DISILLUSIONED CONCEPT OF HOME IN V. S. NAIPAUL'S *HALF A LIFE*

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Along with his harsh criticism of India and all the weaknesses and shortcomings the colonized nations have encountered as an unavoidable consequence of colonial activities and imperial ambitions of Western countries, Naipaul is both critical and supportive of the colonizing ideology *"for the horrors of slavery and for the problems it left its former colonies while praising it for bringing peace and modern thought to areas of the world that remained medieval and debilitated by continual local wars and destructive non-western invasions"* (King, 2003:4). As a prominent postcolonial writer, Naipaul maintains a search for identity in varied ways and is filled with the excitement of dislocation and a sort of exile to attain his unpreventable wish for a concrete identity. Attempting to create a new type of writing, he blended his Caribbean experiences with his own travels to Third World countries, writing on his experiences in culturally and socially corrupted backward societies.

Naipaul observes the colonial period from a wider perspective in the sense that he does not primarily put all the blame for slavery and imperialism on the Western ideology, he also voices how much African and Muslim countries are responsible for the crimes they brought to the colonized countries. That is why Naipaul did not react to the colonial ideology in the same way most Third World citizens did, since they considered Western colonizers as the source of their backwardness. Naipaul himself is of the idea that *"[i]mperialism can even be desirable if it brings order, peace, security and knowledge and raises people to a larger, more tolerant view of the world beyond their pretty local conflicts and limited vision"* (King, 2003:16). Naipaul's ambivalent attitude toward his own society and the Western colonizing ideology is a prominent characteristic of his writings. Naipaul's idea made him a controversial literary figure of the

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postcolonial period. His experiences in Trinidad and his ambivalent attitude "distanced him from the West Indies. Most of his novels and travel writing are devoted to minute dissections of the cultural paralysis (recalling Joyce) and the hypocrisies (recalling Conrad) of once-colonized nations" (Boehmer, 2005:168). Although he was not born in a metropolitan setting, he succeeded in being one of the great writers of British literature after moving to England in 1955, though he did not settle there permanently, as he was an ardent traveler to collect materials for his literary works. As Carter and Mcrea state, *"Naipaul is perhaps the clearest example of the changing cultural identity of Britain, of English, and literature in English"* (1997:529). He wrote a great many novels, from *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) to *Magic Seeds* (2004), of which many basic themes deal with problems of culture, identity, mimicry, and hybridity, and so forth. The last two of his novels are *Half a Life* (2001) and *Magic Seeds* (2004), sequential novels that tell the story of Willie Chandran, his self-dislocation, and ambivalent attitudes in his search for an identity, moving from one continent to another. His physical and psychological displacement from one place to another ends up unhomeliness which Bhabha explains as follows:

> To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the 'unhomely' be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres. … In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting. (1994:9)

In accordance with what Bhabha identifies about unhomeliness, throughout this chapter, the main point of my focus will be on the sense of heterogeneous ambivalence and dislocation of the main character, that is, a sort of self-exile and estrangement connected to multi-dislocation, a typical colonized young man Willie's search for identity and his struggles to find a home for himself. Willie himself is in a constant search for his identity by experiencing unhomeliness and a sense of belonging due to his ambivalent dislocation between India, London, and an unnamed country in Africa. His rootlessness and attempts to find a fixed place and identity force, Willie, into a complex situation as he tries to resolve terms of finding a home, fixed identity, and a sense of belonging. Wherever Willie travels he feels as if he is in psychological exile as a result of a recurrent sense of unhomeliness and his feeling of not belonging anywhere. Naipaul experiences a strong sense of dislocation related to his social and familial background in the West Indies. His sense of dislocation is visible as being an immigrant in the bohemian literary

