

Exploring Existential Absurdity and its Acceptance in Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*

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Abstract

*The study aims to explore the existential absurdity of human life and condition in Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* in the light of Camus' philosophy of Absurdism that presents the idea of man's freedom, his absurd life and actions in a meaningless world and his realization of being an absurd. It also investigates the concept of human liberty of making a subjective choice and accepting responsibility while existing in the purposeless world. The study is qualitative, and a thematic analysis of the text has been conducted. Naipaul's novel demonstrates the life of the people who undergo a long struggle for a meaningful existence in an indifferent world. It finds out the characters' struggle to give meaning to their lives, the thoughts that arise from that struggle, and the absurdity of their actions that the characters face and accept. The research reveals that humans face absurdity due to their continuous futile journey and concede to it as a revolt against the irrational world.*

Keywords: *Existential Absurdity, Naipaul, Mimic Men, Humans*

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1. Introduction:

This study aims to explore the existential absurdity in Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* in the light of Albert Camus' Absurdist philosophy. It investigates the concept of freedom of choice, leading to the responsibility that man encounters being present in a meaningless world. It examines the human condition and his struggle to give meaning and order to his life and the thoughts which arise out of that struggle and brings to light the idea of absurdity and despair faced by man as a result of his purposeless journey and the acceptance of the absurd as a revolt.

Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*, the autobiographical memoir of an exile writer, portrays Mr. Kripal Singh as a refugee in the metropolis and represents his ideas of illusion and disillusion, authenticity and inauthenticity faced by the people from his hometown. The narrator examines himself to understand his life while living in different places. The novel narrates the life of the protagonist Kripal Singh, who later becomes a politician, but the whole struggle at the end proves futile and absurd as he chooses to live an alienated life of exile. The narrative represents the phases of his life and experiences at different places, for example, his life in London as a young man, his childhood and later his political career in Isabella. Naipaul's characters face many problems of ethical injustice, social and racial discrimination, class segregation, alienation, despair and identity crisis. The text demonstrates the psychological trauma the personas go through and their sense of loss and belonging.

2. Research Methodology:

This research applies qualitative thematic analysis and investigates existential absurdity and its acceptance in Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* in the light of Camus's Theory of Absurdism. The current study employs thematic analysis to achieve the proposed aims through critical reading and close interpretation of the text. The shreds of evidence in the texts are analytically evaluated through logical reasoning to get answers to the proposed research questions to get conclusions.

3. Theoretical Framework:

Albert Camus elucidates the philosophy of absurdism in his essay "Myth of Sisyphus" published in 1942. He negates the idea of man's achieved meaning after the struggle and proposes the concept of an absurd life that an individual gets at the end. Camus differs from existentialist thoughts in a way that he does not believe in the idea of getting purpose after a struggle. He believes that man's attempt for meaning is futile and absurd, that is, existential angst. According to him, the absurd arises from the interaction between man's struggle for meaning and the refusal of the indifferent world to provide that. He articulates that, at this point, "Man stands face to face with the irrational" (10) with the longing for happiness and reason. "The absurd is born out of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (10). He presents that the world is unreasonable and the absurdity depends on the man and the world, and he finds that "the irrational, the human nostalgia, and the absurd is born of their encounter" (10).

Camus views that existential absurdity puts man in various situations where he wants to escape through suicide, but he denies man's attempt of suicide as it implies the recognition of "the absence of any profound reason and the uselessness of suffering" (2). He states that killing oneself due to absurdity is "certainly a truth—yet an unfruitful one" (3). He accepts that the struggle contains hopelessness, continuous rejection and conscious disappointment, but he forces upon "a matter of living in that state of the absurd (14). Man needs to carry on living with the absurd because, in his words, "living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is, above all, contemplating it" (18). It shows that the final acceptance of man's absurdity and contention of living makes man aware of death and eventually rejects it. In his views, the recognition of futile existence gives the individual liberty and enables him to live in the present with the absurd and points out three consequences of the absurd: "My revolt, my freedom, and my passion. I refuse suicide" (22).

Camus incorporates the myth of the Greek legend Sisyphus as a metaphor to highlight man's struggle against the absurd and glorifies his revolt as his strength. Sisyphus is reflected happy and satisfied which he thinks should be the final state of man. He prefers the embrace of absurdity and considers it an appropriate response to handle the existential crisis. In his view, "the absurd enlightens me" though he finds nothing rational and hopeful, "henceforth this is the reason for my inner freedom" (20).

