

# **Alienation and Subversion: A Study on *The Middle Passage* from the Perspective of Postcolonialism**

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**Abstract:**

V. S. Naipaul's first travel book, *The Middle Passage*, records Naipaul's impressions as he traveled through five countries in the Caribbean: Trinidad, Guyana, Suriname, Martinique and Jamaica, revealing some problems of the postcolonial period. Using three key terms of identity crisis, mimicry and hybridity in the postcolonial context, this paper analyzes the leap from alienation to subversion in *The Middle Passage*.

**Keywords:** V. S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage*, Alienation, Subversion

## 1. Introduction

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul is one of the most influential contemporary writers and he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2001. He was an Indian by blood and was born in Trinidad, but became a British citizen at last. Above all, he was an exile or outsider in spirit so he may not represent any country or organization. As an immigrant writer with special background, Naipaul paid much more attention to the Third World and is well known for describing the life of marginalized people. He traveled extensively around the world and wrote some travel books, recording what he saw and thought.

*The Middle Passage* is one of his masterpieces of travel books and it is also his first travel book. In 1960, Dr Eric Williams, the premier of Trinidad, invited V. S. Naipaul to revisit his native country and record his impressions, so he wrote the book *The Middle Passage*. In the book, Naipaul shows the real social scenes of five countries in the Caribbean: Trinidad, Guyana, Suriname, Martinique and Jamaica, revealing the problems of a client culture and client economy in the West Indies, criticizing mimicry and lack of cultural creation of West Indians. This paper attempts to apply identity crisis, mimicry and hybridity three key terms to analyze *The Middle Passage* from the perspective of postcolonialism.

## 2. Psychological Alienation: Identity Crisis

Identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. Essentially it gives you a sense of personal location (Weeks, 1990). Besides, Stuart Hall (1997) assumes that identity is dynamic and is constructed in the process of constant change and transformation. However, in *The Middle Passage*, most people do not question or explore their identity. Instead, they take the cultural values, norms, beliefs, customs and other characteristics for granted, and rarely show any interest in discovering their own cultural background and the differences between themselves and others, which inevitably leads to identity crisis in a multiracial colony. The identity crisis of West Indians can be analyzed from two aspects.

On the one hand, the main reason for identity crisis of West Indians is the psychological alienation caused by displacement. Displacement may result from migration, enslavement, transportation and indentured labour and it is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being. In the Caribbean, people of different colors and races mix together, including the blacks, Indians, Europeans, Chinese, Arabs and so on. Behind this mixture, it is the tragedy of displacement. Because of colonial history and indentured labor system, a large number of blacks and Indians are taken to the Caribbean, an unacquainted place, leading to their displacement geographically, historically and culturally. After arriving in a new place, they are cut off from the culture of motherland that they can identify with. Just as V.S.Naipaul (2001) writes in *The Middle Passage* that Africa is no more than a word, an emotion for blacks because the culture and history behind it are unfamiliar to them. Therefore, they become a diasporic group and lose their root because they leave their own culture which grants them the sense of belonging. The situation is similar for Indians. After the abolition of slavery, in order to continue to have cheap labor to produce goods for

the metropolitan residents, the colonizers transport a large amount of indentured labor from India who replace the slaves as main labor. In *The Middle Passage*, when V.S. Naipaul (2001) talks with an Indian indentured labourer, the man mentions that he can scarcely conceive a world outside British Guiana and Coronie, and even India had faded, except for a memory of a certain railway station. In general, displacement leads to cultural rootlessness and even identity crisis of West Indians to some extent. It is first reflected in the loss of mother tongue. A Spanish lady can not speak Spanish and Correia who is a Portuguese can not speak Portuguese (Naipaul, 2001). As a carrier of culture, language can be interpreted as a sign of identity, so the loss of mother tongue means loss of identity in some sense.

On the other hand, with the assimilation of Western culture, the identity crisis of West Indians becomes more and more serious. Cultural assimilation is a process by which the language and culture of one person or group become similar to another group. It is a way to make the immigrants or native residents culturally assimilated by dominant group. Compared with other culture in the West Indies, Western culture is considered as a symbol of advancement, fashion and civilization. In Surinam, an *advisory council for cultural cooperation between the countries of the Netherlands Kingdom* is established with the purpose of promoting interest and knowledge of Western culture, especially Dutch culture (Naipaul, 2001). With cultural assimilation, more and more Western elements have entered West Indians' daily life. Cars and modern commodities flow into Trinidad, and people regard English songs and movies as fashion (Naipaul, 2001). Martinique, a legally constituted department of France, is deeply assimilated by its mother country. In Martinique, "the policemen are French; the street name-plates in blue-and-white enamel are French; the cafés are French; the menus are French and are written in a French hand" (Naipaul, 2001). Besides, "Martinique is full of little French villages; the radio station announces itself as Radiodiffusion Française; the advertisements are for Cinzano and St Raphael and Paris-Soir" (Naipaul, 2001). Everything is full of French characteristics, so it can even be said that France exports all of its civilization to Martinique, but most of the people are blacks.

