

# Dimensions of Diaspora: A Study of V. S. Naipaul's Select Fictions

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## **Abstract**

Recent decades, with war, colonialism and decolonisation amidst great economic and political upheavals around the world, have resulted in vast human migrations. As Edward Said states, "our age is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration." Consequently, the plight of the displaced persons separated from their roots and their histories, has come to occupy the focus of literary and critical attention in recent times. V. S. Naipaul's Indian ancestry, birth in Trinidad, and subsequent relocation to the UK offered him first-hand experience of dislocation and its lurid form that often resulted at times in fragmentation of the self. These existential dilemmas are reflected in his writings and interviews. This article will analyse vignettes of Diaspora experience as manifest in select Naipaul novels—*A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), *A Bend in the River* (1979), and *Half a Life* (2001)—and demonstrate how the exilic experience of his characters triggers the process of fragmentation and disintegration of their selves, and how the protagonists negotiate the existential dilemmas.

**Keywords:** homelessness, nostalgia, diaspora subjectivities, exile, self

## **Introduction**

Defining a diaspora remains contested though a great number of diasporas have existed throughout history. The term "diaspora" is used to refer to the Jewish diaspora, which resulted as a consequence of socioeconomic discrimination which forced Jews out of Palestine in the eighth century. However, Gabriel Sheffer opines that it is a mistake to maintain the concept of diaspora only for the Jewish people because during the second half of the nineteenth century some groups with many similarities with the Jewish diaspora appear in Europe.<sup>1</sup> Judith T. Shuval avers that the term has "assumed a more general connotation of people settled away from their ancestral homelands."<sup>2</sup> Robin Cohen argued that diaspora comprised groups who scatter voluntarily or move as a result of aggression, persecution, or extreme hardship and settle in a new destination for a relatively long time period.<sup>3</sup> He provides six types of diasporas; Victim Diasporas, Labour Diasporas, Imperial Diasporas, Trade Diasporas, Deterritorialised Diasporas, and Incipient Diasporas. William Safran defines diaspora as only one particular form of mass migration, that involving forced exile and a fraught and lengthy period of resettlement and planting down of new roots in regions of destination.<sup>4</sup> Himadri Lahiri has

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<sup>1</sup> Gabriel Sheffer (ed.), *Modern Diasporas in International Politics* (London: Croom Helm, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> Judith T. Shuval, "Diaspora Migration: Definitional Ambiguities and a Theoretical Paradigm," *International Migration*, vol. 38, no. 5 (2000), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (London: UCL Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return," *Diasporas*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1991).

erased certain baffling misconceptions that surround the term, stating “diaspora is a social formation outside the nation of origin. It is a phenomenon involving uprooting, forced or voluntary, of a mass of people from the 'homeland' and their re-rooting in the hostland(s).”<sup>5</sup>

The study of diasporas, however, gained prominence in the late twentieth century as scholars began to explore the experiences of various dispersed communities beyond Jewish diaspora. The theoretical innovations of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Chinua Achebe, James Clifford, Avtar Brah and Salman Rushdie have in recent years vitalised postcolonial and diaspora studies. The notion of diaspora in particular has been productive in its attention to the real-life movement of peoples throughout the world, whether these migrations have been through choice or compulsion. But perhaps of even greater significance to postcolonial theory has been the consideration of the epistemological implications of the term diaspora as theory. Diaspora theory is structured around three principal actors; homeland, diaspora group, host. As the diasporic experience can impact a host of factors in one’s lived experience, diaspora theory’s relevance encompasses multiple academic fields as anthropology, sociology, history, cultural studies, and political science to provide insights into the complexities of diasporic experiences and their broader implications for global society. Exile and displacement are issues which can also impact a country’s economic systems, international relations, and internal politics. In brief, diaspora theory specifically emphasises the experiences of people “exiled” from their homelands.

