

# Spirit of Severance and Identity Crisis in V.S. Naipaul's 'The Mimic Men'

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**Abstract**—*The dichotomy between the literal meaning and figurative connotation of the term 'identity' is contested time and again on account of its indefinite and dynamic nature. Due to vast diversity, it becomes difficult to canonize any single culture. Therefore, identity of an individual becomes even more complex. From the crude early beginnings of this interdisciplinary field of literature, the assertion of identity and its perceivability is given utmost prominence. This is because it gives us a sense of belonging to an extent that its loss appears as loss of self. The following paper seeks to conceptualize the notion of cultural estrangement in the context of 'The Mimic Men' by V.S. Naipaul.*

*Rootlessness and alienation form the influential themes of Naipaul's narration. Identity is a part of self-conception and associates a person to his/her nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, locality and gender. Subsequently, subjugation of the 'self' leads to 'identity crises. A convenient antithesis can be drawn between Naipaul's hunt for ethnic recognition and destruction of Indianness to explicate the idea of identity crisis. The objective of this paper is to question the hegemonic act of legitimizing identity of certain set of men within a nation which rises the feeling of severance for the others. The paper also discusses on deploration in an ambiguous part of a region where he struggles to claim his selfhood.*

**Keywords:** *Identity, Cultural Studies, Selfhood, Identity Crisis, Third World, Alienation, Cultural Difference, Rootlessness, post colonialism.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### Naipaul's India: A Literary Review on Post colonialism

It is a widely acknowledged fact that the effect of modernization has a pervasive effect, both negative and positive, on the lives of the people. In a certain way this gives rise to a condition of stasis, inclusive enough to present a coherent portrait of a society. The enigma of this contemporary world order is highly implausible and cultivates the ambiguity into blood and veins of human beings who prefer to reside here willy-nilly of their choice. Under this ghastly dogmatic shadow of denial and deprivation, one can easily notice the general drift towards a lifestyle that is no longer tethered to religious conformity or submission to

ecclesiastical discipline. Further, the social tension that has culminated in its entirety, looks at those precincts of change which has led to the growth of unrest and abhorrence, encompassing and taking into account the religious, scientific and industrial challenges of the times. Under such profusion of uncertainty and chaos, it becomes more difficult to sustain with moral earnestness and practice religious values.

It is the imperialism that kept the minds and souls of the colonized into the shackles of its absolutism. India specifically is a nation which is well bred under the fetters and regulations of her colonizers. Post-independence,

India offers a comprehensive account of a drenched nation, combined with literature which got heavily influenced thereafter. Such appalling condition of the world from green countryside to the grey urban scapes stands responsible for the inevitable decay of mankind. Undoubtedly, prosperity has increased manifold but brings along with it, a colonized bent of mind. For Partha Chatterjee, a large section of the social consciousness in postcolonial India does not snugly fit into the descriptions of European narratives. He writes (2011: 172):

An important consideration in thinking about the relation between civil society and the state in the modern history of countries such as India is the fact that whereas the legal-bureaucratic apparatus of the state has been able, by the late colonial and certainly in the post-colonial period, to reach as the target of many of its activities virtually all of the population that inhabits its territory, the domain of civil social institutions as conceived above is still restricted to a fairly small section of 'citizens'. This hiatus is extremely significant because it is the mark of non-Western modernity as an always incomplete project of 'modernization' and of the role of an enlightened elite engaged in a pedagogical mission in relation to the rest of society.

One can easily discern the sunken plight of the postcolonial India after destruction of its cultural and traditional celibacy by the British Raj. Literature and society are interdependently connected as one describes the effects and ramifications on the

other after any trigger and fluctuation. For instance, postcolonial writers like Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Mahasweta Devi, Ranajit Guha, and others have focused on the subaltern issues in their works which aptly reflects the then existing panorama of the society. These writers engaged themselves in opening up the possibilities of a new way of looking towards the world. Their writings can be seen as a resistance to the former colonizers. There are other set of writers like Salman Rushdie, Nadira Naipaul, R.K Narayan, Arundhati Roy, V.S. Naipaul et al. who also focussed majorly on the issues like identity, contemporary reality, human relationships, emotions etc. in light of the struggles of postcolonial India. Their dissenting voices speak about the incongruities that India manifested after its brutal plundering of wealth and intellect. Naipaul vehemently asserts the appalling condition of India by putting forth an imagery of the derelict sight he witnessed, which he calls as a "National Drama of Defecation", he explicates the same in his exemplary work '*An Area of Darkness*' as follows:

The squatting figures – to the visitor, after a time, as eternal and emblematic as Rodin's Thinker- are never spoken of; they do not appear in feature films or documentaries. This might be regarded as part of a permissible prettifying intention. But the truth is that Indians do not see these squatters and might even, with complete sincerity, deny that they exist: a collective blindness arising out the Indian fear of pollution and the resulting conviction that Indians are the cleanest people in the world.

