

Exploring Cultural Reconstruction in the Works of VS Naipaul

Dr. Deepa

Assistant Professor

RBD Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Bijnor

Email: deepa.randhawa89@gmail.com

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Abstract

This research paper conducts a comprehensive analysis of cultural reconstruction through the lens of V.S. Naipaul's literary oeuvre. Oscar-winning author and Caribbean national treasure Naipaul is acclaimed for his in-depth examination of identity crises, postcolonial themes, and the complexities of cultural reconstruction. He never experienced a sense of belonging to any of the cultures—Taiwan, India, or Britain—and instead felt profoundly rootless. The VS Naipaul works are situated in numerous cultures, with notable examples including India, Trinidad, Britain, America, Africa, and predominantly the Third World. Numerous of his characters serve as illustrations of the cultural upheavals that result from the loss of one's sense of origin and belonging. Analysis of the repercussions of its collision, transformation, uprooting, and unavoidable human suffering, his fiction explores a wide array of topics, from historical hybridity to contemporary hybridity. The world's cultures are not as homogeneous or accepting as they may appear; rather, they are divided along a very sharp line that can lead to animosity towards another culture. Naipaul is an expert at portraying the interior self of his or her characters and the predicament in which they find themselves.

Keywords

Cultural Reconstruction, postcolonial identity, V.S. Naipaul, dislocations

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1. Introduction

V.S. Naipaul's literary oeuvre extensively explores the subject of cultural reconstruction, thereby manifesting his distinctive vantage point concerning identity, affiliation, and the intricacies of postcolonial societies [1]. Naipaul's analysis of cultural reconstruction is distinguished by a discerning scrutiny of how historical events, colonialism, and the dynamic relationship between indigenous origins and external forces shape collective and individual identities [2].

As Peter Levine's analysis emphasizes, Naipaul's perspective on culture challenges the concept of "whole cultures" and highlights the complexities of cultural hybridity. In contrast to extolling the notion of cultural purity, he advocates for the appreciation of diversity, contending that each culture is a fusion of concepts and influences. Naipaul's body of work emphasizes the significance of ingenuity, esteem, and discernment in the cultural imitation process; it rejects simplistic attempts at cultural appropriation.

Furthermore, Naipaul's involvement with the Caribbean literary and intellectual heritage, as explicated in the introductory section by Oxford Academic, provides a historical framework for his contributions to the Caribbean area [3]. His literary works make a valuable contribution to the ongoing discourse surrounding the sociology of slavery, the Caribbean colonial experience, and the lasting impact of historical legacies on the culture, politics, and way of life of the region [4].

Overall, V.S. Naipaul's literary oeuvre delves into the subject of cultural reconstruction, providing a nuanced comprehension of the intricacies of identity, the transient nature of culture, and the continuous endeavor to redefine narratives in an increasingly interconnected global society [5].

3. Postcolonial Identity Crisis In *The Mimic Men*

In V.S. Naipaul's "The Mimic Men," Ralph Singh embodies the complex struggle of a "prototypical colonial character," deeply entangled in the biases and pluralism of the society he inhabits [15]. Ralph's quest for identity becomes a central theme, as he grapples with mimicking European or Western ideologies, conflicting with his own self-perception and societal expectations. By mirroring colonialists' actions, Ralph forsakes his roots, forsaking home, family, and personal identity in pursuit of assimilation. His immersion in Western culture proves detrimental, severing ties with his cultural heritage and defying ancestral values. This detachment leads to a fragmentation of his being, leaving him vulnerable and morally adrift. Naipaul

parallels the insights of Fanon and Said on colonial mimicry, illustrating Ralph's construction of identity through acceptance of colonial language and norms [16]. Naipaul juxtaposes English with Hindi, symbolizing the clash between colonial imposition and native culture. Through Ralph's linguistic struggle, Naipaul warns of the soul-depleting consequences of adopting colonial culture while advocating for the reclamation of postcolonial identity. Despite critiquing colonial influence, Naipaul acknowledges the power of English as a medium for expressing colonized experiences and reshaping cultural narratives. By embracing English, Naipaul suggests a means for colonized voices to assert themselves on the global stage, reshaping perceptions of identity and culture [17].