Postcolonial theory deals with literature produced in/ about countries that were once colonies of the British Empire. The theory is based on concepts of otherness and resistance. Among the principal themes in postcolonial fiction are: those of exile and alienation; rebellion, struggle, and opposition against colonial powers; and mixing or confusion of identities, multiculturalism, and the establishment of cultural autonomy free from imperial forces. The proponents of the theory examine the ways in which writers from colonised countries attempt to articulate and even celebrate their cultural identities. Edward Said’s *Orientalism*<sup>6</sup> is regarded as the founding work; then Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak critiques the essentialist underpinnings of Subaltern Studies, wherein the marginalised subaltern subject is always defined via his or her difference from the elites.<sup>7</sup> Homi K. Bhabha writes that a “rethink on the perspective of identity of our culture”<sup>8</sup> and views the human world as composed of separate and unequal cultures perpetuated by belief in the existence of imaginary peoples and places.<sup>9</sup>

However, the spirit of postcolonialism, in spite of V. S. Naipaul’s avowed engagement with the cultural dislocation and rootlessness in his *oeuvre*, gets ruptured by the author’s uncomplimentary comments about ethnic and religious minorities as manifest in *The Middle Passage*<sup>10</sup> and *An Area of Darkness*.<sup>11</sup> This lapse in Naipaul’s early writings constrained Said to declare him as “the rootless global realist ... complicit with neo-colonial representations,”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Himadri Lahiri, *Diaspora Theory and Transnationalism* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2019), p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

<sup>7</sup> Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “The Commitment to Theory,” *New Formations*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1988), p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> V. S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage* (London: Macmillan, 1962).

<sup>11</sup> V. S. Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness* (London: Vintage, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile: and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University

as another critic connected him “with the discursive traditions of imperialism.”<sup>13</sup> Naipaul, a Nobel Laureate, addresses in his fiction/nonfiction the issues of cultural dislocation and rootlessness caused by migrations and rapid unsettling social and technological changes in a transcontinental perspective. His ancestors of Indian extraction migrated to the Caribbean islands as indentured labourers and endeavoured to pass on to their immediate next generations the cultural heritage and lost homeland. Naipaul remembers in his Nobel Lecture that as a child he had been given ideas of the Indian epics, the *Ramayana* in particular. He had also seen how the Indians in Trinidad were gradually overwhelmed by the influence of the other cultures despite the first generation’s desire to retain their own cultural heritage. He writes that “as English penetrated, we began to lose our language ... so our ancestral faith receded, became mysterious, not pertinent to our day to day life.”<sup>14</sup> Against this backdrop, it is perhaps natural that Naipaul should focus in his writings on the issues of cross-cultural interaction, hybridisation of culture, identity crisis and in-betweenness which result at times in fragmentation of self. This article analyses the identity crisis of Naipaul’s protagonists in three novels, *A House for Mr Biswas*,<sup>15</sup> *A Bend in the River*,<sup>16</sup> and *Half a Life*,<sup>17</sup> demonstrating how the exilic experience of these characters results into fragmentation and disintegration of their selves as they struggle to negotiate the dilemma of identity in an alien world.

## Discussion

Fluidity, fragmentation, difference, cross-cultural interaction, hybridisation are terms which generally figure in any discourse on diaspora as the diasporic experience is marked multihued cultural diversity. In a diaspora predicament one has to carve out a definite notion of one’s identity because “diaspora identities are ... constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference,”<sup>18</sup> a kind of cultural “border-crossings.”<sup>19</sup> The hyphenated diasporic identities defy geographical borders, thus one’s identity becomes fluid, cross-cultural, cross-continental and the entire process involves continuous erasure and new alignments in the sphere of identity. For an exile, the past suddenly stops at a spatio-chronological point. The lost homeland may have undergone vast changes with time yet an exile retains in his memory the same vision of the land as it had been at the time of his (or his ancestor’s) departure from the country. The ancestors of Naipaul bequeathed to him the vision of India of the 1880s when they immigrated. This India, which Rushdie speaks of as “Indias of the mind,”<sup>20</sup> has been for Naipaul the country that has partly grown up inside his imagination.

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Press, 2000), p. 103.

<sup>13</sup> Rob Nixon, *London Calling: V. S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> V. S. Naipaul, “Two Worlds: Nobel Lecture,” in *V. S. Naipaul: Critical Essays*, Volume 1, ed. Mohit K. Ray (London: Atlantic Publishers, 2002), p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> V. S. Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1961).

<sup>16</sup> V. S. Naipaul, *A Bend in the River* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979).

<sup>17</sup> V. S. Naipaul, *Half a Life* (London: Picador, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Laurence and Wishart, 1990), p. 244.

<sup>19</sup> Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 209.

<sup>20</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 10.

