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Research Article



Interrogating Ralph Singh as Floating Signifier: A Study of Displacement and Diaspora in V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*

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Abstract

Claude Levi Strauss coined the term 'floating signifier' by which he means "to represent an undetermined quantity of signification, in itself void of meaning and thus opt to receive any meaning" (Levi Strauss p. 56). Fundamentally, the term refers to the disorientation of the connection between the signifier and the signified in the Saussurian sense. Its reception as a

non-linguistic sign is quite popular nowadays. This paper seeks to investigate the portrayal of Ralph Singh, the protagonist of V. S Naipaul's novel; *The Mimic Men* (1967), and interpret all the possible factors that justify him as a non-linguistic floating signifier. Ralph Ranjit Kripal Singh or Ralph Singh is a Hindu born, lives in a fictitious Caribbean Island, Isabella. He later goes to England for his education, where he marries an English woman named Sandra. He comes back to Isabella and then travels back to England again. Ralph feels displaced from his real root to be a part of the country which he could not relate himself to and eventually metamorphoses into a 'sign'. In the novel, wherever he travels, Ralph strives to make his life meaningful and significant. But every time his effort ends up in an insignificant way. So, throughout the novel, Ralph Singh behaves as a floating signifier but wishes to be signified. This paper also explores the relationship between displacement and diaspora, and its correlation to the floating signifier. The final purpose of this article is to ignite the discourse of the diaspora from an entirely different perspective.

Keywords: Floating signifier, Non-linguistic, Displacement, Diaspora, Rootlessness, Sign, Nonlinguistic sign, Alienation, Disorder

Introduction

V.S. Naipaul is a controversial figure not only because of the themes of his fiction and nonfiction but also because of his floating identity. He has a complex identity and points of view, and it is this identity that is reflected in almost all of his works. In his case, his subjective experience is manifested as a kind of objective reality Naipaul's major protagonists are often outsiders, characters who are caught between two worlds and struggle to find their place in society. They are complex, flawed individuals who are shaped by their personal experiences and the cultural and historical contexts in which they live. In many ways, these characters reflect Naipaul's own life story. Born in Trinidad to Indian parents, Naipaul spent much of his life traveling the world and grappling with questions of identity and belonging. Furthermore, V.S. Naipaul's exceptional background, shaped by the convergence of diverse cultures, affirms his identity as a genuine global citizen. With Indian ancestry, birth in Trinidad, and residency and intellectual training in Britain, Naipaul embodies the cultural diversity that characterizes the global community. This blend of cultural influences has undoubtedly shaped his worldview and lent a unique perspective to his works, making him an important voice in the literary world (Mehni, Masoumeh, et al., p. 95). But the problem lies in roots, without which no plant or man can stand on their own two feet. It is very necessary to be connected. His forefather was from India, but he was born in Trinidad. Throughout his life, he has neither identified himself as an Indian nor a Trinidadian. And, when he decided to get rid of all these complexities and took British citizenship, he was somewhat dejected and disappointed. Similarly, to many of his characters, Naipaul also experiences a sense of identity crisis and estrangement, where he finds himself no longer able to maintain friendly relationships or be a part of his social group. His status as a citizen of a Third-World country in the postcolonial era plays a significant role in

shaping his consciousness and is a key factor in both his fictional and non-fictional works. This experience of cultural displacement and the search for identity is a common theme in Naipaul's works and provides insight into the complexities of the postcolonial world. Even though it is universally acknowledged that almost all the professional writers of the diaspora face the same crisis, be it the problem of homelessness, exile, or displacement, Naipaul is a kind of representative of all these figures who, through their writing, highlight their burdensome position in the twentieth century postcolonial literary landscape.

Now, Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, started the whole debate on signs and linguistics in the year 1916. A word, according to him, signifies something that has a physical form or something concrete that can be affected, heard, or felt by our sensory organs. On the other hand, a signifier is the mental image or idea associated with a particular signifier. After Saussure, many theorists and intellectuals put these identities in different perspectives, but Saussure laid the groundwork. However, his theories and ideas were limited not only to linguistics but also to other streams of humanities. Claud Levi Strauss, then, ponders profoundly over the theory of Saussure, which plays a very important role in his intellectual development and allows him to construct the pillar of floating signifiers. For Chandler, a floating signifier is "a signifier with a vague, highly variable, unspecifiable, or non-existent signified." Such signifiers mean different things to different people; they may stand for many or even any signified; they may mean whatever their interpreters want them to mean (Chandler p. 52)