Hybridity, stemming from colonialism, denotes the amalgamation of distinct lifestyles. In diverse societies, grassroots hybridization often fosters mutual respect and understanding. Postcolonial writers like Fanon, Said, and Naipaul portray diversity as essential for asserting cultural identity, highlighting the "language shock" experienced during societal transitions. This effect, interpreted by Ashcroft et al. [18] as a breakdown of imperialistic polarization, fosters transcultural interactions among both colonized and colonizers. Hybridity also challenges power imbalances, albeit imperfectly, masking cultural differences while assimilating policies that defy inequality [19]. Naipaul's character Ralph epitomizes the psychic trauma of realizing he can never embody the attributes of the colonizers he admires, notably the unattainable whiteness of colonial imperialists [20]. Said and Naipaul perceive cultural systems within a "third space of enunciation," where cultural identity emerges from ambivalence and contradiction, rejecting notions of pure cultural hierarchy. Said's exploration of estrangement suggests confronting conflict as a pathway to international cultural understanding, underlining the complexities of colonial and postcolonial identities. Said's argument regarding liberation exposes the contradictory nature of identity in the exile region;

*Liberation as an intellectual mission,
born in the resistance and opposition
to the confinements and ravages of
imperialism, has now shifted from the
settled, established, and domesticated
dynamics of culture to its unhoused,
decentred, and exilic energies,*

*energies whose incarnation today is
the migrant, and whose consciousness
is that of the intellectual and artist in
exile, the political figure between
domains, between forms, between
homes, and between languages. From
this perspective then all things are
indeed counter, original, spare,
strange. [21]*

Dependence on multiculturalism's allure isn't solely about exoticism but also about culture's hybridity. Building on Said's idea of cultural diversity, Ashcroft et al. note its connection to survival, emerging from the "in-between space" that enriches mixed cultures' perception. Naipaul echoes Said's sentiments but opposes hybridity. In "The Mimic Men," he portrays an Indian Brahmin alienated from colonial culture, rejecting cultural diversity's mechanics. Naipaul's disdain for hybridity stems from an obsession with purity. He sees cultural shock as a violation, eroding societies' fabric. Naipaul criticizes colonial-induced change in post-colonial societies, advocating for the preservation of original identities and values. Adjusting in hybrid settings, for Naipaul, means compromising cultural integrity.

Said contends that cultural diversity and identity, under colonial presence, oscillate between an outward appearance of authority and originality, and an enunciation of difference and repetition. He argues that colonial discourse blurs distinctions between "self," "home culture," and "alien culture," instead emphasizing notions of "self," "us," and "other." Imperialism, as Said notes, globalized the amalgamation of cultures and identities, perpetuating the misconception of exclusive racial or cultural identities. This construct, wherein a dominant culture is defined alongside its derivatives, aligns with Naipaul's portrayal in "The Mimic Men." Both authors analyze diversity's association with cultural imbalance in colonial societies, reflecting on the complexities of identity formation and cultural assimilation under colonial rule.

As demonstrated earlier, Fanon emphasizes repetition as a significant aspect linking mimicry to slavery. In many postcolonial societies emerging from exploitation and slavery, hybridity often manifests as mimicry of a foreign culture. Mimicry, as Ferdous describes, becomes a means of acquiring colonial knowledge and power [22]. Contrary to reflecting the other, in Said's perspective, colonial mimicry

represents a strong desire for a recognizable and reformed identity. Thus, Ralph's admission of being less fascinated by the act itself than by the order and calm it implied underscores this notion. Colonial discourse compels colonized individuals like Ralph to mimic the colonizer's cultural norms, institutions, assumptions, and values, perpetuating the cycle of imitation and subjugation.

Ashcroft and colleagues define mimicry as the nuanced replication of characteristics that pose a threat to individual identity. The amalgamation of cultures represents a synthetic positioning and cultural relativism, encompassing the convergence of two cultural dialects. This process encapsulates a form of "colonial authority" alongside its coercive influence, which has subtly imposed its dominance through the guise of identification, mockery, and mimicry [23]. These definitions underscore the intricate dynamic between the colonized and the colonizer. The fluctuating relationship between mockery and mimicry reflects the ambivalence inherent in the interaction of these two divergent powers. Mimicry, as a concept, is inherently ambivalent, necessitating the incorporation of both similar and dissimilar elements. Moreover, it entails the perception of a partial transformation from colonized to colonizer, while still retaining distinctiveness, as exemplified in Naipaul's portrayal of Ralph—a character educated in a foreign culture yet assimilated into colonial society through marriage.