In his own words, India “was like a loose end in my mind, where our past suddenly stopped.”<sup>21</sup> It illustrates Rushdie’s observation that “our alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost” like “broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost.”<sup>22</sup>

However, besides loss, the exilic experience offers what Said refers to as “pleasures of exile.”<sup>23</sup> Rushdie, too, accepts that exilic experience can lead to a “double perspective” as:

our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures ... however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles.<sup>24</sup>

Another advantage of an exilic condition is the yearning to move from the marginalised social position to the centre, an effort to form subjectivity in new circumstances. It is an advantage of “deriving some positive things from exile and marginality”<sup>25</sup> as it contains “unending self-discovery.”<sup>26</sup> Identity crisis, or pursuit of self-recognition essentially marks the life of an exile. An exile cannot just end up leaving behind one kind of life and start living another in a faraway country. Settling down at a new place implies a multitude of problems and therefore, an exile often has “an unconventional style of life, and above all a different, often very eccentric character.”<sup>27</sup> Naipaul throughout his long writing career has portrayed a range of people, places, milieu and issues. Though himself changing and evolving from phase to phase, his focus has always been on “broken identities and discarded languages, and the will to bond oneself to a new community against the ever-present fear of failure and betrayal.”<sup>28</sup>

In *A House for Mr Biswas*, Mr Biswas is an exile in an alien society who yearns to be something great and a free man. William Walsh pithily sums it up: “The substance of the novel has to do with the transformation of Mr Biswas, a slave to place, history and biography, into a free man, the sign and realisation of that emancipation being his house.”<sup>29</sup> The narrative presents the marginal man’s attempts to carve out his own identity on an alien soil against the backdrop of his peculiar displacement and the disintegrating influences. One can discern in Mr Biswas’ efforts to have a house of his own, a genuine attempt to establish his identity in a foreign land and be free of dependency syndrome engineered in him by his affluent in-laws. Gordon Rohlehr opines that “independence is the ideal which Biswas seeks, and which he equates with identity.”<sup>30</sup> As a school boy living in mud hut, Mr Biswas avoids his schoolmates

<sup>21</sup> Aida Colon and Aida Luz Rodriguez, “V. S. Naipaul’s Half a Life: Memory and the Myth of Origin,” in *V. S. Naipaul: Critical Essays*, Volume 3, ed. Mohit K. Ray (London: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2005), p. 168.

<sup>22</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>23</sup> Edward Said, “Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals,” *Grand Street*, no. 47 (1993), p. 121.

<sup>24</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> Said, “Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals,” p. 377.

<sup>26</sup> Said, “Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals,” p. 380.

<sup>27</sup> Said, “Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals,” p. 379.

<sup>28</sup> Bharati Mukherjee, *Darkness* (Greenwich: Fawcett, 1992), p. xv.

<sup>29</sup> William Walsh, *V. S. Naipaul* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1973), pp. 31-32.

<sup>30</sup> Gordon Rohlehr, “The Ironic Approach to the Novels of V.S. Naipaul,” in *Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul*, ed. Robert D. Hamner (Chicago: Three Continents Press, 1977), p. 88.

to hide the humiliating reality of his dwelling, and angrily tells his mother, “I am going to get a job on my own. And I am going to get my own house too.”<sup>31</sup> Mr Biswas’ marriage with Shama and consequent shift to Hanuman House, increases for him the need to acquire a secure job and a house of his own. The narrator notices that Mr Biswas is determined to put the amount of insurance claim aside “until he had enough to build his house.”<sup>32</sup>

The longing for his own house gets intensified at Green Vale as Mr Biswas “had thought deeply about his house and knew exactly what he wanted. He wanted in the first place a real house, made with real materials”<sup>33</sup> to arrest his descent into the void.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, building a house becomes the little man’s only means to combat his lifelong fright of being lost in a dark world of nothingness. After his futile attempts to own a house, its final acquisition becomes the symbol of Mr Biswas’ identity and positive outlook. Kenneth Ramchand observes that “if Mr Biswas finds his world a deterrent to ambition, as well as engulfing and repulsive, the faith in life with which his author endows him ... is greater than the fictional character’s impulse to escape.”<sup>35</sup> Meenakshi Mukherjee regards *A House for Mr Biswas* as “the unaccommodated man’s repeated attempts to find a stable location in a ramshackle and random world.”<sup>36</sup> From the downtrodden position of “just nobody. Nobody at all,”<sup>37</sup> Mr Biswas struggles to establish his own identity. As the narrative unfolds, his mother-in-law, Mrs Tulsi demands a whole-hearted surrender of his self. Mr Biswas recognises the desperate need to attain freedom to rescue his family from the grasp of the Tulsis at Hanuman House.

