

The Challenging Path to Identity in Naipaul's *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds***Behzad Barekat**Associate Professor, Department of English Language and Literature,
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University of Guilan, Iran**Abstract**

V. S. Naipaul is one of the leading postcolonial writers whose influential works reflect the problems ex-colonized nations struggle with after declaring independence. A careful examination of Naipaul's novels and travel narratives reveals that he explores such postcolonial themes as alienation, displacement, rootlessness, identity crisis, etc. to show how colonialism continues to affect the life of the former colonized in the postcolonial era. Naipaul's latest novels *Half a Life* (2001) and *Magic Seeds* (2004) are among the most famed postcolonial novels that captivated many critics, and the present paper focuses on these two novels which recount the life story of Willie Chandran who leaves his birthplace, India, for London to devise an identity of his own, but experiences a chain of difficulties and disappointments on his path to achieve this goal. Therefore, the researcher seeks to explore whether Willie suffers an identity crisis and if so, what steps he takes to overcome this hardship and claim his own identity. Reading through the novels, one can discern that Willie is always haunted by a sense of homelessness and non-belonging, which prompt him to turn his back to his ancestors and start an arduous journey for self-realization. However, since he has no firm objectives or specific plans for his future, he lives in futility and is not able to integrate into the different cultures he mingles with. At the end of the second novel *Magic Seeds*, however, he seems to have finally defined a purpose for himself by finding a job in an architecture magazine and choosing to live in a cosmopolitan society away from central London. Overall, Willie is the representative of the marginalized diaspora that face a number of challenges in their quest for identity and feel dislocated and homeless wherever they go.

Key Words: identity crisis, displacement, diaspora, quest for self-realization**1. Introduction**

Born on August 17, 1932, Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul is a Trinidadian-British Noble Prize Laureate in literature whose Indian descent greatly contributed to the formation of his famous works which explore such postcolonial themes as alienation, displacement, rootlessness and identity crisis. He utilizes different writing strategies such as "ethnographic detail, journalistic style, historical, autobiographical and philosophical sense" in his travel narratives to present facts and his real experiences (Roldán-Santiago, 2002: p. 93). Naipaul's unique perspective which is

the result of his multiple heritages helps him "render a detached account of his subjective experiences" (Mohan, 2004: p. 9). The overtly critical position he takes in his depiction of the challenges ex-colonies struggle with gives a pessimistic mood to his works (*Ibid*: p. 10). Naipaul's straightforward descriptions and his skillful use of language make his style a mature and unique one that enables him to efficiently express his ideas. As Naipaul himself noted when interviewed by Ahmed Rashid, he just tries "to write as clearly as he can to let those thoughts appear on the page" and "create something the reader does not notice and which he reads very quickly" (1997: p. 168).

Perusing Naipaul's major works, one can discern such typical themes as alienation, displacement, rootlessness, identity crisis, frustration in a colonized society, search for identity and racial intersections running through his writings predominantly. Through a detailed exploration of a certain character's life, he shows how the cultural dominance of the colonizer in the postcolonial era leaves the colonized as a homeless wanderer who strives to find a proper place in the society and assert his own existence. His realistic portrayal of individuals who are in constant search for identity is an outstanding aspect of his art which helps him to effectively convey his message to the meticulous reader. Naipaul's early novels mainly deal with the colonial society of Trinidad and portray the characters' continual search for an identity and home. His later novels, however, explore the difficulties former colonies endure after gaining independence and focus on the fact that the colonizing superpowers "continue to retain their hold on the former colonies through the newer, more camouflaged methods of neocolonialism" (Mohan, 2004: p. 9).

By focusing on Naipaul's latest novels *Half a Life* (2001) and *Magic Seeds* (2004), the present study seeks to show how the protagonist's journey to discover his identity is depicted through the course of different events. The study also tries to demonstrate how the sense of homelessness and displacement make the protagonist become involved in ambiguous missions which finally disillusion him.

In order to examine the sense of homelessness and displacement which Naipaul's protagonist experiences throughout his whole life, the researcher will use postcolonial criticism as her basic theoretical framework. By limiting the vast diversity of postcolonial theories to those presented by Gayatri Spivak, the present study would provide the readers with Spivak's most significant theories on the postcolonial identity as represented in her major books and essays. Spivak's essay

Can the Subaltern Speak? would be used as one of the major sources embodying her seminal ideas on postcolonial identity. The present paper intends to identify whether Naipaul's protagonist Willie suffers an identity crisis and, if yes, how such a problem affects his life and pushes him to get involved in adventures which change his worldview.

