

## **Fanonism, Orientalism and Othering with Reference to *The Mimic Men***

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**Abstract:** Cultural identities reflect common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which are distorted and destroyed when colonisation turns to the past of oppressed people. Fanon advocates passionate research to discover beyond the misery of today, beyond self-contempt and resignation, some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us. Said's *Orientalism* exposes Eurocentric universalism, which takes for granted both the superiority of what is European or Western, and the inferiority of what is not. Othering describes the ways in which colonial discourse produces its subjects. Spivak explains othering as a dialectical process: the colonizing Other is established at the same time as its colonized others are produced as subjects. This paper examines *The Mimic Men* by V.S. Naipaul in the light of Fanonism, Orientalism and Othering.

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Date of Submission: 14-09-2018

Date of acceptance: 30-09-2018

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The remnants of colonial rule prompted many sensitive writers to redefine the relationship between the Empire and the Centre. The Postcolonial space is an arena of the continuing process of analysing and combating unequal power structures.

The term 'Postcolonialism' generally refers to literature emerging from or depicting the peoples and cultures of lands which have broken free from colonial rule (usually, but not necessarily, relatively recently.) It can also imply a corpus of theory or an attitude towards that which is studied. George M. Gugelberger claims of 'postcolonial studies' that it

...is not a discipline but a distinctive problematic that can be described as an abstract combination of all the problems inherent in such newly emergent fields as minority discourse, Latin American Studies, African Studies, Caribbean Studies, Third World Studies... and so on, all of which participated in the significant and overdue recognition that "minority" cultures are actually "majority" cultures and that hegemonized Western (Euro-American) studies have been unduly privileged for political reasons. (Gugelberger 582)

All cultural practices and forms of representation hinge on the issue of cultural identity.

Practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write – the positions of enunciation. What recent theories of enunciation suggest is that, though we speak, so to say 'in our own name', of ourselves and from our own experience, nevertheless who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never identical, never exactly in the same place. Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think ... of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematizes the very authority and authenticity to which the term, 'cultural identity', lays claim. (Hall 110).

Stuart Hall's essay, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", presents a "nuanced notion of identity which negotiates between essentialist and post-structuralist formations" (Mongia 11).

There are at least two different ways of thinking about 'cultural identity'. The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. (Hall 111)

In post-colonial society, the rediscovery of this identity is often the object of what Frantz Fanon, in "On National Culture," named as "Passionate research... directed by the secret hope of discovering beyond the misery of today, beyond self-contempt, resignation and abjuration, some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others" (Fanon 170)

“Colonisation is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By ... perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it” (Fanon 170).

Fanonism, Orientalism and othering are key elements in understanding the colonial experience and subject-construction. For Stuart Hall, the traumatic character of the colonial experience can be understood only from a certain angle. How colonised people and their experiences

...were positioned and subject-ed in the dominant regimes of representation were the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization. Not only, in Said’s ‘Orientalist’ sense, were we constructed as different and other within the categories of knowledge of the West by those regimes. They had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as ‘Other’. Every regime of representation is a regime of power formed, as Foucault reminds us, by the fatal couplet, ‘power/knowledge’. But this kind of knowledge is internal, not external. It is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that ‘knowledge’, not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, by the power of inner compulsion and subjective con-formation to the norm. That is the lesson – the sombre majesty – of Fanon’s insight into the colonising experience in *Black Skin, White Masks*. (Hall 113)

Unless resisted, it produces, in Fanon’s vivid phrase in “On National Culture,” “individuals without an anchor, without horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless – a race of angels” (Fanon 176).

Examining a newly independent country in the Caribbean, the island of Isabella, V. S. Naipaul in *The Mimic Men* (hereafter cited as *MM*) presents, analyses and evaluates a certain phase in the modern history of ex-colonial countries. Ralph, the protagonist, is troubled by the pain of being a displaced, dislocated and disillusioned colonial man.

During his school days, his classmates attempted to deny their own world. Because of their common experience of impotence and humiliation, they felt a loss of self-esteem, but more importantly a loss of mooring and consequently they never wanted to identify themselves with such lands that lacked power. They felt that “the first requisite for happiness was to be born in a famous city” and that “to be born on an island like Isabella, an obscure New World transplantation, second hand and barbarous was to be born to disorder” (*MM* 127).