The house becomes the very symbol of his freedom. Before his death at the age of forty-six at his Sikkim Street House, Mr Biswas realises: “How terrible it would have been, at this time, to be without it: to have died among the Tulsis, amid the squalor of that large, disintegrating and indifferent family ... to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one’s portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated.”<sup>38</sup> Mr Biswas protests against a system called ‘Tulsi-dom,’ that demands slavery; he asserts his freedom and carves out his identity and ultimately gets success unlike other Naipaul’s protagonists. Nondita Mason opines that the house Biswas acquires is “the grand symbol of his freedom, personal independence, pride and dignity...redeeming all his past trials, perhaps the very past itself.”<sup>39</sup> Though irony underscores his final attainment, the narrator captures Mr Biswas’ sense of satisfaction stating that “the wonder of being in his own house ... to walk in through his own front gate, to bar entry to whoever he wished, to close his doors and windows every night, to hear no noises except those of his family, to wander freely from room to room.”<sup>40</sup>

*A Bend in the River* deals with the theme of homelessness in the post-colonial African state as the terrifying conditions constrain the natives of the land to opt for the life in exile. M.

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<sup>31</sup> Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas*, p. 67.

<sup>32</sup> Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas*, p. 210.

<sup>33</sup> Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas*, p. 210.

<sup>34</sup> Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas*, p. 237.

<sup>35</sup> Kenneth Ramchand, *The West Indian Novel and its Background* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 204.

<sup>36</sup> Meenakshi Mukherjee, “A House for Mr Naipaul,” *Frontline*, vol. 18 (2001), p. 22.

<sup>37</sup> Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas*, p. 279.

<sup>38</sup> Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>39</sup> Nondita Mason, *The Fiction of V.S. Naipaul* (New York: World Press, 1986), p. 35.

<sup>40</sup> Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas*, p. 8.

F. Salat offers a glimpse into the history of this diasporic community in “Africa, the Dark Continent, offered lucrative business opportunities to the trading communities of coastal Gujrat ... in the 19<sup>th</sup> century they began to settle down and set up shops amongst the natives of the East and South Africa.”<sup>41</sup> Salim belongs to the diasporic community whose “past was washed away; there was always only the present”<sup>42</sup> which further increases his feeling of rootlessness. He concludes that for them “The world is what it is.”<sup>43</sup> Salim breaks away from the community believing that he could be master of his fate only if he stood alone: “One tide of history ... had brought us here ... Now another tide of history was coming to wash us away. I could no longer submit to Fate.”<sup>44</sup> Salim has little education, and is devoid of the religious sensibility which further aggravates his alienation as he says, “The insecurity I felt was due to my lack of true religion.”<sup>45</sup> Together with Indar, his friend, an intelligent son of a wealthy coastal moneylender, Salim feels as being left alone with no family, no moorings but appalled by the phenomenon of weird mimicry by “black men assuming the lies of white men,”<sup>46</sup> and almost in a quest for self-realisation, he puts aside inaction and decides to act.

Said observes that “exile is one of the saddest fates ... meant being a sort of permanent outcast, someone who never felt at home, and was always at odds with the environment, inconsolable about the past, bitter about the present and the future.”<sup>47</sup> Salim is an expatriate in the town by the bend in the river, and considers himself as an intruder in the place. Dissatisfaction, anxiety, solitude and restlessness mark his life like other expatriates living in the town. Throughout the novel Salim waits for some good place, “waiting for some illumination to come to me, to guide me to the good place and the ‘life’ I was still waiting for.”<sup>48</sup> Following the knowledge that Metty, the servant boy, has a family somewhere else in the town, Salim feels abandoned and wishes to return home, but instantly remembers the grim truth that “home was hardly a place I could return to. Home was something in my head. It was something I had lost.”<sup>49</sup> Later, during his interaction with Indar, Salim feels that both of them are highly sensitive to and conscious of the blankness that has enveloped their lives. In the words of the narrator: “some blank around which we both had to walk carefully. That omission was our own past, the smashed life of our community.”<sup>50</sup> Salim who has left his home to find a better life soon comes to perceive the reality of his situation. ‘Home’ is something that he has lost and the dream of a better life becomes illusory. “The man not of Africa lost in Africa, no longer with strength or purpose to hold his own,”<sup>51</sup> feels more insecure than before. Later Salim understands that in the town he stands for himself, accountable to nobody or nothing and has to survive in isolation which is contrary to the community life of discipline and rules. Detaching