2. Theoretical Framework

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is a world-renowned critical theorist whose influential works and theories have promoted her as one of the pioneering figures of postcolonial studies. Along with such contemporary intellectuals as Said and Bhabha, she challenges the division presumed to exist between the West and the East and focuses on the culture of the marginalized people ignored as a result of the dominance of western culture (Morton, 2003: p. 1). To do so, she champions the voices and texts of such minority groups as "the new immigrant, the working class, women and the postcolonial subject" (*Ibid*). In her famous essay *Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism*, Spivak offers an important critical challenge to nineteenth-century British literature by emphasizing that the representation of English culture as inherently more civilized than non-European nations led to the "continuing success of imperialist project, displaced and dispersed into more modern forms" (1985: p. 243). In fact, the body of nineteenth-century literary texts produced in the British literature was used as a political tool to promote the idea that British culture is superior to the culture of the colonies, justifying in turn the racial discrimination of the colonized. Spivak's influential and most controversial essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* is considered as a remarkable contribution to Postcolonialism and Subaltern Studies since she raises the issue of "subaltern classes" and explores the possibility of being heard for those considered as marginal in a colonial context. In this essay, she investigates whether the "subalterns" are given a voice to speak for themselves or "they are condemned only to be known, represented, and spoken for in a distorted fashion by others, particularly by those who exploit them" (Moore-Gilbert, 2000: p. 452). According to Spivak, the knowledge produced by the colonizers represents the colonized/ formerly colonized subjects as the "Other" of the West and rejects "their own native knowledge-systems as irrational and irrelevant" (cited in Nayar, 2015: p. 65). Spivak concludes her essay by stating that "[t]he subaltern cannot speak" (1985: p. 104) since the western intellectuals who claim to defend the rights of the subaltern are in fact speaking for them rather than allowing them to "speak for themselves" (Kharbe, 2009: p.

442). As a postcolonial critic, she believes the cultural, economic, and political life of the postcolonial states continues to be affected by the social structures that were established during colonial era.

3. V. S. Naipaul's *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds*: A Brief Summary

V. S. Naipaul's *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds* recount the life story of Willie Somerset Chandran who faces big challenges and undergoes different adventures in his quest for identity. He leaves his homeland for London with the hope of achieving the sort of life he has been dreaming, even though he has no clear image of what he intends to do there. At college, he learns how to present himself as he wishes since nobody knows anything about him and his background. However, since he has no vivid and tangible idea of how his future looks after graduation, he decides to leave London and go to Africa with an African girl named Ana who has read and admired his book of stories. There, he spends eighteen years in futility and undertakes different adventures including sleeping with African prostitutes in a garrison town, which do not bring him the satisfaction he has always been questing. Believing that he has lived "Ana's life" during these eighteen years, he decides to leave her and go to Berlin where his sister lives. Willie's sister, Sarojini, encourages him to return to India and join a guerrilla movement there. Thinking that such a commitment to revolution might help him give meaning to his life, Willie decides to return to his homeland and join the rebel army Sarojini has told him about. To his disappointment, however, joining the revolutionaries does not seem to be the right decision and he ends up in a rebel training camp in the forests. Frustrated and disillusioned, he escapes the camp and surrenders himself to the police. After being released from prison, he returns to London and finds a job in an architecture magazine with the help of his friend Roger. At the end of the novel, Willie, now a man of fifty, reflects on his life throughout which he has always lived as a wanderer in search of an identity of his own. He finally comes to the conclusion that "it is wrong to have an ideal view of the world. That's where the mischief starts. That's where everything starts unravelling."

4. The Challenging Path to Identity

A careful examination of *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds* reveals that Naipaul's protagonist Willie does suffer from an identity crisis which affects his entire actions and decisions. In this

part, the traces of identity crisis in his character will be debated so that the readers may have a more comprehensive understanding of what he is struggling for and why he is doing so. I will also expand upon the steps he takes in order to overcome the sense of homelessness and non-belonging he's haunted by all the time.