In "The Mimic Men," the narrative unfolds against the backdrop of a shifting political landscape in a colonized society. Central to the story is Singh, a character marked by ignorance, poverty, and a lack of inherent talent [24]. Despite achieving public prominence and material success uncommon among similar literary figures, Singh's foreign education in London unveils the injustices inherent in his alien and sophisticated society. However, despite his acute awareness and intellectual prowess, Singh remains vulnerable to cultural shock and alienation due to his complex and fragmented past. Paradoxically, his heightened consciousness only serves to deepen his estrangement from the colonized environment, further complicating his integration into society.

*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. I was the
dandy, the extravagant colonial,
indifferent. [25]*

Naipaul, through the character of Ralph Singh, vividly portrays the West Indian experience, encapsulating the nuances of both East and West Indian psyches and the tensions among Creole, English, and Indian cultures. Acting as confessor, narrator, and visionary, Singh offers commentary on various aspects of postcolonial societies, including politics, power dynamics, and racial and social interactions. Singh's London experience reveals a relentless urban life, particularly evident during his stay at Mr. Shylock's house, where he grapples with feelings of alienation akin to other immigrants. He describes the house as a collection of private cells, highlighting the individualism pervasive in the city. Witnessing the struggles of Lieni, a Maltese housekeeper, prompts Singh to confront his own identity and self-perception, realizing the impact of external perceptions on self-image" [26]. Despite initially neglecting his appearance, Singh's adaptation to the colonial environment leads him to develop a newfound appreciation for his homeland, Isabella Island.

Said notes the discomfort experienced by characters embodying colonial discourse, often torn between the conflicting environments and interactions of the colonized and the colonizer. This unease arises because colonial subjects cannot fully replicate the various traits and social aspects of the ideal colonizer, as described by Ashcroft et al. (2004). Said also highlights the detrimental effects of mimicking a foreign culture, leading to a "double vision" where individuals are aware of at least two cultures, revealing the ambivalence inherent in colonial discourse while undermining its authority [27]. Additionally, this dual awareness provides a basis for resistance, unsettling the foundations of colonial centrality and subjectivity.

In continuation of Said's postcolonial arguments, Naipaul further delves into the challenges of Ralph's fragmented identity in "The Mimic Men." Naipaul posits that within the dominance of centralized colonial power, there exists no alternative for a colonized individual but to adopt mimicry. This underscores Naipaul's perception of cultural power within literature. His portrayal of mimicry bears a striking resemblance to Said's notion that exile is inherently turbulent and unsatisfying, where mimicry's performance is veiled by ambivalence. Naipaul, like Singh, navigates the multifaceted and ambivalent nature of mimicry in "The Mimic Men," illustrating its complexity within the colonial context.

I paid Mr. Shylock three guineas a week for a tall, multi-mirrored, book shape room with a coffin-like wardrobe . . . I thought Mr. Shylock looked distinguished like a lawyer or business person or politicians. He had the habit of strolling the bot of his ear inclining his head to listen. I thought the gesture was attractive; I copy it.
(Naipaul 1967, p. 7) [28]

This passage intricately explores the multifaceted nature of mimicry, delving beyond Singh's imitation of his landlord to delve into Europe's post-war remorse regarding the treatment of Jews, embodied in the guilt associated with the name Shylock. As the narrator, Ralph is compelled to emulate someone who has exploited him, reflecting a subtle form of mockery infused with the colonial process embedded within cultural comprehension. Through Ralph's character, the text illustrates both an object within the colonial hierarchy and a fitting colonized subject, exemplifying the complexities inherent in the colonial dynamic.

"The Mimic Men" transcends mere narrative; it serves as a poignant exploration of the plight of displaced expatriates in a colonized world. Naipaul employs a confessional tone alongside meticulous analysis, illuminating the trials faced by expatriates with authenticity. Through nuanced portrayals, Naipaul exposes the protagonist's profound sense of discontent, alienation, and the relentless quest for a stable, rooted identity. Amidst three distinct cultures, Singh grapples with neither fully embracing his Indian heritage nor assimilating into Caribbean society, nor finding belonging in London's colonial empire. This triple exile crystallizes in "The Mimic Men," revealing Singh's pursuit of success, wealth, and power through expedient means, masking his identity crisis. He embodies a persona of intellectual sophistication veiling shallow values, aware yet disengaged from societal commitments [29]. Singh's admission of mimicry underscores a facade of preparation for life, entangled in the corruption of the human soul, emblematic of his fragile and uncertain character.