During the process of assimilation, West Indians worship the West more and more. They forget and ignore the past, even are unwilling to look at their past, and regard Western values and culture as their spiritual homeland. "Surinamers call Surinam the twelfth province of Holland and their affection for Holland is genuine. In Guyana, the Negro policemen claim to be English and Martiniques also like to call themselves French. To make matters worse, Jamaican artists give yellow hair and pink faces to people who are irremediably black. In a sketch of Jamaican market, under the scarlet bandanas, the Jamaican women have yellow hair, pink faces, and even blue eyes" (Naipaul, 2001). However, to the West Indians, they never feel that their situation is abnormal. It seems to them natural that they should be in the West Indies, that they should speak French or English or Dutch, dress in the European manner or in adaptation of it, and share the European's religion and food.

As a matter of fact, the purpose of assimilation is to maintain the absolute authority of the colonizer. The first thing that Western civilization teaches West Indians is self-contempt and to despise others. Therefore, in the process of cultural assimilation, the relationship between the

colonizer and the colonized is still unequal. In other words, accepting assimilation is in a way to accept permanent inferiority. Everything in the white world has to be learned from scratch and every step on the road to whiteness deepens the abnormality of West Indians' position and increases their vulnerability. As a result, the identity crisis of West Indians becomes more and more serious.

All in all, displacement makes West Indians break away from the root culture that they can identify with. After the endless separation, they gradually lose the memory of root culture and become spiritually homeless. While their own culture becomes increasingly blurry, the Western culture becomes increasingly familiar to them. In this way, their thinking patterns, religious beliefs, customs and life style change unconsciously. The assimilation of Western culture makes West Indians worship the West more and more and then deny themselves. They begin to mimic white people in search of identity, but because of their black skin, they can not really integrate into Western culture. They forget a lot of things and absorb new ideas, wavering in spirit and lacking firm belief because of confusion about identity. Just as Naipaul (2001) writes in his book, "Everyone was an individual, fighting for his place in the community. Yet there was no community. We were of various races, religions, sets and cliques; and we had somehow found ourselves on the same small island. Nothing bound us together except this common residence. There was no nationalist feeling; there could be none. There was no profound anti-imperialist feeling; indeed, it was only our Britishness, our belonging to the British Empire, which gave us any identity". Crisis of identity makes West Indians do not know who they are and where they stand.

### **3. Behavioral Alienation: Mimicry**

The psychological alienation of West Indians leads to the alienation of behavior, and the feature of behavioral alienation is mimicry. The identity crisis brings a sense of inferiority to West Indians and this kind of inferiority complex has a negative impact on recognizing themselves correctly and improving their living conditions. Haunted by inferiority complex, West Indians believe that they can be successful only if they are accepted by white people. In order to achieve a sense of security or identity, they begin to imitate Westerners, which results in the problem of mimicry. Frantz Fanon (2008), a famous postcolonial theorist, describes the psychological state of the mimic men in his book *Black Skin, White Mask*: "The wearing of European clothes, whether rags or the most up-to-date style; using European furniture and European forms of social intercourse; adorning the native language with European expressions; using bombastic phrases in speaking or writing a European language; all these contribute to a feeling of equality with the European and his achievements". In *The Middle Passage*, most people show the behavior of mimicry.

The mimicry is first reflected in the cultural aspect, such as mimicry of language and lifestyle. As the superior metropolitan culture, Western culture attracts West Indians deeply and they take pride in mimicking the colonizers. In terms of language, West Indians are eager to be accepted or gain a certain social status through mimicry of English. Language plays a key role in the history of human civilization and it is also an important element in determining identity. Therefore, West Indians try to use the mimicry of language as a tool to enter the white world and regain their identity. In *The Middle*

*Passage*, Naipaul (2001) writes “West Indians are English-speaking and when confronted with the foreigner display the language arrogance of all English-speaking people”. In addition, the Mackays are proud that their son picks up all sorts of English, such as English slang and English accent (Naipaul, 2001). In Fanon’s (2008) view, “To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization”. So the mimicry of English means the identification with Western culture. By wearing a white mask on black skin, West Indians want to use the discourse of the colonizer to confirm their identity. However, the mimic men who just want to mimic others are doomed to become an echo of the colonizer, and they do not only lose the native language but also fail to enter the white world.

In terms of lifestyle, for West Indians, mimicking the Western lifestyle means modern and to be modern is to ignore local products. So West Indians are accustomed to despising their own products but pursuing Western products. A German makes chocolate in Trinidad because Trinidad is rich in sugar, vanilla and cocoa. The price is a quarter of the price of imported chocolate, but West Indians do not buy it. Unless it crosses the Atlantic twice and eventually comes from Paris, the fashion center, it can not be a real product. The more absurd thing is people all over Trinidad are fond of English dishes. “They will give you ox-tail soup when turtle would be much cheaper. Roast beef and beefsteaks are found at almost every meal. An immense deal of beer is consumed. When yams, avocado pears, the mountain cabbage, plantains, and twenty other delicious vegetables may be had for the gathering, people will insist on eating bad English potatoes; and the desire for English pickles is quite a passion” (Naipaul, 2001). The factor behind the lack of their own taste or style is the self-contempt of West Indians. However, “every colonized people -- in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality” (Fanon, 2008). Living in a borrowed culture, the mimic men are always lost in the process of mimicry. When they come into contact with the real world or the community, they will find the emptiness of their culture, standing there with empty hands. They have nothing worthless and are travelers who will never reach their destination.