The study employs Camus's ideas of man's assertion of his freedom of choices during his struggle for meaning, which results in despair and alienation, the continuity of struggle irrespective of meaninglessness and the acceptance of the absurdity of man's life in Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*.

4. Research Objectives:

The research aims to explore the existential absurdity in Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* by investigating human conditions and tracing the struggle of the characters to make their lives meaningful. It also examines the disillusionment of the characters, a result of their continuous futile struggle, and the existential crisis that leads to acceptance of the absurd as a revolt against absurdity.

5. Research Questions:

Q. 1. How does Naipaul represent the struggle of his characters to achieve meaningful existence in *The Mimic Men*?

Q. 2. Why do the characters feel purposeless and disillusioned about life and society in *The Mimic Men*?

Q. 3. How does existential crisis lead to alienation and the acceptance of the absurd in *The Mimic Men*?

6. Literature Review:

The researchers conducted on Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* present the pos conditions of a country and its people in the Caribbean, Isabella Island, highlighting the life experiences of formerly colonized inhabitants and the class inequality prevailing in the underdeveloped state. *The Mimic Men* has received various critical responses from different perspectives, like post-colonial, textual, political, and existential spatial.

The post-colonial perspective is quite prominent in post-colonial literary works as they depict ideas of colonization, the impact of imperialism, and the aftermath of colonial rule. Jayachandran's study "Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* Postcolonial Study" has demonstrated the pathetic condition of oppressed people in the postcolonial era. He highlights the inferiority complex of the colonized who consider their masters superior, identify with the empire and create a hybrid identity. Jayachandran states, being far away from their homeland, "their own original tradition and religion have become meaningless to them" (1536). Therefore, they suffer from the loss of identity and place. He considers Singh's act of writing as his struggle "to find some order within the chaos of the present and the uncertainty of the future in the contemporary colonial society" (1537). He finds Singh's writing a source of showing the effects of a colonial empire on the personality of the individuals.

Home and Identity have always been represented as significant ideas reflected in postcolonial literature. Colonization has affected the identity of the colonized natives. result, they have faced many social, cultural, political and psychological effects. Assangaeneng et. al. in their article "The Politics of Home and Identity in V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*", have studied the impact of colonialism on the identity and the psyche of the people. They highlight the discourses of dislocation, homelessness, fragmentation and loss of identity and show how the natives consider themselves inferior and "become mimic men who imitate and reflect the colonizer's lifestyle and views" (59). They view the colonized lost in the post-colonial scenario that "fails to offer a sense of national unity and identity" (60). Naipaul has depicted colonization as a means to snatch the identity and home of the natives. The study reveals the failure of the protagonist's education in helping him in his dislocation and its role in distancing him further from his culture and land as they articulate, "Singh's colonial education has caused him to become a homeless man with no self-image (62) because he has become the product of colonial empire. According to their viewpoint, his novel represents the lives of the people who suffer from hybrid identity, alienation, confusion and displacement.

Dr. Ghanshyam Pal and Dr. Surekha Dangwal in their article "Exploring Caste, Ethnicity and Social Fragmentation in Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* and the Suffrage of Elvira" have examined the social inequality faced by the diasporic communities based on their ethnicity and caste in a settler colony in Naipaul's novel. The issues of fragmentation, social and personal, and discrimination are highlighted. They articulate that "discrimination is the leading trauma which upsets them most and causes a subaltern status in an alien land" (19). The researchers exhibit that Naipaul depicts a hybrid experience of migration and "the perspective of the immigrants on how and why they retain themselves from the mingling and fusion of the cultures of others" (22). Their study is the comparative study of two novels to highlight the identity issue of the Eastern African's displacement.

Neeraj Kumar and Dr. Satkala in their study “Diaspora Identities and Psychic Trauma in V.S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*” examined Naipaul’s attempt to project carefully and objectively the complex fate of the individuals in a cross-cultural society (38) to investigate the concept of up-rootedness and the shipwreck of culture and society. They explore the “enigma of a shipwreck” (39) related to identity and culture. They view that the state of displacement affects the mind of individuals when they move from one place to another to secure their identity but, in the end, realize that “he belongs to none being always bothered to none” (40). According to their point of view, the novel highlights the estrangement of the individuals in the post-colonial societies who continuously search for their origins as they remark, “Singh’s search for a home in London is Naipaul’s perpetual search for origins” (42).

The impact of colonization on morality in Naipaul’s book is discussed by Firat Vildiz in her article “V. S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*; Degeneration of Values”. She asserts that colonial powers instil the belief that “the oppressed society requires colonial powers and cannot exist without it” (268). According to her point of view, the purpose is to corrupt the religion, culture, language and morality of the colonized community. While highlighting the protagonist’s social and political life in the text, she clearly posits that “the colonial hegemony erodes a society’s political and social nature” (270).