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<sup>41</sup> M. F. Salat, “The End of the Beginning: A Note on the Afro-Indian Diaspora,” in *Theorizing and Critiquing Indian Diaspora*, eds Kavita A Sharma, Adesh Pal and Tapas Chakrabarti (New York: Creative Books, 2004), p. 168.

<sup>42</sup> Naipaul, *A Bend in the River*, p.16.

<sup>43</sup> Naipaul, *A Bend in the River*, p.17.

<sup>44</sup> Naipaul, *A Bend in the River*, p.22.

<sup>45</sup> Naipaul, *A Bend in the River*, p.16.

<sup>46</sup> Naipaul, *A Bend in the River*, p.18.

<sup>47</sup> Said, “Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals,” p. 371.

<sup>48</sup> Naipaul, *A Bend in the River*, p.110.

<sup>49</sup> Naipaul, *A Bend in the River*, p.124.

<sup>50</sup> Naipaul, *A Bend in the River*, p.124.

<sup>51</sup> Naipaul, *A Bend in the River*, p. 144.

himself from his community has also meant stripping himself off “the support the rules gave.”<sup>52</sup> It is a place where the life of everybody is devoid of solidity. The floating hyacinths on the Congo River in particular symbolise this.

Said regards Salim as an effective instance of the “modern intellectual in exile: an East African Muslim of Indian origin, he has left the coast ... lived life at a bend in the river as a sort of no-man’s land ... gradually losing his property and his integrity in the mounting confusion.”<sup>53</sup> His final journey with the other co-passengers of a steamer together with the ones that preceded it, are parts of “a longer journey through life, through history, into larger and larger spirals of exile and loss”<sup>54</sup> or perhaps, as Fausto Ciompi thinks, they are moving towards “nothing but mere biological survival and meaningless wandering.”<sup>55</sup> In search of peace and stability everybody wants to leave the place but nobody knows where to go. In the post-colonial world full of refugees like Salim and Indar, questions as “do they go back home? Do they have homes to go back to”<sup>56</sup> become redundant.

*Half a Life* brings into focus Willie Somerset Chandran who, much like the author, leaves his homeland at an early age and comes to London to fulfil his ambition. But unlike his creator he fails to pursue a successful literary career, marries Ana to make an easy escape to a Portuguese colony in East-Africa where he spends eighteen years of a shadowy existence until he is seized by the necessity of having an identity of his own. *Half a Life* ends with his departure from Africa, leaving his wife behind to join his sister Sarojini in Berlin. In the quest of his self, Willie comes back to India following the suggestions of his sister, and joins a communist revolutionary group but gets disenchanted.

Since his very birth Willie Somerset Chandran is destined to live with a feeling of incompleteness. His name is indicative of a different kind of incompleteness. The opening chapter begins with Willie asking his father the reason of his being named thus; Willie Somerset Chandran is neither wholly a Christian nor wholly a Hindu name. The hybrid name denoting a double identity suggests how the protagonist is destined to have “half a life.” Unlike the great writer Maugham, Willie fails to pursue a successful literary career as he writes only one book which he himself admits is “artificial and false.”<sup>57</sup> Later, in Africa, he mimics the role of husband as the mimicry that is latent in his name, marks his performance and activities. While studying at the Canadian mission school, he gradually becomes hateful of the ‘halfness’ of his existence, particularly his mixed parentage. He is full of hatred against his mendicant father and equally hates the prospect of being branded like his mother as ‘backward’ by going to a mission school. Therefore, in order to escape the shame and ‘halfness’ of his life, he sets his target to somehow get away from there but profoundly unhappy all the time, feeling that “everything in the world is so sad.”<sup>58</sup> His sadness gradually becomes overwhelming as his father finds it difficult to forget “the picture of the ambitious, defeated boy sleeping face down

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<sup>52</sup> Naipaul, *A Bend in the River*, pp. 208-209.