## 2. CULTURAL STUDIES IN THE LIGHT OF COLONIALISM

Post colonialism is blanket term given to variably positioned approaches to textual analysis. The common assumption among them is literature, culture, and history affect each other in significant ways. Postcolonial critics argue that colonialism was the key source of all the agony, pain, suffering and exploitation and it did not vanish with the departure of the colonizers. It continues to affect our culture and literature insidiously and subtly even today. Therefore, it should be resisted. Culture Studies on the other hand, is a new field, the roots of which dates back to the last quarter of the twentieth century. It tends to initiate its approach into intellectual enquiries concerning different socio-political and cultural forms and practices. This discipline meticulously draws on the notion of identity and selfhood, yet blurs the boundaries between different ethnic communities with similar identity. Hence, it is eclectic, pluralistic and multivalent in its subjects and methods of analysis.

Since its inception, the concept of culture and identity proposed by Mathew Arnold, who largely read culture with an idealist and essentialist lens, understands the undercurrents of cultural systems. Cultural Studies understands culture as indicative of society's living standards in which the relations of power and gender with crisscrossing lines are performed in

the name of cultural activity. Stuart Hall in his essay scrupulously explicates the role of cultural identity. He negotiates about Afro-Caribbean diaspora, discovering their remote past and perennial identity characterized by diversity, hybridity and difference. He enunciates in a demeanour,

We should not, for a moment, underestimate or neglect the importance of the act of imaginative rediscovery which this conception of a rediscovered, essential identity entails. Hidden histories have played a critical role in the emergence of many of the most important social movements of our time – feminist, anti-colonial and anti-racist.

### Concept of Identity Crisis

The continual reminiscence and the feeling of nostalgia which pertains in an individual on account of the dire homelessness instigates the loss of identity. For instance, to understand the concept of identity crisis, one must look through the lens of diaspora settled across the globe. Set off against the conventional race, diaspora within a separate geographic locale yearns for congeniality and wistful sense of belonging. They grapple with unrequited desire to get back home and this increased nostalgia provides them with double consciousness i.e. their narration gets a double voice.

Another example that can be explicitly quoted here is the forlorn identity of women in the garb of patriarchal society. A woman stuck in the trap of the chauvinistic male dominated society struggles to unearth her own distinct identity. Subjected to the rigidity and stereotypes of gender, she succinctly moves towards the convergence of her own identity and depends upon the recognition inherited to her by her male counterparts. The sheer veneration and dignity is lost which leads to loss of identity; severance leads to a deep chasm in her personality. There are many women writers who explores the subterranean layers of feminine existence through their works like Amrita Pritam, Kamla Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy so on and so forth.

### V.S. Naipaul and Severance

In psychology, identity crisis is a phenomenon where one fails to achieve and procure his egocentric demands and wishes during adolescence. The term identity crisis was first coined by German psychologist Erik Erikson. There is constant repulsion between identity cohesion and role confusion. The writer's corpus goes beyond his native and adapted frames such as a reference as West Indianness, his Indianness, his Britishness. Even though he strenuously disavowed the 'West Indian' label, his references remain controversial, hindering the exploration of his true identity.

V.S. Naipaul – the name deracinated if rendered more cosmopolitan by the condensation into initials. Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, a British Trinidadian writer is winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001 and is a renowned connoisseur of travelogues and myriad novels. His narratives continuously endeavour to grapple with issues of identity and

cultural tradition. V. S. Naipaul's serendipity and circuitous writing style makes him one of the most promising author read and circulated worldwide. It is worthwhile to reconsider his stance on postcolonial identity while reading his texts. His literary pieces are nonetheless, a scuffle with self, an argument with his own conscience for a stable cultural identity and a vehement voice against suppression and exploitation. To mention few, *The Mystic Masseur* *The Suffrage of Elvira* *Miguel Street* *A House for Mr Biswas* *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion* *A Flag on the Island* *Guerrillas* *A Bend in the River* *The Enigma of Arrival* *A Way in the World* *Half a Life* *Magic Seeds* *In a Free State*. There is another corpus of non-fictional novels in his basket namely, *The Middle Passage* *An Area of Darkness* *The Loss of El Dorado* *The Overcrowded Barracoon* *India: A Wounded Civilization* *The Return of Eva Perón* *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* *Finding the Centre* *A Turn in the South*.

