

## The Issues of Belongings and Identity: A critique of Naipaul's 'Half a life' and 'The Magic Seeds'

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*V.S. Naipaul is a noted novelist of Indian origin. His novels have beautifully described colonial and ex-colonial societies. The present paper analyses some complex issues of the society described in his novels.*

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Exile and home are the two faces of the same coin - the full meaning of one can be grasped properly only in relation to the other. Home is not simply where one lives. It is one's identity- national, cultural, spiritual. Home is where one belongs- it is the soil that has nurtured one's body and spirit. Home is security, Exile, the loss of home. Home is the place with which we remain intimate even in moments of intense alienation from it.

In India, Africa and South East Asia Colonial education alienated men from their own culture and traditions and made them exiles in their own lands. They talked about nostalgic sensibilities and feelings, articulating a pain for the loss of secure home that had been left behind.

In our country, exile, far from being an exotic figure has become the type of modern man. It is to this world-wide crisis of homelessness that Naipaul's work is a sensitive response - taking into its sweep both the causes and consequences of the situation. He has no comforting message, only the bleak knowledge that in today's rapidly changing world the yearning for permanence can never be more than the unfulfilled ache- "everyone is far from home".

It is apparent that colonialism was a lot more than mere military conquest. It was, as Nicholas B. Dirks puts it, "a cultural project of control<sup>1</sup>," that displaced traditional cultures and left a deep scar on the psyche of the colonized people. Acculturation studies, like the one done by Margaret Mead, about the Indian people in contact with white society, clearly reveals that "While the Indians were encouraged to adopt the white people's ways, at the same time they were prevented by white prejudice from participating in joint cultural ventures".<sup>2</sup>

The relation between literature and the historical phenomenon of imperialism has been a long and intimate one. In fact, literature played the key role in validating imperial rule. For long, it served as an arena in which the main issues related to imperialism were "reflected, contested and even for a time decided".<sup>3</sup>

Discussing this aspect, Martin Green reveals that the adventure tales that formed the light reading of English men for two hundred years and more after Robinson Crusoe were, in fact : the "energizing myths of English imperialism", meant to charge "England's will with the energy to go out into the world and explore, conquer and rule"<sup>4</sup>. It was in the early part of twentieth century, when the power and glory of empire began to wane, that the monopoly on imperial writing was broken and the colonized elite could articulate their protest against the imperial power, which they did by appropriating the language and literary forms of the colonizers."<sup>5</sup>

Postcolonial literature gives expression to the colonial experience from the other's perspective, which includes all the cultures that were affected by the imperial process. In the context of the Caribbean too, there has been a substantial contribution to postcolonial literature. As Bruce King observes, " West Indian is one of many English Literatures that began under colonialism and 'emerged' after the second world war, mostly, as a result of the social, political and cultural changes which had started in the late 1930s and which picked up speed during the war and with the ending of empire. As with other new literatures its development has paralleled the rise of national movements and its themes

and subject matter have often been the problems resulting from colonialism and independence." <sup>6</sup>

V.S. Naipaul, Sir Vidiadher Suraj Prasad Naipaul, is a noted novelist of the colonial experience. He situates, his novels in both colonial as well as ex-colonial societies and portrays vividly the complexities inherent to such societies. The major themes of his novels are related to the problems of the colonized people : their sense of alienation, their identity crisis, their displacement and their homelessness.

Naipaul is a victim of double diaspora as his grandfather migrated from India to Trinidad in 1880, since then his family lived there. He decided to study at Oxford University College and later on settled there as he has strong desire to settle in England since his childhood. The sense of expatriateness was in his blood because he was born and educated in a country which was not his own and now he is residing in England that can also not be called his home. He can only be a visitor where ever he goes. For him, India is a country of his ancestors, not of his own generation and Trinidad, where he lived, became a country because of colonialism and for England he is just an alien. Hence the blood, which is moving in his veins, belongs to one country, while he lived in another country and settled in the third country.