Joy Das has worked on the theme of Mimicry and Ambivalence in his article “Projection of Mimicry and Ambivalence in the *Mimic Men* by V. S. Naipaul: A Post-colonial Reading”. He has unveiled the issue of hybridity in a mixed cultural space. Das talks about Naipaul’s depiction of the themes of homelessness, mimicry and ambivalent attitude in a different way. He quotes Rao Mohar who considers that these concepts “are viewed as a universal condition of the modern world afflicting both colonized and colonizer alike” (74). The protagonist’s life shows Bhabha’s notion of mimicry as he tries to imitate and has mixed feelings of love and hatred for the West as well as his past.

Emily Greenwood investigated the idea of classical allusion in his article “Mimicry and Classical Allusion in Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*”. He presents that Naipaul has used these allusions to show that Britishers were themselves the imitators of Rome and Greece. They cannot claim to be pure ethnicities and cultures. She also asserts that these cultures have appropriated Greek and Roman civilizations for their colonized plans.

Dr. Kailash Chandrajha has investigated the symbolic patterns and images in Naipaul’s fiction in his article “Symbolism in the Works of V.S. Naipaul”. He highlights Naipaul’s ability to present different ideas from suppression and class inequalities through various symbols like “The Belle Belle Bottling Works are an apt symbol of colonialism” (2451). The contract of the family with Coca-Cola symbolizes the influence of the colonizers and the power of the elite class. According to his perspective, Naipaul’s strategy of using motifs and symbols reflects his themes related to postcolonialism and Marxism.

Serafin et.al have analyzed Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men* from the existential point of view in their article “Pessimism and Existentialism in V. S. Naipaul”. They have brought to light the existential strands by depicting nihilism and hopelessness. They articulate that “the philosophic notion of nothingness and disillusion has permeated most of Naipaul’s writings” (153). They view that gloominess and decay prevail in the text and lead to panic, corruption, dissolution and demise.

From the review of the above-mentioned studies, it becomes evident that Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men* has been investigated from various postcolonial, existential and stylistic perspectives etc. The present text is taken as a post-colonial text although it brings to light the conditions of modern man in the struggling present world. It has not been studied from an absurdist angle in the light of

Albert Camus' theory of Absurdism in which the focus is on the acceptance of the absurd state of man as a revolt.

7. Discussion:

Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* represents the story of displaced people in a post-colonial country through the autobiographical memoirs of Ranjit Kripal Singh, the narrator and the protagonist. The narrative consists of three parts highlighting the three different phases of his life experiences. Mr. Singh is depicted as a modern man who is continuously struggling to give meaning and order to his existence and, ultimately, understands the meaninglessness of the world around him and the absurdity of his efforts. The novel brings to light the personal and social chaos in the colonized suppressed community as well as in the Western world like "London". Naipaul investigates the ideas of disillusionment and frustration of the individuals who are either dislocated, rejected or isolated in the social circle. The bleak view of human life and the point of nothingness prevails in the narrative strands of the novel. It appears to be the social study of one's search for order that is leading to alienation as Singh feels hopeless of all his attempts and chooses the lonely exile as his final resort.

Man's freedom of choice, responsibility for his actions, existential struggle and loss, understanding of the absurdity and final acceptance are the prominent points prevalent in *The Mimic Men*. As Albert Camus, as an existentialist, believes that man is free and has to bear the responsibility for his actions, Naipaul demonstrates the liberty of his characters while making choices that can affect them in various ways, but bearing the consequences is necessary. Mr. Singh at the very start of describing life in London, talks about an action and its result by saying we boarders live narrowly with "pleasure and penalty" (1) because they willingly take pleasure in various subjective actions but then bear the penalty. The responsibility of one's free choice creates tension and man tries to avoid it sometimes as he longs for "the absence of responsibility" (7). In absurdism, man's significance lies in his individuality and Mr. Singh realizes this fact that "we are individuals, units" (15) in the city responsible for themselves only as he narrates, "In London, I had no guide. 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" (17). This reflects the protagonist's ability to select his personality without any external force and he chooses whatever suits him. Even when Singh describes Sandra's decision to marry, he declares it her personal choice due to her circumstances. Even Singh's decision is too subjective as no one forces them. He declares that they decided that they would create "out of drabness that surrounded them, an occasion" (43). So, they independently made the decision. Singh's return to his native island shows his personal choice as going to London was an intentional desire. However, these actions are based on his longing and struggle for some satisfaction and hope for his life.

