

Identity Crisis in V.S. Naipaul's "The Mimic Men"

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Abstract – Present paper is a deep study of the theme 'Identity Crisis' in V. S. Naipaul's novel 'The Mimic Men' in the post-colonial era. Naipaul was born in Trinidad and Tobago where his grandfather migrated from India. Due to this, Naipaul faced identity crisis and alienation in his own life which is clearly depicted in his novels. This paper is an attempt to explore the theme of identity crisis through the novel's protagonist Ralph's character. It is also an attempt to look at the actions done by Ralph which depicts his quest for his true identity.

Key Words: Indigenous Culture, Non-Belongingness, Mimicry.

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INTRODUCTION

Colonization, literally means, 'the action or process of settling among and establishing control over the indigenous people of an area.' However, as any point of view or idea has various perspectives, so does colonization. It can be looked at or defined with the eye of a colonizer and with the outlook of the colonized. Of course, a writer or author from the countries which colonize other countries would opine that colonial actions had positive outcomes such as the overall development in the areas of infrastructure and social upliftment. On the other hand, a representative of the colonized would have an entirely opposite viewpoint. According to the colonized, colonization is nothing else but the entry of one nation to subjugate another and begins by conquering the entire system including the language, culture, tradition and even the value system.

When this outlook is studied in depth, we learn that as soon as colonization embarks in a nation, it begins by obliterating or destroying the native culture and tradition by terming them as primitive or uncivilized. Colonizers don't demonstrate any love or affinity for the indigenous cultures, instead they begin promoting their culture and value system and gradually set about enforcing it on the native people. Consequently, there arises a struggle for the native people to adapt, though not by choice, with the entirely new culture, alien lifestyle, abandoning their own age-old traditions for a tranquil existence in their own land. This tragic experience of colonization has compelled the colonized people to adjudge themselves as not equivalent with the colonizer. The Anglo education and the British culture which were promoted as the best, eventually, made the

indigenous people feel that their customs and traditions were much inferior. In order to overcome or get over this disparity, the native people began adapting themselves with the language, culture and lifestyle of the colonizer, to be considered as equal to them. Moreover, people began migrating to the colonizer's land, keeping in mind the dream of being equal with the colonizer, in terms of every sphere of life. This obsession is still prevalent in most of the colonized countries. At the same time, because of the apparent differences in the culture, traditions and ethnic backgrounds, they become unsuccessful in identifying themselves with the colonizer. Inevitably these people fall victim to identity crisis. They don't wholly belong to either their own native land nor to the migrated land. They feel baffled in this world without a clear identity

It is with this perspective, this article looks at V.S. Naipaul's 'The Mimic Men'. 'An Indian by ethnicity, a Trinidadian by his nativity and British by education and residence'. This is V.S. Naipaul in a nutshell. Trinidad was a British colony for many years and the exposure he had with various cultures (Indian, African and English) eventually formed his viewpoints and his attitude to life. He got alienated from the land of his birth and had to live in a land which was absolutely different from his cultural roots. (Mehni) His choice of moving to London is the result of such an influence. Even in his personal life, he had confronted serious challenges with regard to his identity. This is the reason, 'The Mimic Men', is referred to as an autobiographical memoir. This article will look at the identity crisis faced by the protagonist of this novel, Ralph, during various stages of his life.

NAIPAUL AND RALPH

Naipaul speaks his mind and life through Ralph's character throughout the novel. Ralph faces the issue of identity crisis which Naipaul also faced at certain points of time in his life. His life in Trinidad was same as Ralph's in Isabella. Ralph has confused memories of his childhood and western culture has affected him internally as well as externally. He has completely adopted the English way of lifestyle like Naipaul defying his own roots, culture and traditions which were followed by his ancestors and is constantly tormented by the dilemma of identity crisis. Ralph follows Leini as she tries to groom him to make him a perfect Englishman. He starts thinking in the same way how Leini made him think, "We become what we see of ourselves in the eyes of others"(Naipaul, 2001, 22).

Ralph is a good example of a person who is torn apart by his inner and outer self. A sense of non-belongingness prevails throughout the novel which made him restless and led to a non-ending conflict. The whole order of events in Ralph's life is a replica of Naipaul's life. Ralph met his wife Sandra while studying in London like Naipaul who met Patricia during his college days in London. Both of them got married to English girls to be a part of that society where they did not belong. There is a quest of finding their true identities.

