholarships to these non-European children to study in London demonstrates the working of the colonial system to train and integrate these tender minds into the colonial system:

“Singh's fantasies are constructed according to the Western formula which he has adopted from the heroic tales of Aryan war leaders and from British and European history books. These stories, and subsequently Singh's fantasies, are in the sphere of Western ideal narration. This type of narration contradicts Singh's actual every-day experiences and activities on Isabella.” (Huttunen 273)

Ralph Singh recalls the beginning of his shipwreck by reflecting on his life in a boarding house in London, where he, as a student on scholarship, endeavours to imitate the style of the landlord, Mr. Shylock. Visiting different places in the city reflects the earnest desire of an expatriate to integrate into the rhythm of London life by mimicking. Bhabha argues that mimicry is “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite.” (*Bhabha* 86) All students from colonies on scholarships to study in Oxford take the utmost care

and pain to imitate the ways of London life. This internalisation of colonial culture helps the empire to safeguard its future. Liení, a Maltese woman and hostess of the house, serves as an informal guide to Western life, encouraging Ralph Singh to imitate its clothing, lifestyle, and mannerisms to fit into the colonial structure. This establishes how colonial ideology creates structures to regenerate favourable conditions for its own sustenance. In the machinery of colonialism, Ralph Singh recollects in his memoirs that all students from colonies like Isabella are trained to function as cogwheels for its smooth functioning. They unconsciously allow their transformation from organic to mimic subjects. Richard Kelly writes: "Ralph Singh, like his fellow Isabellans, is a mimic man whose mind and life have been twisted and controlled by the models of the West" (*Kelly 101*).

Written in a non-linear narrative, the text presents Ralph Singh, an ex-colonized and former political figure, resorting to writing his autobiography to trace the trajectory of his uprootedness and his state of being "shipwrecked." His ruminations offer many perspectives on the lives of colonized subjects who are torn between the impulse to imitate the colonizer and the reality of their own political incapacity. The act of writing symbolizes the act of organizing his broken, scattered, and fragmented internal and external worlds. The act of writing is also an act of identity formation. As Stuart Hall aptly puts it, people construct identity through history, language, and culture:

"They arise from the narrativization of the self, but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity, even if the belongingness, the 'suturing into the story' through which identities arise is, partly, in the imaginary (—) and therefore, always, partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within a phantasmatic field." (Hall 4)

His memoirs further illustrate that his decision to marry a lower-middle-class English girl, Sandra, was a miscalculated step. Sandra, studying on a scholarship at the same university, was disgruntled with her family's control and the class she belonged to. Sandra, under the influence of colonial education, desires to be independent, but her family stands in the way of her ambitions. The patriarchal attitude of her father fills their relationship with bitterness and tension. Her hatred becomes even more manifest when she expresses her desire to be a nun rather than the daughter of a father like hers. For her, London is an embodiment of colonial disillusionment, post-imperial decay and superficiality. Sandra's command of English infatuates Ralph, as he does not have many women around him who speak such good English. Being financially poor and weak in studies, she sees her desire of leading rich life to be fulfilled in Ralph Singh, whom she considers a prospective match. Ralph's later recollection of the scattered episodes spent with Sandra in a nuptial bond elucidates that Sandra's urge to live a prosperous life turns to disappointment when

she fails to secure a degree, eventually persuading him to marry her. It was Ralph's dandyism and mimicry of European styles that led her to mistake him for an affluent person. She perceives this as an opportunity for upward social mobility. The foundation of their marriage is not love, commitment, and loyalty. It is based on opportunity, escape, and pure commercialism. The text further reveals that Ralph also has ulterior motives in this transaction. Marrying an English woman guarantees him a connection to the larger society of London as well as social prestige in his own society in Isabella. In addition to gaining a stronghold in both societies, he finds that Sandra's energy and confidence give purpose to his alienated self. Unconnected to his own society and overwhelmed by British societal ambitions, his return to Isabella proves to be a debacle. Contrary to their plans, Sandra is deemed unfit by the elite circle of Isabella and eventually decides to walk out of this unfounded marital relationship.

"It was with surprise that I discovered that, though of the city, her position in it was like my own. She had no community no group and had rejected her family. She saw herself alone in the world and was determined to fight her up. She hated the common, her own world from which she nevertheless freely acknowledges herself to have sprung." (MM: 44-45)

The political and social movements in societies like Isabella are marked by failure as they lack genuine political authenticity. Ralph Singh and Browne, after their education in London, return to lead Isabella in contesting elections and reforming the society, but Ralph Singh's aloofness and lack of grassroots experience in Isabellian life prove to be a fiasco. The elite leaders detach themselves from the reality of their society by adopting unsuitable models borrowed from colonial structures. The novel divulges that a slave should not copy his master to become a leader of his own men. A colonized subject like Ralph Singh exists in a state of complete detachment from reality. These societies grapple with perennial challenges of poverty, hunger, unemployment, and a lack of opportunities, as their resources have been exploited by imperial powers. With freedom, these countries are left in chaos, with conflicts among communities for power and resources. These poverty-stricken countries are thrown into a troubled political battle marked by corruption and bloodshed, as the ruling elite fails to assess the needs of their people—needs that could truly materialize the idea of freedom on the ground. Colonial attitudes divided society into graded hierarchies of race, colour, and religion, causing competition for power without any essence or loyalty. Power becomes a means of ostentation rather than a tool to address the needs of such societies. The political system in these nations brings about no remarkable change and eventually proves to be a complete failure and debacle for want of real attachment. The real power of political systems lies in someone else's hands, whom the colonised subject finds themselves unable to understand. The Western powers still manage the political system of these countries through "hegemony" and Euro-centric approaches. He writes, "The career of the colonial is short and ends brutally. We lack

order. Above all, we lack power, and we do not understand that we lack power.....as soon as bluff is called, we are lost. Politics for us a do-or-die, once-for-all charge; once we are committed, we fight more than political battles; we often fight quite literally for our lives.” (MM 8)