It's essential to recognize the educational system as a "privileged instrument," enabling colonized individuals to mimic the cultural steps of colonialists, assuming roles within the empire. This involves wearing ill-fitting masks in their daily lives,

leading to complications when the colonized begin internalizing these roles. Mimicry, as observed by Said and Naipaul, serves the imperial agenda by aspiring for recognition and reform, albeit with nuanced differences between colonizer and colonized. The inability to achieve perfection underscores the alienation felt by the colonized, while also highlighting their cultural ambivalence in the pursuit of authenticity. Naipaul's works exemplify the intricate dynamics of mimicry and hybridity, particularly in exploring the complexities of slavery and subordination among colonized individuals. Education, along with varying degrees of mimicry, shapes the identity diasporas of postcolonial subjects, as seen in Naipaul's character Singh, whose lifelong mimicry impedes authentic self-assessment until his early forties.

4. Analysis of *The Enigma of Arrival*

V.S. Naipaul's "The Enigma of Arrival" explores significant concepts such as migration, displacement, and the enduring influence of colonial legacies on individual sense of self [30]. Naipaul's semi-autobiographical novel depicts the protagonist's odyssey from Trinidad to England, thereby distorting the boundaries between reality and fiction and reflecting Naipaul's own experiences. The novel effectively engages readers through the protagonist's contemplative observations of the English countryside, thereby emphasizing significant themes such as displacement, deterioration, and the quest for a sense of belonging in an unfamiliar territory.

Through an examination of the protagonist's consciousness, which is influenced by migration and the concept of "arrival," Naipaul provides a nuanced analysis of the intricate nature of cultural reconstruction. The novel's gradual exploration of themes such as mortality and decay, the influence of migration on identity, and the narrator's introspective musings all contribute to the nuanced depiction of the human condition by Naipaul. Critics have observed that the novel's melancholic tone serves to emphasize the protagonist's feelings of estrangement and the difficulties associated with adjusting to foreign surroundings.

Furthermore, the novel's pastoral England setting provides an additional and distinctive aspect to Naipaul's investigation of cultural reconstruction [31]. By employing eloquent prose and succinct descriptions, Naipaul effectively conveys the broader concepts of deterioration and bereavement by depicting an English estate in a state of disrepair and its occupants. By prioritizing the narrator's internal musings over external events, the novel's narrative structure emphasizes the introspective character of the protagonist's voyage and the profound influence that migration has on his consciousness.

Fundamentally, an examination of “The Enigma of Arrival” within the body of work authored by V.S. Naipaul unveils a prodigious investigation into the intricacies of cultural reconstruction, migration, and displacement [32]. Through skillful integration of autobiography and fiction, Naipaul constructs a captivating storyline that prompts readers to reflect upon profound inquiries concerning identity, belonging, and the lasting influence of colonial pasts on individual accounts.

5. Analysis of *A House For Mr. Biswas*

In a postcolonial framework, “A House for Mr. Biswas” by V.S. Naipaul is an in-depth examination of independence, identity, and the quest for self-actualization. Mohun Biswas, a Hindu Indian man residing in British-owned Trinidad, experiences the complexities of cultural displacement, familial obligations, and societal norms throughout the novel. Naipaul explores themes of personal agency, the pursuit of autonomy, and the repercussions of colonial legacies on individual lives using the character of Mr. Biswas [33].

The symbolic nature of “A House for Mr. Biswas” is evident in the narrative, as Mr. Biswas’s quest for a residence symbolizes his yearning for autonomy and personal satisfaction [34]. Amid familial and societal pressures, the novel depicts his eventual acquisition of a home as a symbolic quest for self-actualization, complete with setbacks and disappointments. Naipaul skillfully integrates components of cultural legacy, individual ambitions, and the intricacies of interpersonal connections to vividly depict the difficulties individuals encounter in a world that is transforming.

Furthermore, the novel presents a comprehensive examination of the process of identity development, emphasizing the conflicts that arise from the desire to belong and the perpetual pursuit of a personal space. Through his depiction of Mr. Biswas’s interactions with his family, the Tulsis, and his internal struggles, Naipaul illuminates the complexities of cultural reconstruction, individual development, and the lasting impact of colonialism on individuals [35].