4.1. Dissatisfaction with Traditional Values

The very first line of *Half a Life* is a kind of foreshadowing for the whole novel when Willie asks his father "Why is my middle name Somerset? The boys at school have just found out, and they are mocking me." This suggests that little Willie starts his quest for identity from early childhood by asking questions about his roots. His father tells him that he's named after the famous English writer Somerset Maugham. Supposing that Willie's name is part of his identity and keeping in mind that it is borrowed from someone else, one can conclude that he does not possess an identity of his own and that is why his struggle to attain self-identity is what shapes his whole life. Willie's going to the mission school changes his life trajectory since it is there where he starts to daydream about going to Canada where his teachers came from. Attending a mission school ruled by foreigners inspires little Willie to even think of adopting their religion and becoming like them (Naipaul, 2001: p.16). This is exactly what Gayatri Spivak discusses in her essay *Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism*, emphasizing that representing the English culture as inherently more civilized than the other cultures justified the so-called "civilizing mission" and led to the "continuing success of imperialist project, displaced and dispersed into more modern forms" (1985: p. 243). Willie's enthusiasm for living in foreign lands becomes more evident when he's asked to write an English composition about his holidays. In his composition, he pretends he is a Canadian and depicts a foreign life which is taken from American comic books he had read in the mission school.

4.2. A Nebulous Life in London

In London, Willie meets people of different races who, like Willie, are struggling to discover themselves and find their identity. Willie struggles to firstly, "adjust himself to London-life" and secondly, "have a history of his own" (Kumar Vishnu, 2003: p. 54). Since nobody knows anything about his background, he tries to present himself as he wishes to be more readily accepted and respected by the society. Therefore, he remakes himself by altering the reality and

omitting those parts of his life for which he felt embarrassed. In fact, since he does not have the courage or the opportunity to express himself as he really is, he invents a new man through whose voice he can confidently communicate with others. By doing so, he tries to become like an Englishman but imitating the cultural norms of the British lifestyle does not help him to overcome his sense of inferiority and shame. At college, Willie makes friends with a Jamaican of mixed parentage named Percy Cato who is leading a half-life in his own way and tries to adopt the London lifestyle by dressing immaculately. Percy mimics the cultural norms of London society to be accepted by others and Willie imitates what Percy does to gain others' respect. In fact, he does not have the courage and the capacity to approach the authentic London culture and needs a guide who can familiarize him with that culture. Willie's indecisiveness makes him mimic the mimic, namely Percy, signifying that he is battling a grave identity crisis. Percy also takes him to the bohemian parties in Notting Hill where immigrants from different colonized nations meet from time to time. Accordingly, he gradually becomes "part of the special, passing bohemian-immigrant life of London of the late 1950s" which he finds quite different from "traditional bohemian world of Soho" (Naipaul, 2001: p. 29).

4.3. Sexual Frustration

Willie's sexual incompetence is another important trace of his identity crisis. Percy's comfort with sexuality arouses Willie's jealousy and he decides to look for a prostitute, but since he does not have the courage to find one, he goes to Percy's girlfriend June to have his first sexual intercourse with her. Although the experience is not a completely successful one, Willie feels pleased with himself believing that he is a "changed man" now. His first sexual encounter with June reveals another fact about Willie's background from which he seeks to escape: the suffocating conditions in India do not allow Indians to enjoy sexual life to the full. His sexual incompetence is the result of his upbringing in a society where the marriages are arranged and talking about sex is regarded as a taboo. This is what June directly tells Willie when she recognizes his sexual ineptitude:

A friend of mine says it happens with Indians. It's because of the arranged marriages. They don't feel they have to try hard. My father said his father used to tell him, 'Satisfy the woman first. Then think of

yourself.' I don't suppose you had anybody telling you anything like that.

(Naipaul, 2001: p. 28)

Gradually, Willie comes to understand that "sexual indulgence is one of the factors of western culture" (Ray, 2007: p.125) and thus he tries to learn more about it so as to keep pace with the trends of western lifestyle and fulfill his sexual longing. Culturally displaced, he disregards the sexual taboos of his homeland which prevail in his mentality and struggles to adopt a culture which is not much familiar to him.