Language and literature are powerful tools in the process of colonization, be it political or cultural. Therefore, any knowledge, science, technology, literary criticism and modernization claimed to be universal are actually Eurocentric. Post-colonialism questions and rejects this idea of universalism

In *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, Edward Said exposes the Eurocentric universalism which established Western superiority over the East, identified as the ‘Other’ and the processes by which the ‘Orient’ was and continues to be constructed in European thinking. Though “Professional Orientalists included scholars in various disciplines such as languages, history and philology, ... for Said the discourse of Orientalism was much more widespread and endemic in European thought” (Ashcroft et al 167). It is an academic discourse and style of thought based on “the ontological and epistemological distinctions between the ‘Orient’ and the ‘Occident’” (Said 1). But Said analyses it as the Western strategy of dealing with the Orient “by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 3).

This view illustrates Foucault’s definition of a discourse. For Foucault,

...a discourse is a strongly bounded area of social knowledge, a system of statements within which the world can be known. The key feature of this is that the world is not simply ‘there’ to be talked about, rather, it is through discourse itself that the world is brought into being. It is also in such a discourse that speakers and hearers, writers and readers come to an understanding about themselves, their relationship to each other and their place in the world (the construction of subjectivity). It is the complex of signs and practices which organises social existence and social reproduction. (Ashcroft et al 70-71)

Discourse fuses power and knowledge:

Those who have power have control of what is known and the way it is known, and those who have such knowledge have power over those who do not. ...Edward Said in his discussion of Orientalism ... points out that discourse, this way of knowing the ‘Orient’, is a way of maintain power over it. Said’s work lays more stress on the importance of writing and literary texts in the process of constructing representations of the other.... Said’s insistence on the central role of literature in promoting colonialist discourse is elaborated in his later work ... where he argues that the nineteenth century novel comes into being as part of the formation of Empire and acts reflexively with the forces of imperial control to establish imperialism as the dominant ideology in the period. This emphasis has made Said’s work of especial interest to those concerned with post-colonial literature and literary theory. (Ashcroft et al 72)

The part that discourse plays, for Foucault, is more pervasive as he argues that discourse is the crucial feature of modernity itself:

For the discourse of modernity occurs when what is said, the 'enunciated', becomes more important than the saying, the 'enunciation'. In classical times, intellectual power could be maintained by rhetoric.... [Later] the 'will to truth' came to dominate discourse and statements were required to be either true or false.... The crucial fact for post-colonial theory is that the 'will to truth' is linked to the 'will to power' .... The will of European powers to exercise dominant control over the world, which led to the growth of empires, was accompanied by the capacity to confirm European notions of utility, rationality, discipline as 'truth'. (Ashcroft et al 72-73)

...as a mode of knowing the other [Orientalism] was a supreme example of the construction of the other, a form of authority. The Orient is not an inert fact of nature, but a phenomenon constructed by generations of intellectuals, artists, commentators, writers, politicians, and, more importantly, constructed by the naturalizing of a wide range of Orientalist assumptions and stereotypes. The relationship between the Occident and the Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony. Consequently, Orientalist discourse, for Said, is more valuable as a sign of power asserted by the West over the Orient than a 'true' discourse about the Orient. (Ashcroft et al 168)

Under the general domain of knowledge of the Orient, and within the ambit of Western hegemony over the Orient from the eighteenth century onwards, there emerged, says Said: "...a complex Orient suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum, for reconstruction of the colonial office, for theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial, and historical theses about mankind and the universe" (Said 7). Thus Orientalism is:

...a distribution of geographical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philosophical texts; it is an elaboration not only of a basic geographical distinction ... but also of a whole series of 'interests' which ...it not only creates but maintains. It is, rather than expresses, a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even incorporate, what is a manifestly different world. (Said 12)

Orientalism follows the pattern of constructing the colonial order like "the study, discussion and general representation of Africa in the West since the nineteenth century. ... its practice remains pertinent to the operation of imperial power in whatever form it adopts; to know, to fix the other in discourse is to maintain a far reaching political control" (Ashcroft et al 169).