<sup>53</sup> Said, “Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals,” p. 371.

<sup>54</sup> Chandra B. Joshi, *V. S. Naipaul: The Voice of Exile* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1994), p. 214.

<sup>55</sup> Fausto Ciompi, “The Politics of Fluidity in A Bend in the River,” *The Atlantic Critical Review*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2002), p. 35.

<sup>56</sup> Naipaul, *A Bend in the River*, p. 279.

<sup>57</sup> Naipaul, *A Bend in the River*, p. 279.

<sup>58</sup> Naipaul, *Half a Life*, p. 123.

with the dead old school text of *The Vicar of Wakefield* beside him.”<sup>59</sup> Senior Chandran manages to find a scholarship for his son at a college for mature students in London. Willie leaves for London “with no idea of what he wanted to do, except to get away from what he knew, and yet with very little idea of what lay outside what he knew, only with the fantasies of the Hollywood films of the thirties and forties that he had seen in mission school.”<sup>60</sup>

In London Willie’s struggle is threefold. First, he has to adjust himself to London life, “re-learn” almost everything afresh. Secondly, he is “to create a myth of origin to control the dynamics of the stage on which he moves in London and Africa”<sup>61</sup> and finally he has to carve out an identity of his own. Willie starts learning the new cultural realities as “At the college he had to re-learn everything that he knew. . . had to learn how to eat in public . . . how to greet people . . . had to learn to close doors behind him . . . how to ask for things without being peremptory.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, Willie tries to learn the new cultural constructs and begins to discern the pretentious nature of London life. In order to adjust himself to the demands of the new world, Willie begins to “remake himself and his past and his ancestry.”<sup>63</sup> Like Ralph Singh in *The Mimic Men*, he starts feeling “free to present himself as he wished.”<sup>64</sup> Quite ironically as part of the process of “settling in” he starts to reconstruct the family history, and begins to speak of his mother “as a full Christian . . . he adapted certain things he had read, and he spoke of his mother as belonging to an ancient Christian community of the subcontinent, a community almost as old as Christianity itself.”<sup>65</sup> He kept his father as Brahmin and made his father’s father a ‘courtier’. So playing with words, he began to re-make himself, which gave him “a feeling of power.”<sup>66</sup> Thus, moving through cultures, Willie becomes, in the words of Salman Rushdie, one of the “translated men,”<sup>67</sup> and in London he nearly loses his heritage and past.

At this stage Willie himself wants to be divested of the past which is indicative of his “desperate search for an alternative identity.”<sup>68</sup> Willie dissipates himself in the immigrant-bohemian life of London, befriends Percy Cato, a Jamaican of mixed parentage, frequents prostitutes, and sleeps with Percy’s girlfriend June. Willie comes to London in search of completeness but ironically, he seems to lose that half of his life which he had so long possessed. The half-hearted pursuit of education fails to provide him with broader perspectives of life. When Willie realises that the old rules he has left behind at home no longer bind him in any way, he is left rudderless as it were. On the one hand displacement offers him the freedom but on the other it is precisely the same freedom that corrupts him as he resorts to falsehood and becomes disloyal to his friends. The taint of corruption is a common factor underlying the lives of almost all the displaced characters in Naipaul’s writings—Ganesh, Ralph Singh, Salim, Dayo. Willie is now a completely deracinated, rootless individual as he is lost. As a writer

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<sup>59</sup> Naipaul, *Half a Life*, p. 48.

<sup>60</sup> Naipaul, *Half a Life*, p. 50.

<sup>61</sup> Naipaul, *Half a Life*, p. 50.

<sup>62</sup> Naipaul, *Half a Life*, p. 51.

<sup>63</sup> Colon and Rodriguez, “V. S. Naipaul’s *Half a Life*,” p. 168.

<sup>64</sup> Naipaul, *Half a Life*, p. 59.

<sup>65</sup> Naipaul, *Half a Life*, p. 61.

<sup>66</sup> Naipaul, *Half a Life*, p. 61.

<sup>67</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 17.

<sup>68</sup> David Punter, “Diaspora and Exile, Arrival Addicted,” *Postcolonial Imaginings: Fictions of a New World Order* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 171.