The characters' struggle is quite prominent as they all are putting in efforts individually to change their lives like Singh, Sandra, and his friends in school. Singh and Sandra both try their best to give meaning to their struggle through marriage, similarly, other colonized and suppressed individuals are fighting to forget the past and adopt a new identity like Hok but their struggle seems futile. Singh's efforts are reflected in these words, "I worked hard and played hard" (55) which shows the personal and political journey he takes. After his broken relationship with Sandra and the entry of a new woman into his life, he declares himself accountable as he asserts, "In those last days I often had the absurd feeling that I was responsible for two alien women" (77) so choice and acceptance go side by side in the text whenever he presents the journey of his life towards order and meaning. During his fight with the boy on the beach, he again refers to his decision-making power where he is the one who decides as he narrates, "in this new stage of the old war between

master and slave it was left to me” (142) whether he would fight or not and he selected to leave because he with his “own fantasies” made a “decision to leave” (142).

Kripal Singh’s choice of joining politics shows his struggle for meaning and he calls it just a “drama” (229) through which he hopes for certain order and purpose. According to him, this political game which he calls drama makes people "actors" who perform the way they like and it "gives them some sense of" (229) themselves and their subjective experiences. He does not regret his decision to join it rather he puts all of his efforts as an individual to keep it going but even then it leads to loss and failure. “For four years, drama had supported me; now, abruptly, drama failed” which proves to be his “private loss” although he “struggled to keep the drama alive, for its replacement was despair” (236).

One’s freedom of choice leads to a guilty conscience as Singh shows memories of “shame” (24) and finds himself “guilty” (24) of his actions done intentionally. At the end of the novel, he leaps writing his autobiography in isolation from society, he declares it his personal choice and comments on man being accountable for his acts. He remarks, “I must bear much of the responsibility. It was a responsibility that began with that moment of return to the slave island” (257) so his return to the island and his political activities and games are all his own intentions which he accepts and clarifies that “the acceptance of guilt is not easier than action” (257).

Camus stresses the significance of the existential journey of a person as in his point of viewpoint, it is necessary to continue struggling because it defines man and his life without being concerned about the hope of gaining meaning in an irrational world. Naipaul exhibits his protagonist’s struggling life in various phases of his life living at different places in search of meaning, order and identity. Singh’s narrative brings to light how he moves between Isabella and London and passes through multiple stages of meaningfulness leading to absurdity, loss generating a sense of futility and the recognition of personal solitude. The significant point to be noted is that throughout his struggle, the narrator seems aware of its absurdity and failure even then he does not stop as Camus’ Sisyphus refuses to stop his task of rolling the stone and shows his revolt. In the first phase of his life in London, Singh narrates the life of all the individuals who are struggling for their existence in the world like Lieni and his brother, an English student who tries to connect with the narrator due to his insecurity and the people who were boarders with him, are portrayed as strugglers for some sort of existence but their pursuit as Singh says “the god of the city that we pursue” is “in vain” (15).

The journeyman takes could be disturbing as well as despairing as it contains certain states of stress and disappointment and “during periods of stress, we imperceptibly sink; it is only during the climb back up that we can see how far, for all the continuing consciousness of wholeness and sanity, we had become distorted” (23). This clearly highlights the idea of the ups and downs of one’s journey and at many places, one loses the strength to continue and often it results in a broken self. While talking about his trying to give himself a personality after going to London, Singh narrates that he seeks order but every time, the process seems elusive to him and he has been trying “to give himself a personality” (23) not once but more than once. His ambition gets confused and fades.

Mr. Singh discusses the active periods of his life which were spent at two different lands for his search for self-identity and rest but in his point of view, in those periods, “intensity of emotion was the thing I never achieved. I felt I had known a double failure” (29). This shows his failure as a struggler when he is failing again and again but irrespective of his loss, he decides “to live between their twin threats” (29) and it is during this time, that he thinks of writing to achieve meaning and order in his life.

Singh and Sandra are depicted as the ones who make various decisions that affect their life in some ways. For example, Sandra's decision to marry a foreign man, Singh, seems to be out of the boredom and despair that she feels about her life and also because of her desire to bring change in her life. Singh's acceptance of the proposal is based on the idea of being married to a girl from England as an element of superiority for the dislocated person and his way of having a new identity. Their decisions reflect the reasons for their journey which can bring about new things for them in future. After that, their decision to return to the native land exhibits their longing for transformation.