circles of London, then during his search for a new identity in an unnamed African community. *Half a Life*—the title of the novel—is also a symbolic title in its representation of the incomplete life of Willie Chandran in his search for his ideal cultural identity that had always been shadowed by the cultural values of the Western ideology. *Half a Life* is, moreover, a fragmented life story of the main character, who is also an authentic representation of Naipaul. Most readers criticized Naipaul's sympathy for the Western ideology, and most critics were similarly critical of him for being an ardent supporter of the colonizing mindset. One of those who criticized Naipaul was Edward Said, who defended the opinion that Naipaul *"carries with him a kind of half-started but finally unexamined reverence for the colonial order. That attitude has it that the old days were better when Europe ruled the coloureds and allowed them few silly pretensions about purity, independence, and new ways"* (Rath, 2001:167). Naipaul's ambivalent stance towards both the colonizer and the colonized—despite many difficulties he encountered in England—seems to have provided him a secure position to write about both sides—namely, the West and the Third World countries.

A new phase of world order that followed the colonial period was the era of decolonization when most of the colonized countries gained their independence partly or completely as a result of power shifts between the settlers and the colonized nations. As Frantz Fanon argues in *The Wretched of The Earth*, "[d]ecolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder" (1963:36). Out of this disorder emerged a chaotic atmosphere in most of the colonized nations in tandem with the local disturbances, civil disobediences, and social unrest in terms of cultural and national identities. Along with all these socially turbulent occurrences, there appeared a sort of displacement and dislocation within Third World nations willingly or reluctantly with the enforcement and as well as the encouragement of colonizing settlers. *Unhomeliness* is a term appropriated into postcolonialism by Homi Bhabha. This originally "German word *unheimlich* is obviously the opposite of *heimlich***,** *heimlich,* meaning 'familiar,' 'native,' 'belonging to home'; and we are tempted to conclude that what is 'uncanny' is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar" (Rivkin and Ryan, 1998:154). *Unhomeliness* arises as a term for interrogating and investigating uncanny feelings behind immigrant lifestyles, and Willie's attempts along with his mobility from one country to another start with his questioning of self-identity. Born into an unstable colonized country, a sort of estrangement to his familial background and his sympathy for the colonizer's mindset compelled him to

experience a solitary life in different countries where the colonized diaspora communities always remain with their desperation, futility, and failure about their pursuit for home and identity. As Bhabha claims in *The Location of Culture* (1994): *"[t]he negating activity is, indeed, the intervention of the 'beyond' that establishes a boundary: a bridge, where 'presencing' begins because it captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world—the unhomeliness—that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations"* (p. 9). What Bhabha explains in the quote above accounts for the experiences that Willie has in various locations.

In that sense, Willie's estrangement starts with his early realization of realities about his self and his social, cultural, and religious assets of colonial Indian society. *"Willie Chandran asked his father one day, 'Why is my middle name Somerset?' The boys at school have just found out, and they are mocking me'"* (Naipaul, 2001:3). A hybrid name being comprised of the name of a British author and his Indian name, drifts Willie into an irrevocable journey toward a search for his "half life," first in his own country, then in the Metropolitan, and then in an unnamed African country. Willie is, of course, not satisfied with the whole story his father tells him about how he was named after a famous British author, and his father's devotion to the Brahmin caste system and his marriage with a woman from a low caste—namely a backward Indian community. Willie's estrangement is strongly connected to his father's turbulent lifestyle and his uprooting from the caste system, which is considered a rebellion in the deep-rooted Indian cultural system. Willie was born into a sort of uprooted family—uprooted from social norms and cultural values—which leads Willie into a *"half life,"* and the story his father tells him widens the psychological gap in Willie's mind. *"All my anxiety, when little Willie was born, was to see how much of the backward could be read in his features"* (Naipaul, 2001:33). Mr. Chandran is well aware that his son was born into a backward caste with a low social status. He acknowledges that his marriage with a woman from a lower caste puts his son's life in danger in his community. *"A little later, as he started to grow up, I would look at him without saying anything and feel myself close to tears, I would think, 'Little Willie, little Willie, what I have done to you? Why I have forced taint on you?'"* (Naipaul, 2001:33) The taint—as his father confesses—plays a crucial role in Willie's cultural and religious identity as well as the search for his self-identity. Willie Chandran makes up his mind because he felt betrayed by his father and his caste, and he responds accordingly. The moment his dad finishes his background story, Willie's estrangement toward his family grows bigger and bigger as he says, *"What is there for me in what you*