The crisis of unbelongingness is always a feature which one can not ignore while reading Naipaul. There is a strong desire of independence and identity in his writing. His works give a sense of his biography of departure from the colonial background of Trinidad to the cosmopolitan culture of England. He thinks that colonial society was the product of colonizers and the culture and knowledge of those societies has come from outside :

" He hated the narrow, circumscribed brutal life which surrounded him in colonial Trinidad with its limited possibilities, small range of profession, notorious political corruption and social and religious conflict. .... Indians among whom he was raised lived in a social world of their own uninvolved with the races. The Trinidadian of African descent appeared to have not traditional culture of their own and modeled themselves on the English.....The local whites had produced nothing of lasting values, were drunkards , uneducated and privileged." <sup>7</sup>

In London also, Naipaul never felt at home in his first twenty years. He feels that he knows very little about England and has few friends there but in Trinidad he knew more people. He writes:

" The privacy of big cities depresses me. There are no communal pleasures in London. Between the activity and the response there is always the barrier of self consciousness. You go to a restaurant or a night club, you eat, you watch, you pay, you come out and look for a bus, feeling you have wasted your money..... The theatre is a disappointment .....you watch, you come out in the interval to smoke or have a drink, you watch again, and it is all over..... However good the acting, you come out alone into the cold street, private sitting in a bus full of grim people who have left their pleasure behind them in a threat ..... I got more pleasure from going to a cinema in Trinidad."<sup>8</sup>

Naipaul lived in London as a diasporic He went there because he had no other place to go. His sense of alienation gets reflected in most of his writings. He has always written about the problems of Indian diaspora, whether his subject is Trinidad, London, East Africa or India. His "fiction is designed to convey to the readers the experiences of a particular situation in which alienation and absurdity occur in contemporary life."<sup>9</sup> He has given the description of third world and for him that is the world of colonies inhabited by the immigrant people. These people as a labour went there with their particular culture. They have still no root there and large part of world population, living in those colonized islands have sense of inferiority.

Naipaul's Half a life, published just before he received Nobel Prize, portrays and evaluated the lives of the mixed descent in three countries - India, England and Portuguese Africa (Mozambique) and their struggle to discover their identities . The novel, partly autobiographical, analyses beautifully the pangs of the exiles, their living a half life their sense of alienation and their cultural traditions. The novel is set in three locales - India, England and Africa. A princely State in British India untouched by colonial agitation, is the setting of the first part of the novel entitled. A visit from Somerset Maugham. The second part entitled 'The first chapter is set in post-war London with its dingy West End clubs and lonely pavements and the third part called 'A second Translation' has setting in a province of Portuguese Africa. The Protagonist Willie Chandran, born in India of a brahmin father and a lower class mother, leaves India and goes first to England and then

to Africa. Willie's life in London is fraught with many frightening experiences. He is portrayed here as a young man 'with nothing to his name but his promise as a writer, drifting aimlessly, groping for a voice'. He suffers from alienation and emptiness - 'a sense of being without history or understanding, the difficulty a writer from the colonies faces in finding material and his shocking sexual encounters'. He sleeps with prostitutes and friend's girl friends only to discover his own sexual incompetence. "Willie realized that his own failures mirror those of his father's and that these personal failures mirror the failure of colonialism; Britain losing Indian and Portugal losing Mozambique" <sup>10</sup> Willie finds love in the chance encounter with Ana, a mixed race girl from Africa and admirer of his book. They meet in his hostel room. Willie has been a little tense before her arrival. But 'as soon as he saw her, all his anxieties fell away, and he was conquered' (125). The most intoxicating thing was 'that for the first time in his life he felt himself in the presence of someone who accepted him completely'.