Then the mimicry is reflected in mimicking whites’ racial discrimination towards others. In Trinidad, when people talk about racial problem, they do not refer to the problem between blacks and whites, but the conflict between blacks and Indians. The degree of separation between blacks and Indians is greater than that between blacks and whites. Blacks despise Indians because they are not whites, and blacks have deep contempt for everyone except whites. Indians look down upon blacks because they are not Indians. In addition, they inherit all whites’ prejudice against blacks. “The Asiatic insists the more on his superiority in the fear perhaps that if he did not the white might forget it. Like monkeys pleading for evolution, each claiming to be whiter than the other, Indians and Negroes appeal to the unacknowledged white audience to see how much they despise one another” (Naipaul, 2001). It can be seen that contempt between blacks and Indians is based on whites as a reference. In addition, West Indian blacks always want to distinguish themselves from blacks and try to get close to whites as much as possible. If West Indian blacks are assigned to work with the African

immigrants in the same plantation, they will not eat, drink, or walk with the newcomers and even will not work beside them. They believe that they are much superior to the newcomers. However, no matter how hard they work, West Indians will never be true whites. They try their best to mimic, but they are still labeled as aliens.

However, the mimicry may not only be the Third World's capacity for parroting the West, it may also be a strategy to subvert authority. When the colonized mimics the colonizer by adopting the colonizer's cultural habits, institutions and values, the result is never a simple reproduction of those traits. Instead, the result is a blurred copy of the colonizer that can be quite threatening. This is because mimicry is never very far from mockery, since it appears to parody whatever it mimics. Just like Homi Bhabha's (2012) view, "mimicry is the process by which the colonized subject is reproduced as almost the same, but not quite. The copying of the colonizer culture, behaviour, manners and values by the colonized contains both mockery and a certain menace, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace".

#### **4. From Alienation to Subversion: Hybridity**

"Hybridity commonly refers to the creation of new trans-cultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1998 ). It has the characteristics of both sides but is different from the combination of both sides, and has the incomparable advantages of both sides. It could be manifested in various forms, such as language, profession, family, race, culture, politics and so on. Above all, it is a strategy for different races or ideologies to subvert and question the colonial discourse. Homi Bhabha (2012) claims that the colonizer and the colonized should blend with each other and develop a contradictory and indistinct transitional space, which is called the Third Space. All cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent Third space, where the cultural identity always emerges. To some extent, the Third Space derives from hybridity because it develops when two or more individuals or cultures interact, appearing as a state that neither belongs to the self nor the other. So it can be concluded that hybridity is an inevitable result, which is closely related to the construction of identity.

In *The Middle Passage*, there is a kind of Black English called talkie-talkie or negerengels in Surinam, which is a Creole language. Creole languages develop from the mixing of parent languages because of trade, slavery or colonial contact. There are many types of Creole languages in the world and some Creoles are based on English. The Creole in Surinam is like this, the English left in the minds of slaves three hundred years ago is the foundation, and then blends with the local language to form the unique talkie-talkie. Although this language has some characteristics of English, it is very different from English. Naipaul (2001) says a few lines of Wyatt's poem in English:

They flee from me that some time did me seek,  
With naked foot stalking in my chamber,  
I have seen them gentle, mild and meek.  
That now do scorn to remember,  
That they have taken bread from my hand.

Then Mr Eersel translates them into talkie-talkie:

Den fre gwe f' mi, d' e mek' mi soekoe so,  
Nanga soso foetoe waka n' in' mi kamra.  
Mi si den gendri, safri,  
Di kosi now, f' no sabi,  
Fa den ben nian na mi anoe.

Naipaul (2001) comments that Mr Eersel's translation further simplifies the poem, but there is no denying the sweetness and rhythm of the language. As a product of hybridity, Creole may become a tool of subversion. The subversion is not a subversion of language alone, but of the entire system of culture and the whole discourse of metropolitan. During the process of hybridity, the purity of colonial discourse is reduced and the authority of colonized discourse is established. Therefore, the strategy of hybridity provides West Indians with the potential of a new vision to position themselves and to see the world.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has made a study on V.S.Naipaul's outstanding travel book *The Middle Passage* from the perspective of postcolonialism, and the analysis is from three aspects: identity crisis, mimicry and hybridity. The paper shows the identity crisis of West Indians caused by displacement and cultural assimilation, criticizes the extremely bad influence and absurd behavior of mimicry, and uses Creole as an example to explore the possibility of hybridity as a strategy of subversion. Works are reflections of author's inner world, so *The Middle Passage* is also a self-discovery of V.S.Naipaul.

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