'RALPH' A NEW NAME

Singh remembers very little about his childhood as he has bleak memories of his school, classmates and textbooks that were taught there. All of these were greatly influenced by the western culture. The earliest memory that he has of his school is about giving an apple to his teacher which again illustrates his fondness for western culture as he carried an orange thinking of it as an apple:

"My first memory of school is of taking an apple to the teacher. This puzzles me. We had no apples on Isabella. It must have been an orange; yet my memory insists on the apple. The editing is clearly at fault, but the edited version is all I have." (2001, 83).

It was in this pursuit of imitating Western culture that Singh gives himself a new name 'Ralph' to relate to that culture to which he did not belong. He pretended to be someone else and thought himself to be extraordinary with his new name. He believed that a western name 'Ralph' would earn him a status in his school like Deschampsneufs (Ralph's classmate) who was appreciated by his teachers and fellow classmates:

"Of Deschampsneufs, in fact, I already knew a little. Soon I was to know more. His distinction was vague but acknowledged by all. The teachers handled him with care. Uniformed servants, one male, one female, brought his lunch to school in a basket and

spread it on a white tablecloth on his desk." (2001, 85-86).

It is quite evident that Singh strongly believes that his new name is capable of changing his identity and destiny.

MARRIAGE WITH SANDRA

Ralph's arrival to London was with the dream of finding an identity. However, he had moments of confusion and crisis of being lost during his stay in the city of his dream:

'Those of us who came to it lost some of our solidity; we were trapped into fixed, flat postures'. (2001, 28).

It was at this time of disappointment that his endeavour to find an identity ended up with the marriage with an English woman, Sandra. He transforms himself into a new individual after the wedding, with Sandra by his side. He believes that now he can stand tall in Isabella, with a British lady as his wife. In Sandra, he finds solace and feels more confident:

'I had such confidence in her rapaciousness, such confidence in her as someone who could come to no harm- a superstitious reliance on her, which was part of the strength I drew from her.' (2001, 45)

However, he has his moments of doubt and disbelief in him whether he is worthy enough to have Sandra as his wife, especially after listening to the registrar's concern for Sandra, by giving her the address of an association which offered information and protection to British women overseas. Years later, even when they got separated, Ralph had the same emotion of being lost and not belonging to any roots. This crisis of not belonging continues to haunt him. He thought:

'Sandra was after all in a position to leave, other relationships awaited her, other countries. I had nowhere to go, I wished to experience no new landscapes. (2001, 71)

MIMICRY

As the title of the novel, 'The Mimic Men' suggests, the theme of the novel depicts Ralph's preoccupation that the colonial society has nothing original, and an assumption that they aren't real or not real men unless they follow or blindly imitate the so called superior people, the colonizers, to be considered civilized. According to him, people in the colonized world have to follow the footsteps of the colonialists. Only then, the inhabitants of the colonies can have a certain identity.

For the protagonist, the basic issue is lack of identity, which is reflected by his blind mimicking of western or European views and lifestyle. He thinks

it is the easiest way to find an identity. So, there is a deliberate attempt by him to assimilate to the English lifestyle and mannerisms. One instance is his reaction when he sees snow for the first time in his life in London, "Snow: At last; my element." (2001, 9). He says snow is his element instead of sea or beach, which is the place of his origin. So throughout the novel, we can see Ralph developing the idea of colonial mimicry at various stages of his life.

Generally, mimicry is done initially in front of a mirror to know whether what is being done is the near true reflection of how an individual or person behaves or expresses their mannerisms. So, it can be stated that none of the mannerisms or movements in mimicry is real or authentic mainly because it is just a copy of something else. Nasrullah Mambrol has opined, "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'." In brief, the following passage from the novel would speak a volume about this theme:

"We, here on our islands, handling booksprinted in this world and using its goods, had been abandoned and forgotten. 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. (132-33)

CONCLUSION

Ralph was haunted by his search for his true identity throughout his life. Although he copied western culture but he could not find solace similar to any other colonized person who imitates the culture, language and lifestyle of the colonizer but still remains a blurred copy of the colonizer. As Mohsin Hamed has rightly said, "it is not always possible to restore one's boundaries after they have been blurred and made permeable by a relationship: try as we might, we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings we previously imagined ourselves to be. Something of us is now outside, and something of the outside is now within us." Even if the colonized try to mimic the racial, colour or cultural aspect of the colonizer, they still cannot be a true copy. In contrast, they lose their roots and henceforth begins their search for true identity.

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