At home his mixed inheritance spoils everything. Even the love he felt for his mother, which should have been pure, was full of the pain he felt for their circumstances, ' (125) His experience of love with Ana, he hopes, might bring him the fulfillment he so desperately seeks. At Ana's estate house in Africa, Willie feels like a stranger, and says, 'It may be because of something in our culture that in spite of appearances, men are really looking for women to lean on. (141) And further, 'Ana was important for me because I depended on her for my idea of being a man' (142) Willie wants to discover some purpose in life through his sensual associations and sexual encounters in Ana's Africa, "Willie's submission to sexual desire is wholly believable for the very reason that he has previously been stunted into half life by the constrictions of caste in India and class in England, Africa releases him into sensuality".<sup>9</sup>

However, at the end of the novel *Half-a-Life*, he decides after 18 years to leave Ana realizing, that it is not his life and chooses to stay in Berlin with his sister Sarojini.

Thus Willie, uprooted from his own culture, can not get any permanence fulfillment anywhere. He fails to adjust every where. He leads a half life. His sister Sarojini is also living a half life, wandering here and there with her German Husband who is a film producer. Willie's friend Percy Cato too is leading a half life and has no proper place to stay. Both friends belong to the same background. Willie had not really known what to make of a man "Who appeared to have no proper place in the world" (62). Some other characters in the novel also move from town to town, house to house and job to job. Their struggle for existence never comes to an end. They think that "The local rich people controlled everything and didn't allow the poor man to live." (209) In spite of all this, Willie has a hope of finding some purpose in life: "All that he had was a belief in magic - that one day something would happen, and illumination would come to him, and he would be taken by a set of events to the place he should go" (122)

The protagonist Willie Chandran in the *Magic seeds*, which is the sequel of *Half -a-Life*, undertakes a reverse journey from his sister's place Berlin to India. His sister also inspires him to go the "real place with real people"<sup>12</sup> This remark is indicative of the existential tremors of rootlessness and homelessness. He decides to go to the other world, his own world, as he thinks India is, to join some revolutionary mission but the movement turns out to be vague and instead of leading to any sense of fulfillment it filled the heart of Willie with a sense of homelessness. In the semi comic turn of events Willie is eventually successful in extricating himself from prison life when one of his old English literary friends Roger, a lawyer, persuades the authorities to release him on the grounds that a long-forgotten book of stories has established Willie as 'a Pioneer of Modern Indian Writing'. Ultimately he finds himself back in London, where after almost thirty years, he has to start a 'search for home'.

"Willie felt old stirrings, the beginning of old grief. But then he thought, I have been there. I have given part of my life and I have nothing to show for it. I can not go there again. I must let that part of me die. I must lose that vanity. I must understand that big countries grow or shrink according to the play of internal forces that are beyond the control of any one man. I must try now to be only myself. If such a thing is possible" (MS. 176 - 177)

Willie feels an insatiable thirst for home which he has developed after his marriage to Ana and after an obscure life in Africa in the novel *Half-a-Life*: "It had seemed natural to him twenty and more years ago, at home, to want to hide. Now all that has followed from that wish seemed to him shameful. His half life in London, and then all his life in

Africa, that life when he was permanently in semi-hiding, gauging his success by the fact that in his second-class, semi Portuguese group he didn't particularly stand out, and was 'passing' all that life seemed shameful." (MS.10)

Willie seems to be a part of Appadurai's 'thnoscope' : " The landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live : tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers and other moving groups of individuals who make up the instabilities within the seemingly stable global system." <sup>13</sup>

This is confirmed in the very beginning of the novel, " It had begun many years before, in Berlin, another world. He was living there in a temporary, half and half way with his sister Sarojini. After Africa it had been a great refreshment, this new kind of protected life being almost a tourist, without demand and without anxiety." (MS-1)

Leading the life of a gypsy, Willie enjoys this status of a tourist. In the guerrilla movement that he joined in India, he has to take up the task of a courier because the point about a good courier is that he has to look o.k. every where, Willie looks to be at home every where. He says ," It's the one thing I have worked at all my life, not being at home, anywhere , but looking at home." (MS - 74)

Thus Willie represents the fragmented cultures and displaced populations. The title ' The Magic Seeds refers both to the abortive revolution sown by the revolutionaries and also to the seed that will produce a raceless society, a new class of drifters' for whom 'Home' remains a utopian dream which is never realized.

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