Naipaul has presented not only the struggle of the narrator but also that of his father who leaves his family and social life and moves to forests for spiritual movement. Mr. Singh talks about his father's movement which, according to him, "expressed despair but were at the same time positive" (137) because it exposes the realistic picture of disorder prevailing in the society. He considers that the purpose his father is struggling for is apparently useless even though he likes his spirit and sees "method in his father's madness" (137).

According to Albert Camus, the absurd is created when there is a clash between man's struggle and the indifferent attitude of the world and man faces absurdity and futility as the result of his interaction. He says, "The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (10). The protagonist narrates the life experiences and the futility and absurdity of the relations and experiences. While about the city life, he makes it clear that "it is rooted in nothing; it links to nothing" (33). He highlights the nothingness present in city life and the individuals. When the reporter asks him about his plans, he presents his thoughts that "so many absurd pictures came to me" (37) which shows his awareness of the fact that the future seems absurd to him and he feels for anyone, "in the end, nothing could be done" (37). His journey in the city made him feel pointless, insignificant and broken when he, again and again, makes himself "open to the feeling of defeat and helplessness" (48). He clearly states the consequences of human struggle in these words, "the gift which falls on us is also an intolerable burden. It sets us apart; it distorts us" (59) making man lose himself. This same gift of struggle in the form of disappointment and futility is also felt by Sandra when he says that this continuous struggle brings madness that makes so many people "throw away all" (65) as, being tired of the meaninglessness of their relationship, she decides to leave him and go back to London.

Human beings struggle to give meaning to their existence but at whatever level they are, they face weariness and futility. Men during their achievement "are made weary by a sense of futility" (73) which depicts the point of purposelessness that Mr. Singh imagines she is always present around in this irrational world. At the time of the beach incident at Cecil's beach house, Singh tells the stories of those who drowned in the sea and the fishermen present at the spot did not try to help them through he understands "the feebleness and absurdity of any attempt to rescue those persons" (117). Naipaul continuously highlights the futility of human life, man's journey, the result of this journey and the absurd state that arises out of this struggle. Singh's realization of his absurdity is quite evident in these words, "I felt again the unimportance of my endeavour. My courage ebbed and was replaced by a type of weariness" (125) so he has again and again suffered from this state of futility. The characters' experiences and interactions with the indifferent world prove Camus' point of the absurd.

Camus' main philosophical point is based on man's acceptance of the absurdity of life, actions and the world and his will to continue living with the absurd. As he posits, "living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is, above all, contemplating it" (18). Naipaul asserts the same idea through Singh's narration as he articulates; "Once a man is stripped of his dignities he is required,

not to die or to run away, but to find his level" (4). It demonstrates that man needs to avoid death and escape rather than live with whatever he has.

At the end of his political games, Mr. Singh throws away his power because he gets disillusioned with the idea of temporary political power just like his friend Browne who also faces despair after a lot of struggle. When he retires from his active social life, he chooses alienation in exile in London where in a hotel he chooses to take his future step, the next part of his journey. After spending half and one year in that hotel, when he has accepted despair and emptiness then "it was with a delicious sense of anxiety and of being employed again that I got the hotel to give me a writing table, set it beside the window, and composed myself to work" (260). This is his resistance towards absurdity that he does not select suicide after feeling useless; instead, he chooses isolation and the act of writing where he can put his new powers. He declares his purpose by declaring his aim to put his life on the page and "to impose order on my own history, to abolish that disturbance which is what a narrative in sequence might have led me to" (261). His final state is the result of the futile actions of his life in search of meaning, and he accepts the uselessness. Without it, he asserts his final lonely "residence to be the most fruitful" (264). The novel ends with the final statement of the protagonist, who seems to be Naipaul's absurd hero. Being conscious of his exhaustion, he declares, "Even I did not give up my quest" (266).

To conclude, Camus's concepts of liberty of choice, man's decision of struggle, the hopelessness and absurdity arising out of it, and the acceptance of the absurd as his final understanding of his life. While looking for the answer to the proposed research questions, the finding is that Naipaul presents the struggle of his characters, especially the protagonist, Mr. Singh, through their choices, life experiences, actions and awareness of being responsible. It is also observed that the characters feel disappointed and exhausted at various stages of their life when they find themselves unable to find meaning and order. Their absurdity becomes the reason for their despair, a result of their struggle. The third research question is the basic point of Camus' ideology that is investigated by the narrator's realization of the absurd life, choice of alienation from social life and his final acceptance of this state of meaninglessness instead of taking refuge in suicide which shows his revolt towards the absurd.

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