Ernesto Laclau, another considerable figure in this context, talked about an "empty signifier," which is almost like a "floating signifier." Moreover, Laclau goes further and describes in detail the difference between these two ideas. He says that these two are dissimilar and have distinct features as well. According to him, "As we can see, the categories of "empty" and "floating" signifiers are structurally different. He explains, "The first concerns the construction of a popular identity once the presence of a stable frontier is taken for granted; the second tries conceptually to apprehend the logic of the displacements of that frontier" (Laclau. p. 133) This discourse of Laclau is itself very long and perplexing, like a "floating signifier," and it is very ambiguous. Whatever the case, just because a signifier travels from one project to another, it would be better to call it "floating" than "empty". "The unconscious is structured like a language," said Lacan. This famous sentence means that our unconscious is a chain of signifiers, which psychoanalysts call "free association." This is a practice where a therapist is asked to share anything that comes to the mind of a patient when given an image, structure, or anything else. Based on the series of connected signifiers or free associations, we can diagnose Ralph's consciousness in the novel. His predicament, background, and other actions function just like free association, which helps us see Ralph in a better light. However, this floating signifier is going to be the chief parameter of analysis in this paper.

Ranjit Kripal Singh, or Ralph Ranjit Kripal Singh, as he wanted to be called very often, was raised in a Hindu household on a fictitious Caribbean Island named Isabella before moving to England to complete his further education. He moved back to Isabella after being married to

Sandra, an English woman, where he established himself as a prosperous real estate investor, builder, and politician. But suddenly, his marriage ended, and he returned to England after giving up on his political career in Isabella. After this, he started living in London, where he settled down in an ancient boarding house that is now a hotel, and he began writing his memoirs. After analysing Ralph's journey carefully in the said context, it will become very clear that he is nothing but a floating signifier, shifting from here to there, from this to that, continuously trying to become or do something significant. But the only difference is that he is a non-lingual element, yet all the chief characteristics are amply visible in his traits.

Analysis:

Democracy, fake news, Global Citizen, etc. are some common examples of floating signifier that have been explored in various articles by various scholars around the world. Even glancing at some of these famous pieces of writing can offer us an authentic view of this unique endeavor. Global Citizen and Race as a Floating Signifiers are two well-known examples of this concept in action. Race is an excellent example of a floating signifier. This example can give a clear view of the whole concept without any perplexity. Race means different things to different people. For some people, it could be the color of their skin; for others, it could be a type of hair; and for others, it could be the region of the world to which they originally belonged. Even calling it a concept can be wrong since a concept is a proper, defined set of ideas, but here, it is lacking in this approach.

The title of the novel is also quite evocative in its context. A mimic man, according to Homi Bhabha, is from a Third-World country and has been a subject of colonialism, especially under British rule. Whenever we hear words like “mimicry” and “mimic man,” we think of colonialism and Bhabha. Bhabha speaks of how the colonizer wants to take over the colonized in almost every way. In *The Mimic Men*, a novel by V.S. Naipaul, the central theme revolves around the colonizer’s efforts to shape the colonized into its image, leading to the colonized becoming a “mimic man” and losing their individuality. This drive for conformity has a profound impact on the colonized, resulting in the loss of their unique identity. This theme is not limited to the protagonist, Ralph, but is also evident in other characters in Naipaul’s works.

Ralph, the main character of *The Mimic Men*, is a typical example of a Naipaul protagonist, possessing both positive and negative traits. He is a colonized individual who harbors a deep fascination with the Western way of life, specifically urban life. Ralph’s desire to materialize this fantasy is a testament to the lasting impact of colonialism on the colonized mind. The theme of the colonized becoming a “mimic man” is a powerful commentary on the cultural displacement and loss of identity that often results from colonialism.

Yet, the moment he achieves all his London dreams, he becomes a mimic in the true sense. Thus, this analysis also hints at the common crisis: rootlessness or arbitrariness. The floating nature of Ralph’s character can also be justified from this perspective. Ralph, the country folk did not match the native people because of this unique identity.