4.4. Eighteen Years of Bewilderment in Africa

Willie undergoes many different adventures during his eighteen-year-long stay in Africa and lives among people of different races who treat him as an ordinary man. Therefore, not only does he lose the little autonomy he gained in London, he also loses his name, as an African maid calls him "Ana's London man". In his search of a home where he can find solace, Willie gradually forgets that side of his self he recognized in London and tries to hide his true feelings about others by behaving like them and learning their language. After a few years of living in Africa and learning more about people around him, Willie seems to overcome the sense of homelessness and alienation he had when he first arrived in the country: "In Africa I had after a while let those London lies drop; in our half-and-half group they seemed to have no point" (Naipaul, 2001: p. 72). Another aspect of Willie's life in Africa pertains to his learning more about sex through the guidance of an estate manager named Alvaro who takes Willie to different villages off the town where he can see the dark world of African prostitution. Although Willie had satisfying sexual intercourse with Ana, getting involved in such a world brought him some sort of liberation: "I began to live with a new idea of sex, a new idea of my capacity. It was like being given a new idea of myself" (Ibid, p. 76). Undergoing such experiences helps Willie gain a new sense of himself but does not give him the sense of belonging and satisfaction he is struggling to achieve. That is why he soon grows tired of the life of sensation and begins to respect the religious outlawing of sexual extremes. Such a constant change in attitude confirms the fact that Willie's quest for identity has not succeeded yet and he has not set a specific goal for himself. He is in fact like a wanderer who walks in the darkness awaiting someone to guide him and help him discover some segments of his identity. Finally, believing that he has wasted the

best part of his life in Africa, Willie decides to leave her wife and go to Berlin where his sister Sarojini lives.

4.5. Joining the Guerrilla Movement in India

After leaving Africa, Willie goes to Berlin where he stays for six months "living in a temporary, half-and-half way with his sister Sarojini" (Naipaul, 2004: p. 5). As Madhusudhana Rao A maintains in his article *Obsession for Finding Roots in Magic Seeds*, "[Willie's] sense of displacement is not diminished after the departure from Africa, and Berlin does not seem to be the city where he could finally settle" (2013, p. 19). Therefore, he should take another critical step in his path to identity in order to achieve the sense of belonging he is seeking. Following his sister's advice, Willie decides to return to his native India to join a guerrilla movement with the hope of finding his true self; however, he finds himself among the wrong people about whom he knows almost nothing. His traumatic experience in India as a guerrilla brings him to the realization that he belongs to nowhere and is unable to develop an idea of himself. To get out of this situation, he escapes the guerrilla camp and surrenders himself to the police after which he is sentenced to 10 years in prison.

4.6. Ending up in London Suburbs

Having been released from prison, Willie moves to London where he had spent his college days. He decides to forget the past and try to be only himself "if such a thing is possible" (Naipaul, 2004: p.170). However, it seems that he would never be able to achieve a sense of belonging either in London or anywhere else in the world since his rootlessness and his confusion with Indian culture prevent him from being integrated into the local society and gaining belongingness (Wang and Lin, 2014: p. 189). In fact, Willie is a diasporic character obsessed with the question of belonging everywhere he goes, realizing that his quest for home has been futile because he has lived an exiled life all the time and has never felt at home in the different places he has slept in:

I have never slept in a room of my own. Never at home in India, when I was a boy. Never here in London. Never in Africa. I lived in somebody else's house always, and slept in somebody else's bed. (Naipaul, 2004, p.

178)

After a while, his friend Roger helps him find a job in an architecture magazine and take some architecture courses in the company's training center where he lives with immigrants like himself who come from different countries and are pleased with integrating into the cosmopolitan community of London. There, he comes to a new understanding of himself and realizes that this kind of life suits him. Therefore, it seems that Willie has finally defined a purpose for himself after living a pointless and futile life for more than 30 years.

5. Conclusion

V. S. Naipaul's latest novels *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds* recount the life of Willie Chandran who faces a number of challenges in his quest for identity. Willie is a diasporic character obsessed with the question of belonging everywhere he goes and "is preoccupied with varieties of dislocations, migrations, exile, the idea of being unanchored and displaced" (Nayak, 2005: p. 259). This is the problem most ex-colonized people face in their attempt to claim their own identity and find their own voice in the society. Based on Spivak's ideas, it is really difficult for such people to speak for themselves because they are constantly being denied of a voice by those who claim to defend their rights but are in fact speaking for them rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. Being entrenched that they are uncivilized and uncultured, colonized people try to adopt the culture of the colonizer which they deem superior as compared to their own culture. On the one hand, the colonized man can never become exactly like the colonizer; and on the other hand, he cannot fully forget the cultural norms that have been institutionalized in him since childhood. This is where he loses his voice and is marginalized by the hegemonic culture of the colonizer. Although ex-colonized people are constantly caught between their own culture and the culture of the colonizers, this does not mean that there is no possibility for them to overcome their identity crisis and feel pleased. That is why Naipaul's novels do not seem to be totally pessimistic and you can find signs of hope for changing the disastrous conditions the characters are dealing with. However unsuccessful Willie's quest for identity has been, we cannot deny that his attitudes and thoughts change throughout the novel but as a representative of the marginalized diaspora, he is continuously denied a voice of his own and is not able to claim an identity that is exclusive to him.

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