have said? You offer me nothing" (Naipaul, 2001:35). He realizes that neither his familial background nor the culture he has been raised in will be able to serve as a sound shelter for him when considering his caste and race. Colonial hegemony, on the one hand, forms social, racial, and cultural barriers and, on the other hand, does not protect Willie, which is the prominent motive behind his self-exile. Willie himself has always been regretful about his life and family in the low-caste community. During his early days at mission school, he has been inclined to turn his back to his family as the school is for backward *"who would not have been accepted at the local school for people of caste"* (Naipaul, 2001:36). That is, there is a huge barrier between the castes. This situation appears to lead to severe discrimination between people of different castes.

Willie's motivation to separate from his homeland, find a secure location for his future, and erase his past originated from his wish not to find employment, not to become an ardent member of his colonial diaspora, or his quest for a good fortune, but his priority to start a new life in a socially, culturally, and politically developed country. *"The feeling of being caught between cultures, of belonging to neither rather than to both of finding oneself arrested in a psychological limbo that results not merely from some individual psychological disorder but from the trauma of the cultural displacement within which one lives that Homi Bhabha coined as unhomeliness* (Tyson, 2006:421). Unhomeliness does not necessarily mean that one does have a shelter to reside but a sort of identity problem that drifts any immigrant into a certain psychological process. It is a process between what is known and what is unknown, a situation leading to a sense of belonging nowhere:

> And that was how, when he was twenty, Willie Chandran, the mission school student who had not completed his education, 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 at the mission school, went to London. (Naipaul, 2001:49)

Naipaul highlights that Willie is not mature enough to decide what is right or wrong, yet what he is determined to do is to get away from the knowledge he has picked so far in his own country. Willie's escape from India and his knowledge about a foreign country are all about the virtual realities he has seen in Hollywood movies which were imposed on him at mission school, and he is not mature enough to discern between reality and illusion without experiencing them personally. Willie considers his journey to London as an escape from his unfortunate past and an unprecedented opportunity to gain a kind of freedom

away from the inferiority complex of the colonized subject in a colonized country like India. Bhabha states, *"To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the 'unhomely' be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres"* (1994:9). This psychological phenomenon of feeling unhomely which Willie experiences throughout his travels across the continents follows him like a shadow and his time in London does not serve as an escape from his own reality of being an inferior individual even in developed countries such as England.

As John Mcleod claims in *Beginning Postcolonialism* (2000): *"[let] us probe deeper how 'home' is imagined in diaspora communities. The concept of 'home' often performs an important function in our lives. It can act as a valuable means of orientation by giving us a sense of our place in the world. It tells us where we originated from and where we belong* (p. 210). The description of "home" by McLeod is visited and revisited by Willie along with his identity in almost all the settings in which he takes his journey with the expectation of finding a secure place. As an indigenous colonized subject, Willie has had scanty information about London and almost no experience of a foreign country. His quest for a stable and secure home disappoints him in completely alien surroundings—not only alien in its literal sense but socially and culturally unknown to him. Of course, Willie's first impression of the city is very important in that the sense of belonging he experiences there would greatly influence his life: Naipaul states in *Half a Life* (2001), *"He knew that London was a great city. His idea of a great city was of a fairyland of splendor and dazzle, and when he got to London and began walking about its streets, he felt let down"* (p, 50). Willie's new life in London is a matter of his adaptation to his new surroundings regardless of his previous life. He is able to hide his true identity and his past, which he considers embarrassing, and to start a new way of life that fits the requirements of the Western ideology. *"The only two places he knew in the city were Buckingham Palace and Speaker's Corner. He was disappointed by Buckingham Palace. He thought that the maharaja's palace in his own state was grander, more like a palace ..."* (Naipaul, 2001:50). Willie's initial disappointment with the places that he knew before his arrival was the impetus for his comparisons of places and people around to those of his own state. As an expatriate from a Third World country in London, Willie, on the one hand, tries to get rid of his past, yet on the other hand, he finds himself comparing or contrasting his new environment in Metropolitan London with that of his Third World surroundings. His prejudices about a Western country create an ambiguous sense of belonging, a sort of estrangement, and a feeling of