The floating signifier is considered the main parameter in this endeavor to analyze the protagonist of Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*. In the sections that follow, I will delve into the novel

to see how some of the characteristics of the “floating signifier” are present. These characteristics add depth and meaning to the work and provide insight into the complexities of the narrative. Ralph Singh exhibits a floating identity not only in Isabela, where he was born, but also in England, where from the beginning he wanted to go. Ralph Singh feels like a fish out of water on the Caribbean Island of Isabella; his grandparents immigrated from India many years ago, but he was born in India. Even so, he has to suffer a lot for the touch of Indianness he was stuffed with. Singh has always shown an interest in books, particularly those of Asian and Aryan in origin. All of these books demonstrate Singh’s love of such books, which he has had since childhood. The line mentioned below is a living example of how a child-like boy can feel, especially when he is displaced: “China was the subject of Hok’s secret reading.” “Mine was of Rajputs and Aryans, stories of knights, horsemen, and wanderers” (p.98). He always failed to make a connection with the land, even, though Singh did not have a feeling of connection to Isabella as a youngster. He portrays his childhood in the novel in his own words:

I could scarcely wait for my childhood to be over and done with. I have no especial hardship or deprivation to record. But childhood was for me a period of incompetence, bewilderment, solitude and shameful fantasies. It was a period of burdensome secrets. (p. 90)

He feels dislocated, and this dislocation renders him a nobody in his own eyes. He wanted to pursue cricket as a career, but soon after his failure as a cricketer, he made the decision that it was not his cup of tea and broke up with Isabella. It’s most likely that the first time he disconnects from something, and from now on he’ll just act like a proper signifier who doesn’t know how to be signified. However, after this stage of his life, he decided to embrace British citizenship, though first as a student. He utters:

Coming to London, the great city, seeking order, seeking the flowering, the extension of myself that ought to have come in a city of such miraculous light, I had tried to hasten a process which had seemed elusive. I had tried to give myself a personality. (p. 26)

He left his homeland and started living on the periphery of London’s reality among a group of displaced individuals as an immigrant student; he wanted to connect with the city but was unable to do so. Singh failed to gain order in life; he left his native land because somehow, he found it in disorder and thought there was some problem with the land, so he just left the island. unable to find his desired peace and return to his land, thinking this time he will finally succeed in achieving order in life, but failing to find it again. With full courage and anticipation, he left the island once again. His exile back to London forces him to reside in a hotel. At this particular moment, his age was forty. in the hotel, he avoids any contact. Neither old friends nor lovers, not even any acquaintances He was thinking of settling down there because the hotel was perfect at providing him peace and comfort. Here in this hotel, he was very close to achieving his order. As soon as he reached his dreamland, it started disappointing him. His lamentation can be seen in the following part:

In the great city, so three-dimensional, so rooted in its soil, drawing colour from such depths, only the city was real. Those of us who came to it lost some of our solidity; we were trapped into fixed, flat postures. And in this growing disassociation between ourselves and the city in which we walked, scores of separate meetings, not linked even by ourselves, who became nothing more than perceivers: everyone reduced, reciprocally, to a succession of such meetings, so that first experience and then the personality divided bewilderingly into compartments. (p. 27)

His long-awaited London Dream was now accomplished, but somewhere deep inside he was not content. Like a “sign,” which has different meanings in different contexts, Ralph had a belief that the moment he landed in London he would be fulfilled, but it was his delusion. It was an unpleasant experience for him. And it was this experience that forced him to leave his dream place and return to Isabela, which he left behind. So, again, he shifted from one part to another, keeping in mind that he could do something significant there, but yet again, he was in vain. These complexities and floating nature can be seen not only in his fictional protagonists, but also in the author’s own personality. Naipaul himself was the subject of rootlessness, identity crisis, alienation, displacement, etc. All these above-mentioned crises and complexities came from his first-hand experience. Almost all of his major protagonists reflect these traits. Whatever the case, to be precise, Singh is given a second chance to demonstrate his independence when he returns to Isabella after his epiphany in London.

Ralph’s relationship with other women depicts another shade of his character. Most of the time, his journey ended in violence. He once asked a French woman, “Do you dance?” and that woman instantly rose up and went away. He then meets Sandra, with whom he later marries. Sandra was very dear to him because both of them suffered from the same problems. She was alone in the city and had left her house and relatives. Their commonality brings them together, and they share a good bond. But it also ended pathetically, and Ralph continues on his quest for peace. Singh’s relationships highlight the exile’s separation from or fragmentation of his identity. He finds himself unable to build any enduring or meaningful relationships. So, the ‘sign’ (Singh) is making every attempt to be signified, but every time it ends in vain. Here again, he was looking for a proper and safe haven for himself, but fate had other plans for him. His manner of getting into this relationship also reveals his traits. Even though he dislikes intimacy, he enjoys doing and receiving fondling:

Intimacy: the word holds the horror. I could have stayed forever at a woman’s breasts if they were full and had a hint of weight that required support... [As for sex] I was capable of the act required, but frequently it was in the way that I was capable of getting drunk or eating two dinners. (p. 25)

“What joy!” he utters once when he suddenly wakes up from his dream. This incident, here again, proves that Ralph’s pursuit of his ideal functions like some sort of unfulfilled desire, which causes him a never-ending suffering. He is first drawn to Sandra, who would become his wife, since her breasts appear to fit this ideal. In the dream, he sees himself nursing at his

mother's breast as a new-born baby. So, he is trying to fill the vacant space left by his mother with Sandra and the sensuousness is very quiet and visible in their relationship.