Fundamentally, “A House for Mr. Biswas” serves as a profound introspection regarding the human condition, highlighting enduring concerns such as yearning, inclusion, and the quest for individual satisfaction. Through its eloquent narrative construction and perceptive examination of cultural forces, Naipaul’s novel challenges conventional wisdom by delving into the intricate nuances of identity and the perpetual pursuit of self-actualization within the context of a postcolonial society.

6. Discussion

An examination of cultural reconstruction as portrayed in the literary oeuvre of V.S. Naipaul provides an in-depth investigation into themes such as identity, affiliation, and the intricate dynamics that are intrinsic to postcolonial societies. Naipaul's literary contributions constitute a voluminous tapestry crafted from his travails as a diasporic individual and his perceptive observations of the societies he encountered. By analyzing seminal literary pieces including "The Mimic Men," "The Enigma of Arrival," and "A House for Mr. Biswas," Naipaul reveals the complex interplay between cultural displacement, the search for a sense of self, and the yearning for a sense of belonging.

Ralph Singh, portrayed by Naipaul in "The Mimic Men," embodies the archetypal colonial protagonist who confronts the intricate issues of loyalty and integration. Naipaul effectively illustrates the detrimental effects of emulating colonial ideologies and the subsequent splintering of identity via Ralph's voyage. Naipaul's examination of cultural ambivalence, hybridity, and emulation highlights the difficulties colonized people encountered when attempting to construct a sense of identity amidst the colonial hierarchy. Furthermore, "The Enigma of Arrival" explores profound concepts such as migration, displacement, and the lasting impact that colonial legacies have on personal identity. Naipaul's semi-autobiographical account offers a reflective exploration of the protagonist's state of mind as he traverses the English countryside, contending with emotions of alienation and the desire for a sense of inclusion. By employing intricate prose and reflective contemplations, Naipaul sheds light on the profound ramifications of migration on the human condition.

In a similar vein, "A House for Mr. Biswas" provides a thought-provoking examination of self-actualization, independence, and identity in the context of the postcolonial era. By symbolically representing Mr. Biswas's quest for a place to call home, Naipaul underscores the enduring consequences of colonialism and the intricacies of cultural displacement, while also emphasizing the individual's quest for personal fulfillment. In its entirety, Naipaul's body of work presents a sophisticated comprehension of cultural reconstruction, shedding light on the complexities surrounding affiliation, identity, and the never-ending pursuit of inclusion in postcolonial societies. Through the skillful integration of personal anecdotes, historical backdrops, and fabricated storylines, Naipaul extends an invitation to readers to contemplate the lasting consequences of colonialism and the intricate nature of cultural identity in a globalized society.

7. Conclusion

In summary, the examination of cultural reconstruction as depicted in the literary works of V.S. Naipaul demonstrates a profound comprehension of the intricate dynamics of identity, belonging, and the lasting consequences of colonialism. Naipaul's literary contributions offer a poignant introspection into the complex realities that individuals encounter while traversing postcolonial societies; they confront challenges such as cultural assimilation, displacement, and the pursuit of genuineness. In "The Mimic Men," Naipaul adeptly depicts the internal conflicts that arise within individuals as they navigate the paradoxical obligations of colonial mimicry and the yearning for a deeply ingrained sense of self via characters such as Ralph Singh. This literary work illuminates the persisting psychological and social consequences of colonial legacies by revealing the profound alienation and fragmentation that individuals who traverse multiple cultures endure. Comparably, Naipaul explores the intricacies of migration and displacement in "The Enigma of Arrival," skillfully constructing a narrative that obscures the distinction between fact and fantasy. Naipaul provides nuanced insights into the complexities of cultural reconstruction and the pursuit of belonging in foreign lands via the protagonist's introspective reflections. "A House for Mr. Biswas" delves deeper into thematic elements of autonomy, self-actualization, and identity in the specific setting of postcolonial Trinidad. Naipaul's portrayal of Mr. Biswas's endeavour to secure a residence function as a potent allegory for the more extensive quest for independence and individual contentment in the face of familial and societal obligations. In general, the literary collection of Naipaul offers a diverse array of storylines that shed light on the intricate processes of cultural reestablishment within postcolonial societies. The author's literary contributions provide significant perspectives on the lasting consequences of colonialism, the intricate process of constructing one's identity, and the ongoing pursuit of genuineness and inclusion in a globally interconnected community. By employing discerning examination and evocative narrative techniques, Naipaul encourages readers to reflect on profound questions about the nature of being human and the ongoing challenges faced by individuals as they navigate the intricate process of cultural reconstruction.

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