unhomeliness that can be observed throughout his experiences in and out of England. Willie has always witnessed the superiority of the colonizer, saw their civilized aspects in movies, and learned different things from them at mission schools. That is why his prejudices and expectations clash with what he observes along London streets and result in his disappointment.

As a postcolonial writer Naipaul depicts his character in line with his own experiences and perspective that *"has been shaped by the humiliation of his youth; it is also influenced by his consciousness of being Indian and the humiliations India and Indians suffered"* (King, 2003:16). Willie's humiliation originates out of two main reasons: being a colonized young man from a lower caste and being a solitary member of the Indian diaspora in a culturally and racially different country. Between the two extreme poles of psychological existence, Willie's efforts to create a new self in his college environment serve to produce a new identity and help him to forget about his background, which he considers extremely embarrassing. In his attempts to write stories, he became acquainted with people and different editors in literary circles, and his wish to write about his experiences grew more and more. When Willie is about to finish with his book, which Roger recommended him to write, there breaks out a race riot against the blacks in London and causes a disturbance for him because black people are considered to be a menace for the native white population in London. This event triggered the sense of unhomeliness in Willie, and events grew bigger in the streets full of angry mobs protesting black presence there: *"Because that weekend the race riots began in Notting Hill*" (Naipaul, 2001:102). During the events, hostility against the non-Western black population causes the death of some of them and this racial tension leads African and Indian people to feel homeless.

This feeling of unhomeliness takes over Willie just like the scary feeling of Maharaja's gang in India. *"He felt the newspapers were about him. After this, he stayed in the college and didn't go out. This kind of hiding was not new to him. It was what they used to do at home when there was a serious religious or caste trouble"* (Naipaul, 2001: 103) in which many people were killed or uprooted as a consequence of ethnic and religious rage between the different castes. Willie's character development is in-between his homely colonial past—which had never existed in his home due to his self-estrangement toward his own family and society—and his postcolonial presence that is an unborn condition in terms of culture and identity in his present residence—London. Owing to the racial riots and killings in Notting Hill, Willie's sense of unhomeliness revisits him once more before he completes his adaptation to the

social, cultural, and psychological medium of his new surroundings. His efforts to find his own identity and to discover his sense of belonging are prevented by the riots taking place in some parts of England*: "I don't know where I am going. I am just letting the days by. I don't like the place that's waiting for me at home. For the last two and a half years I have lived like a free man"* (Naipaul, 2001:110). Willie associates his new surroundings with his freedom from his past and hometown, which he considers as problematic, and a large part of his life experience that he wants to forget. Normally, home is associated with something positive and acceptable; however, Willie's sense of home and belonging somehow has been disturbed by his experiences and destroyed by the idealization of the colonizer's cultural values and way of life.