Such inputs lead to the generalized construction of regions and makes inroads into the realm of self-construction also,

...so that the idea of a set of generalized 'Asian' values (e.g. Asian democracy) is promoted by the institutions and governments of peoples who were themselves lumped together initially by Orientalist rubrics such as 'the East' (Far East, Middle East, etc.). the Orient or Asia. Employed as an unqualified adjective, a term like 'Asia' is in danger of eroding and dismantling profound cultural, religious and linguistic differences in the countries where it is applied self-ascriptively in ways not dissimilar to the Orientalist discourses of the colonial period. (Ashcroft et al 169)

The notions of Other/other and othering are indispensable in this context:

In general terms, the 'other' is anyone who is separate from one's self. The existence of others is crucial in defining what is 'normal' and in locating one's own place in the world. The colonized subject is characterized as 'other' through discourses such as primitivism and cannibalism, as a means of establishing the binary separation of the colonizer and colonized and asserting the naturalness and primacy of the colonizing culture and world view. (Ashcroft et al 169)

Used in existential philosophy in the context of analysing the relation between Self and Other in creating self-awareness and ideas of identity, "the definition of the term as used in current post-colonial theory is rooted in the Freudian and post-Freudian analysis of the formation of subjectivity, most notably in the work of the psychoanalyst and cultural theorist Jacques Lacan" (Ashcroft et al 169).

For him, the other "designates the other who resembles the self, which the child discovers when it looks in the mirror and becomes aware of itself as a separate being." The image must bear "sufficient resemblance to the child to be recognized" but "separate enough to ground the child's hope for an anticipated mastery." Its importance is "in defining the identity of the subject. In post-colonial theory, it can refer to the colonized others who are marginalized by imperial discourse, identified by their difference from the centre and perhaps crucially, become the focus of anticipated mastery by the imperial 'ego'" (Ashcroft et al 170).

The Other (with the capital 'O') has been called by Lacan as *grande-autre*, "the Great Other, in whose gaze the subject gains identity" (170). The Symbolic Other may be the mother or father. Fundamentally, "the Other is crucial to the subject because the subject exists in its gaze. Lacan says that 'all desire is the metonym of the desire to be' because the first desire of the subject is the desire to exist in the gaze of the Other" (Ashcroft et al 170).

In the post-colonial context, the Other:

...can be compared to the imperial, centre, imperial discourse or the empire itself, in two ways: firstly, it provides the terms in which the colonized subject gains a sense of his or her identity as somehow 'other', dependent; secondly, it becomes the 'absolute pole of address', the ideological framework in which the colonized subject may come to understand the world. In colonial discourse, the subjectivity of the colonized is continually located in the gaze of the imperial Other, the 'grande-autre'. Subjects may be interpellated by the ideology of the maternal and nurturing function of the colonizing power, concurring with descriptions such as 'mother England' and 'Home.'

On the other hand, the Symbolic Other may be represented in the Father. The significance and enforced dominance of the imperial language into which colonial subjects are inducted may give them a clear sense of power being located in the colonizer, a situation corresponding metaphorically to the subject's entrance into the Symbolic order and the discovery of the Law of the Father. The ambivalence of colonial discourse lies in the fact that both these processes of 'othering' occur at the same time, the colonial subject being both a 'child' of empire and a primitive and degraded subject of imperial discourse. The construction of the dominant imperial Other occurs in the same process by which the colonial others come into being. (Ashcroft et al 170-171)

The term 'othering' was coined by Gayatri Spivak for this process by which imperial discourse creates its 'others'.

Whereas the Other corresponds to the focus of desire or power (the M-Other or Father – or Empire) in relation to which the subject is produced, the other is the excluded or 'mastered' subject created by the discourse of power. Othering describes the various ways in which colonial discourse produces its subjects. In Spivak's explanations, othering is a dialectical process because the colonizing Other is established at the same time as its colonized others are produced as subjects. (Ashcroft et al 171)

Edward Said's *Orientalism* "is a specific expose of the Eurocentric universalism, which takes for granted both the superiority of what is European or Western, and the inferiority of what is not" (Barry 186). As mentioned earlier, he identifies "a European cultural tradition of 'Orientalism', a long-standing way of identifying the East as 'Other' and inferior to the West" (Barry 186). The Orient, a colony, according to Said, "features in the Western mind as a sort of surrogate and underground self," i.e., the East becomes "the repository or projection of those aspects of themselves which the Westerners do not choose to acknowledge" (Barry 186) and the Orient is represented either as immoral or exotic -- qualities the Westerners do not wish to or cannot attribute to themselves -- and seen as uncivilized and barbarian characterized by "cruelty, sensuality, decadence, laziness," stupidity, effeminacy etc., on the one side or as "the exotic, the seductive and the mystical" on the other. (Barry 186)

It also tends to be seen as homogenous, the people there being anonymous masses rather than individuals, their actions determined by instinctive emotions (lust, terror, fury, etc.) rather than by conscious choices or decisions. Their emotions and reactions are always determined by racial considerations (they are like this because they are asiatics or blacks or orientals) rather than by aspects of individual status or circumstance... (Barry 186-187)

In *The Mimic Men*, this tendency of exoticising the non-European is seen in the missionary lady's description of the island and Ralph's father. Ralph states, "It was not an island I recognized. Nor could I recognize my father from the description..." (MM 93). There is a faded photograph in the book, *The Missionary Martyrs* in which his father looked faintly aboriginal and lost. When she saw him "riding on his bicycle as on an ass to his Sabbath work," with only his white turban visible and dazzling in the sun, the rest of him being hidden behind a hibiscus hedge, she "thought then that she saw an angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting Gospel to preach onto them that dwell on the earth" (MM 94).