### 3. THE MIMIC MEN: A HUNT FOR IDENTITY

The identity crisis that Naipaul's characters witness is due to their destruction of the past experiences. Therefore, Naipaul's attitude to culture has always been sanguine and progressive. It is difficult for the author to register emulation of the Third-World. He bluntly puts forth the shortcomings of Third-World nations and societies, which are strongly attached to their roots and fear uprooting due to blind treading on the heels of western culture, in search of a stable identity. They are thus able to maintain a distinct identity. However, for the generation born and bred in the immigration culture, life in the host-land proves almost fatal as they have not been blessed with the insularity of their forefathers, who went there from India. For the new generation, loses the sense of reality that it had conveyed to their ancestral beings. The following textual lines rightly explicates the idea of internal struggle for identity in the novel,

I know that return to my island and to my political life is impossible. The pace of colonial events is quick, the turnover of leaders rapid. I have already been forgotten; and I know the people who supplanted me are themselves about to be supplanted. My career is by no means unusual. It falls into the pattern. The career of the colonial politician is short and ends brutally. We lack order. Above all, we lack power, and we do not understand that we lack power. We mistake words and the acclamation of words for power; as soon as our bluff is called, we are lost. Politics for us are 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.

There are prominent themes which reflect the pathos and disgrace of the characters. Their sense of alienation from the landscapes, their identity crisis and the paradox of freedom displaces them from the nativity and they then linger across hunting selfhood. The people who can no longer associate themselves with a cultural heritage, lose the assurance and integrity unless provided by their racial ancestors. In tandem,

tougher realities have shifted and modified their perception on the west Indian parts of the world. The psychological and physical conditions correspond so closely that these homeless and destitute, West Indians are so often culturally and spiritually dispossessed as well. His utmost substitution is to strive after the culture of his ex-colonial masters even when he is unable to recognize their intentions.

In *the Mimic men*, however, the caricature of Kripal Singh appears less profound; may it be his ignorance, deprivation of innate skills or the persecution of a grasping Hindu family. He has made a considerable success in terms of public eminence. Apparently, he enjoyed thorough independence and freedom 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. Nevertheless, his clearly superior status and acute consciousness do not make him any less vulnerable to the subtle, yet overpowering consequences of his psychologically fragmented and confusing past. In fact, his ability to rationalize his own condition sharpens rather than reducing his total alienation from his environment and his final rejection of an active life.

Then I spoke the sentence which tormented me almost as soon as I had said it. It was this which no doubt made the interview so painful in recollection. I said, 'How can I take this message back to my people?' 'My people': for that I deserved all I got. He said: 'You can take back to your people any message you like.' And that was the end.

### 4. CONCLUSION

Thus, V.S. Naipaul is a renowned writer of style and demeanor. He has finely manifested the agony and disgrace of subjugated people with a clarity that comes from his own experience. While delineating the parameters of the colonized society, he took utmost care of the colonized sensitivity. Edwards Said has lauded him for his unrelenting commitment to truth (*Culture and Imperialism* : (20). N. Ramadevi takes a balanced view when she says,

"His novels deal not only with questions of identity, rootlessness, cultural difference and assimilation brought about by migration but also with his own dilemmas as an exile about self and home and the psychological and political aspects of alienation"

The identity is contested and intertwined with anatomical and morphological elements that fluctuates within. The more a person is affected by an individual's notion of self in relation to society, the more it impacts their identity. People try to identify themselves in relation to the people around them, particularly noting that which is different. It is because of this that people are quite cognizant of their disposition pertaining to societal norms. There are two components to an individual's

identity-the internal and the social. This social component is constantly being adjusted and manipulated. An individual may appear to have many different and conflicting socially fraught identities which struggle to acquire in tandem.

*The Mimic Men*, however, is a nuanced elaboration and explication of his personal experiences on arrival to India: 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 mental structure.

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