Ralph's deep dive into the past allows him to understand the true nature of politics. His father mimics the style of Gurudeva, a sannyasi, who abandons his home solely on account of his impoverishment and anger against the in-laws upon whom his family depends financially, and pretends to live the life of a recluse. His failures and the situation of being trapped in a quagmire of poverty and humiliation are the main drivers of his departure. His subsequent involvement in the anti-colonial movement through populist politics showcases how such masquerading can be damaging. The adoption of the name Gurudeva reflects his politics as being grounded in religion and piety to mobilize the indentured masses by projecting his image as a prophet who renounces everything for the nation. However, this lacks substance, though it garners support from the poor population of Isabella nonetheless. His performativity of being spiritual and ascetic is merely a mimicry of Hindu Sanyasi but stems from his personal frustration, inability, and failure rather than his inner spiritual urge. He is displaced in his own world and adopts a false identity. Gurudeva's performance of *Asvamedha* to connect to the past to mobilise the masses through myths demonstrates the performativity of ascetic identity in a broken society. Ralph Singh recollects in his memoirs that “*Asvamedha*. Tainted oil, raw flesh. Chieftaincy among mountains and snow had been my innermost fantasy. Now, deeply, I felt betrayed and ridiculed. I rejected the devotion that was offered me. I wished to fly, to begin afresh, lucidly” (MM 138). Brownie's politics is also somewhat populist and based on the radical ideas that win him huge support in his African community. He also pretends to be the leader of his mass by adopting humble attire and cordial connections. Ralph Singh is an embodiment of a Diasporic consciousness who reflects the deep sense of rootlessness and unhomeliness experienced by individuals suspended between the periphery of the Caribbean and London, the imperial centre. The back-and-forth narrative of Mr. Ralph can be substantiated by Naipaul's *A Way in the World*:

“Most of us know the parents and grandparents we come from. But we go back and back, forever, we go back all of us to the very beginning; in our blood and bone and brain we carry the memories of thousands of beings..... sometimes we can be strangers to ourselves.” (WW: 9)

The history of the migration of diasporic communities holds a prominent place in their collective psyche, as they weave their narratives to trace the trajectory of their past, correlate it with the present, and define their identity in a culturally, linguistically, and spatially diverse world. Ralph Singh, through the process of writing

in his rented lodge in London, endeavours to recover a past with a broken trajectory. "The knowledge that I had lived a fraudulent existence for so long was the burden I had carried." (MM 33) The realistic image of the geography of the colonial map enables the narrator to introspect more deeply on the precariousness of human existence. The weight of colonialism is realized by the narrator, and after putting his life into a more ordered form, he desires to be a free man and comprehend the paths that lie ahead toward selfhood. "I have cleared the decks as it were, and prepared myself for fresh action. It will be action of a free man." (MM: 251) The attainment of freedom by the narrator underscores the importance of a liberated self in enjoying the life of a free man in a world torn by the legacy of colonialism. His suffering and trying times give him an in-depth understanding of his past, and offer more strategic and effective solutions to free him from the various burdens he carried unconsciously. Achieving freedom, therefore, from psychic slavery is the prime motive of Naipaul's protagonists. They attain it through various forms of transformation and self-realization. Ralph Singh writes at the end of the novel:

"It does not worry me now, as it worried me when I began this book, that at the age of forty I should find myself at the end of my active life. I do not now think this is ever true. I no longer yearn for ideal landscapes and no longer wish to know the god of city." (MM: 251)

Conclusion:

Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* demonstrates how colonialism adversely affects the lives of the indentured labourers and the enslaved people by dislocating them from their native geographies to the hostile terrains to live in destitution. Furthermore, colonial institutions destabilise indigenous history, culture, and language by imposing exploitative systems of governance. Characters like Ralph Singh, his father Gurudeva, Brownie, Sandra, etc., become victims of identity crises. The colonial disorder translates into internal disorder and displacement of Ralph Singh. His escape from the stark realities of his society and his irrational idealisation of Western culture and myths of his own culture force him to live with mimicry without any authentic identity. His education in a colonial school, life in London on a Scholarship, marriage with Sandra, political engagement through election in Isabella, and eventually his exile in London as a failed politician throw light on the range of his experience with different types of ideologies which only impose performativity and demand unquestioned submission. To form a genuine identity with meaning and belongingness with devastating backgrounds is impossible for the colonised. Ralph Singh's "shipwrecked" identity gets meaning and order through the act of writing his memoirs and free himself like a true ascetic lost in himself. It reflects this phase of life, as in Vanaprastha, as per the philosophy of the fourfold paths of human life mentioned in Hindu philosophy.

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