When Ralph stated his reasons for changing his name the teachers responded in great seriousness as if acquiring strange knowledge.

At the time of Ralph's marriage at the Willesden registry office, the Registrar warns his bride, Sandra (an English girl) of "certain countries [where] women could be divorced just like that; with his own hand he wrote out the address of an association which offered information and protection to British women overseas." And to Ralph, "he offered neither advice nor consolation – his manner, in fact, was one of controlled reproof" (MM 30-31).

The feeling of superiority on the part of the Europeans is a continuing phenomenon and operates during and after the period of colonization. A case in point is Sandra's declaration on being slighted by an islander, "The Niger is a tributary of that Seine" (MM 84), evidently the cry of the defeated in the war between master and slave and attempt to save face.

Sandra disdains the girls whose company she once sought while in Isabella and evolves for each "a pejorative racial description. A bulky girl from Amsterdam married to a man from Surinam ... became a 'subkraut'; the Latvian became ... the 'sub-Asiatic'" (MM 68).

The European wives and girl-friends of the islanders criticised “the narrowness of island life: the absence of good conversation... the impossibility of going to the theatre, of hearing a good symphony concert” (MM 69). When the Canadian Trade Commissioner asked Sandra if she cared for music, her reply was “I would have you know that I like a good symphony concert” (MM 70).

When Ralph goes to London to negotiate the nationalization of the sugar estate owned by an Englishman, Lord Stockwell, he is humiliated by an English minister. Lord Stockwell refuses to talk seriously about labour problems and the sugar estate, instead he treats Singh like a child and says that he has nice hair. These representatives of imperial power impose their superiority on Singh by refusing to consider him as a political figure or acknowledge the importance of his task and thus push him to an inferior status and a sense of political dislocation/failure. The novel thus considers the relationship between the socio-political and the psychological consequences of imperialism

Due to the notion of superiority of the colonizer, the children of the colonized are denied not only their lands but their true identities as well. An instance is Ralph giving himself a new name in school as a reaction to his “incompetence and inadequacy” just to sound extra-ordinary and to compete with the French Deschampsneufs (who has a six-part name.)

...I gave myself a new name. We were Singhs. My father’s father’s name was Kripal. My father, for purposes of official identification, ... ran these names together to give himself the surname of Kripalsingh. My own name was Ranjit; and my birth certificate said I was Ranjit Kripalsingh. That gave me two names. But Deschampsneufs had five apart from his last name, all French, all short, all ordinary, but this conglomeration of the ordinary wonderfully suggested the extraordinary. I thought to compete. I broke Kripalsingh into two, correctly reviving an ancient fracture, as I felt gave myself the further name of Ralph; and signed myself R. R. K. Singh. At school I was known as Ralph Singh. The name Ralph I chose for the sake of the initial, which was also that of my real name. In this way I felt I mitigated the fantasy or deception, and it helped in school reports, where I was simply Singh R. From the age of eight till the age of twelve this was one of my heavy secrets I feared discovery at school and at home. The truth came out when we were preparing to leave the elementary school and our records were being put in order for Isabella Imperial College. Birth certificates were required. (MM 100)

His father “was not pleased at having to sign an affidavit that the son he had sent out into the world as Ranjit Kripalsingh had been transformed into Ralph Singh. He saw it as an affront...” (MM 101). The narrator admits that he has given a flippant account of the episode: “Flippancy comes easily when we write of past pain; it disguises and mocks that pain. I have no material hardships to record, as is clear. But observe how weighed down I was with secrets; the secret of my father, who was only an embittered schoolteacher, the secret of that word wife, the secret of my name” (MM 101).

Though the attempt sounds comic superficially, at a deeper level, it shows the child’s struggling after a new personality and identity. It is ironic that by changing his name, he has in fact changed the very identity he was searching for so desperately.