“The weight of the breast on my face and mouth, the proximity of soft, silky flesh” (p. 116). Breasts represent Singh's heart, his home, and the time before his exiled life. It is very much like V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*, where the central character, Mohun Biswas, is looking for an ideal house. Mr. Biswas spends his entire life in search of his own house, which can give him real comfort and shelter. For Singh, the breast can offer him real comfort and shelter. And it's very interesting that both of these protagonists are in the same boat in this context; they are both displaced and have Indian ancestors.

The novel is a journey of a character who is traveling and shifting from one destination to another to do or be something significant. Ralph's alienation knows no boundaries, his identity crisis is equally relevant when it comes to his perplexed identity, and displacement dislocates him from his roots; as a consequence, he turns into a subject of rootlessness. All the above-mentioned crises and complexities are quite popular among researchers and academicians. All research based on Naipaul's works can be categorized into social, political, and psychological issues. Naipaul, knowingly or unknowingly, is himself a subject of these crises. But the uniqueness of this project is in its parameters and ways of dealing with them. Levi Strauss' concept of the “floating signifier” has had a significant impact in various fields, including social sciences, news media, and cultural studies. However, it has not been extensively explored in the realm of literature. It presents an opportunity for scholars and researchers to delve into the application of this concept in literary studies and to examine how it can be used to analyse and interpret works of literature.

One potential area of such investigation is to examine how the floating signifier operates within literary texts, specifically in terms of the way symbols and signs are used to represent concepts, themes, and characters. For example, the use of symbols such as the American flag or the “All-Seeing Eye” can be seen as floating signifiers in literature, representing different meanings and interpretations to different characters, as well as to the reader. Another interesting avenue of inquiry is to explore how the floating signifier can be used to understand the construction of identity within the literature. For example, the use of clothing, accessories, or physical appearance can serve as floating signifiers, representing different identities and social status for characters. Through an examination of these floating signifiers, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of how Identity is constructed and represented within literary works. Hence, the concept of the floating signifier provides a unique lens through which to analyse and interpret literature, and there is much work yet to be done in this field. By exploring its applications, researchers and scholars can gain new insights into the meaning and representation of symbols, themes, and identities within literary works.

Its acceptance in different multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary fields is now random, unlike previously. Just like its definition floating signifier is inconsistent and flexible. Yet, from its inception, other thinkers frame it into different structures. Some later thinkers like

Lacan and Derrida have not only contributed to its development but also pondered over it greatly.

Conclusion

If we think of any known person who has left his or her native land for a job, career, or better opportunity and is now living somewhere outside of their native land, we will always find that those characters have the desire to return to their native land and live peacefully and happily. Ralph is one such individual. All those diaspora writers and people like them on a large scale have left their birthplaces or countries of their origin and started living in a foreign land for some valid and unavoidable reasons. If we consider this in general, they all in some way or another have suffered from this sense of alienation and rootlessness, which is repeatedly visible in nearly all of Naipaul's works. And, now to summarize this analysis, "floating" fundamentally refers to an insignificant and moveable (unstable, variable, etc.) idea, but its journey is very long and interesting. Its journey from the beginning to the present is still unique to each such individual. It is often said that one's search for the ideal is both eternal and eternally frustrating. Be it Ralph, Mr. Biswas, or Naipaul himself, the search for their ideal is eternal, and it is eternally frustrating. However, the arbitrariness of the signifier and signified is the ultimate reality of human existence, which gets reflected in every choice we make. Fundamentally, a sign is made up of two elements: the signifier and the signified. A very familiar instance of this is the idea of a tree. The sign, 'tree', has two components: the signifier, which is the arbitrary and abstract idea of a tree, and the signified element of the tree, which is how any individual imagines the real existence of a tree. Thus, we can conclude this aspect by saying that the true meaning or idea of life, with which Ralph has burdened himself in the novel, can be a signifier, a floating signifier. This sense of senseless and arbitrariness of life is beautifully interpreted in William Shakespeare's most celebrated drama, *Macbeth*. After the death of Lady Macbeth, Macbeth uttered the following lines to describe human life as having no essence, "Life's but walking shadow; a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more: it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." (Sen, p. 200)

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