Willie represents a comically dismal failure, and he can mock himself for this failure. In Africa though Ana retains her copy, Willie loses his one as he wishes to forget it.

About this failure of Willie, Naipaul says: “the true writer can deal with those difficult things,”<sup>69</sup> as does the writer in *The Enigma of Arrival*. In fact, Willie cannot deal with that turmoil and that is the important reason why his life takes the turns it does. Willie seems to illustrate Oscar Handlin’s view that “the history of immigration is the history of alienation and its consequences ... For every freedom won, a tradition lost ... For the gains of goods and services, an identity lost and uncertainty found.”<sup>70</sup> Willie’s alienation, his ambivalent position are largely caused by his living in a kind of in-between position, in a kind of half and half world from which ironically he cannot free himself whether in London or Africa where he becomes someone like a supervisor of Ana’s estate whose duty is to reinforce her authority upon those subordinate to her. Though Willie overcomes his initial fear of losing his language, the fear that haunts him almost always during his long stay in Africa, is the fear of losing his own identity. Such is the predicament of an exile that he has to experience the “translation” of his self and quite appropriately the chapter where Willie narrates his experience in Africa, is named “A Second Translation.” In Africa there is nothing he can claim his own as he lives in Ana’s land, speaks her language and mixes with her friends.

In an interview Naipaul states that “Willie’s problems are inextricably linked with his cultural displacement, not only that caused by his move away from India, but also by the ill-conceived mixed-caste marriage of which he is the product. It is not that he cannot love. He falls in love several times throughout the novel, but his feeling of alienation leads to an inability to feel he belongs anywhere and thus with anyone.”<sup>71</sup> Willie, much like Ralph Singh, mimics the role of a husband; what finally leads him to leave his wife Ana is his realisation that his decision of marriage has been part of his attempt to evade confrontation with his own self, and therefore, further continuation of that means losing his own life completely. But what saves him from living another man’s life is his decision not to accept the ‘halfness’ of his existence. Since his childhood Willie has been acquainted with living in such “half-and-half” position. In India because of his mixed-caste parentage he had been acquainted with such ‘halfness’ of existence. In London as a migrant once more he has to live “half a life.” Thus, in Africa once again, Willie lives in a fragmented or split world. Furthermore, the ‘halfness’ of his position - he has not been living fully his own life - leads Willie to experience a disintegration of self. He finds that his marriage provides him with no anchorage. Soon, like Ralph Singh, he drifts apart from his wife and indulges in mindless sex. He feels that “for almost no reason” he has been breaking something and putting an end to his close relationship with his “protector” in Ana. He persists in promiscuous pursuits and restlessly discovers “another kind of satisfaction,”<sup>72</sup> possibly because of his subconscious attempt to free himself from Ana, to assert the existence of his own self. Willie remains an incomplete man in several ways; he fails as a lover, as a

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<sup>69</sup> Joe Cuomo, “Question & Answer: V. S. Naipaul,” *The New Yorker*, 12 March (2001).

<sup>70</sup> Asha Choubey, “A Critique of Naipaul’s *Half a Life*: Searching for Identity in Limbo,” *V. S. Naipaul: Critical Essays*, Volume 1 (2005).

<sup>71</sup> Gillian Dooley, “Alien and Adrift: The Diasporic Sensibility in V. S. Naipaul’s *Half a Life* and J. M. Coetzee’s *Youth*,” *New Literature Review*, vol. 40 (2003), pp. 76-77.

<sup>72</sup> Naipaul, *Half a Life*, p. 189.

writer, and as a man in pursuit of self-recognition, because his life has been paralysed by the 'halfness' of his existence.

### **Conclusion**

In the light of the foregoing analysis it can be inferred that Naipaul's three protagonists—Biswas, Salim and Willie—negotiate the dilemmas of self and identity. Mr Biswas by owning a house carves out his authentic selfhood, Salim, the intellectual exile, discerns signs of identity in his lost cultural moorings, and Willie, though culturally displaced, asserts the existence of his self by rejecting the "halfness" of his life. These protagonists manifest Naipaul's constant engagement with the diaspora world peopled by 'exiles' who experience cultural dislocation and "broken identities" triggered by the feeling of homelessness and "in-betweenness"<sup>73</sup> and go through the rigmarole of securing an idea of self and identity.

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<sup>73</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 3-4.