Others, viz., his cousin Cecil, the pretender Deschampsneufs, Hok, who is of Chinese descent, the blacks Evans and Browne -- also belong to the world of mimicry. Hok refuses to recognize his mother. The scene serves as an example to show the deep racial wounds in West Indian society. Hok ignores his mother because she is a Negro. The scene of rejection takes place when a group of school boys is going on the road: “One boy said, ‘Sir, Hok went past his mother just now, and he didn’t say anything at all to her. The teacher, revealing unexpected depth, was appalled, ‘Is this true, Hok? Your mother, boy?’ She was indeed a surprise, a Negro woman of the people, short and fat, quite unremarkable. She waddled away, indifferent herself to the son she had just brushed past” (MM 103).

Thus we see that apart from being an effective way of disempowering people, internalisation of colonial sets of values was also the reason for trauma for colonised peoples who were brought up to look negatively upon their people, their culture and themselves. Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* examined the psychological effects of racism and colonialism drawing upon his experience as a psychoanalyst. “In a narrative both inspiring and distressing, Fanon looked at the cost to the individual who lives in a world where due to the colour of his or her skin, he or she is rendered peculiar, an object of derision, an aberration” (McLeod 20).

*Black Skin, White Masks* explains the consequences of identity formation for the colonised subject who is forced into the internalisation of the self as an ‘other’. The ‘Negro’ is deemed to epitomise everything that the colonising French are not. The colonisers are civilised, rational, intelligent: the ‘Negro’ remains ‘other’ to all these qualities against which colonising peoples derive their sense of superiority and normality. *Black Skin, White Masks* depicts those colonised by French imperialism doomed to hold a traumatic belief in their own inferiority. One response to such trauma is to strive to escape it by embracing the ‘civilised’ ideals of the French ‘mother-land’. But however hard the colonised try to accept the education, values and language of France – to don the white mask of civilisation that will cover up the ‘uncivilised’ nature indexed by their black skins – they are never accepted on equal terms. ‘The white world’, writes Fanon, ‘the only honourable one, barred me from

all participation. A man was expected to behave like a man' (*Black Skin, White Masks*, p.114). That imaginative distinction that differentiates between 'man' (self) with 'black man' (other) is an important, devastating part of the armoury of colonial domination, one that imprisons the mind as securely as chains imprison the body. For Fanon, the end of colonialism meant not just political and economic change, but psychological change too. Colonialism is destroyed only once this way of thinking about identity is successfully challenged. (McLeod 20-21)

Fanon and Said made it clear that Empires colonise imaginations. If Fanon showed the way this operates for the oppressed at a psychological level, Said demonstrated the legitimization of Empire for the oppressor. Fanon pointed out the need for reclaiming one's own past and erasing the debunking of the past by the colonizers. Postcolonial studies seek to perceive the post-colonial era by shedding the 'amnesia' that set in during the colonial period.

The children depicted in the novel with their own secret dreams lived in fantastic worlds to escape the sense of futility and insignificance. As a child, Ralph responds to his sense of abandonment by reading and dreaming of India, his homeland and the land of his ancestors. One book that he borrows from the library is *The Aryan Peoples and their Migrations*. He creates an ideal and heroic past which is in conflict with the real life conditions in Isabella. But he is shocked when his father conducts an Ashwamedha although he is aware that the symbolic significance of such an act in the Hindu tradition is to secure fertility and prosperity. This sacrifice makes Ralph see an Indian world that is in contrast with the noble and ideal realm of imagination. Hindu rituals have lost their meaning in Isabella as the people have lost their connection with India, its culture, customs and traditions. Apart from this genetic dislocation -- the condition of the East Indians in the Caribbean, who having crossed the Kalapani lost their Indianness, --Ralph, as a member of an ethnic minority on the island experiences ethnic displacement too. By idealizing the past he tries to reconstruct history to establish his identity, but the task being impossible, he is disillusioned.

Browne also fantasizes his origin and his room is full of pictures of black leaders. Each boy is obsessed with his own racial origin and the ethnic group he belongs to, implying that emotional security and a real sense of identity are unachievable in heterogeneous societies of the Caribbean.

As a result of his psychological need for identity and fulfilment, Singh becomes a politician. He tries to achieve order, meaning and success as a political figure. In this attempt, Ralph realizes that he has become distanced from his people and has to play a role to preserve his position. Once the colonizers had left, people had placed their leaders on the pedestal previously occupied by them. And this retains the hierarchy and reinforces a sense of the master-slave relationship akin to the colonizer-colonized binary that prevailed earlier. This was most probably prompted by the fact that the leaders being products of Western education have imbibed colonial values.

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