As unhomeliness is the opposite of feeling secure and results in uncanny feelings that refer to feelings of neither accepting nor rejecting somewhere as a home, experiencing such thoughts makes Willie an unstable individual in his search for a home that seems to be far in the distance due to the social and political unrest in tandem with the racial tension in the country. His sense of exile is mixed with his feeling of an escape from the past, which Willie clarifies as such: *"I can't go back to the other thing. I don't like the idea of marrying someone like Sarojini, that's what will happen if I go home. If I go home I will have to fight the battles my mother's uncle fought"* (Naipaul, 2001:110). What Willie emphasizes here is his sense of not belonging to his home country—a psychological posture that drifts him into literally creating his sense of unhomeliness yet setting off a new journey to overcome this issue and create a new identity completely different from his previous one. *"If I get my teaching diploma and decide to stay here and teach it will be a kind of hiding away. It wouldn't be nice teaching in a place like Notting Hill. That's the kind of place they would send me … It would be worse than being home"* (Naipaul, 2001:110). In his metaphorical displacement or exile, as is the case for Naipaul, Willie feels himself a part of literary bohemian circles—an intellectual environment where he is a would-be member: *"While exiles are people—often writers and intellectuals—who are granted individual definition, one conventionally speaks of communities of exiles cemented with an obsession with home, their memories, their grievances, and their idealism"* (Nixon, 1992:22). Willie has the intention of being or feeling like an individual in exile who has obsessions with his background and unfavourable memories stemming from his own social and cultural background.

Willie's uneasiness in the West can be taken into consideration as a motivation in his search for a secure place and find out his immature cultural,

national, and personal identity. Upon Percy's departure, one of his best friends, as a consequence of racial riots and killing that Percy regarded as a menace, *"Willie thought, 'Humiliation like this awaits me here. I must follow Percy. I must leave"* (Naipaul, 2001:114). He regards his existence as a humiliation as a member of the black population and plans to leave the country in that his sense of unhomeliness revisits him once more. *"Willie could only go back to India, and he didn't want that. All that he had now was an idea—and was like a belief in magic—that one day something would happen, an illumination would come to him, and he would be taken by a set of events to the place he would go"* (2001:114). The extract from the novel indicates that Willie has lost his confidence in living there, and his ambivalent feelings of unhomeliness encourage him to leave and find a more secure place out of Britain. The meaning of exile, according to Bhabha, is the *"scattering of the people that in other times and other places, in the notions of others, becomes a time of gathering"* (1994:291). These gatherings are the results of social, cultural, and political developments in colonized lands yet do not necessarily supply all Third World subjects with what they expect from this displacement.

When Willie is alone and desperate in a foreign country, he receives a letter from Ana, a Portuguese African girl who has read one of Willie's stories and felt a need to write and meet him: *"I feel I had write to you because in your stories for the first time I find moments that are like moments in my own life, though the background and materials so different"* (Naipaul, 2001:116). Although Willie knows nothing in detail about Ana's background and has his own hesitations to meet her, not wanting to let her down, he accepts to meet her, and "[h]e was entranced by the girl and over the next few weeks learned to love everything about her: her voice, her accent, her hesitation over certain English words, her beautiful skin" (2001: p, 118). Willie's unconditional acceptance of Ana leads them to develop a love affair, and he becomes willing to learn more about Africa and her life there. Willie's enthusiastic curiosity about Africa and the African way of life could be associated with his own colonial past. He finds himself much closer to that way of life to adapt to living there without having much of the difficulty that he has experienced in England: *"He encouraged Ana to talk about her country. He tried to visualize the country on the eastern coast of Africa, with the great emptiness as its back"* (2001: p, 119). Willie is well aware of the fact about Africa as a colonial continent, and he can visualize it without knowing much about its history except traces of colonialism and the backwardness of its people. Most colonial countries share a common fate of colonial past and the concepts of being civilized and developed are somehow

away from those lands even today, and Willie is able to differentiate between illusion and reality in his visualization of this unnamed African country.

Willie makes up his mind about going to Africa, and when he tells Ana about his idea, her hesitation indicates that Willie might have difficulty adapting to a vastly different way of life in another colonized country. However, Willie himself is sure that his existence in England will be much more challenging, and it would be hard to survive in such a socially and politically disturbing place. His sense of belonging encourages him to go to Africa and set out for a new journey to find another place as a home. Just like Naipaul—as a son of a migrant family in Trinidad, which they had always considered as a place of opportunities yet never went beyond an illusionary place in terms of chances—Willie himself has always been let down by the opportunities England has provided for him and immigrant minorities. Therefore, he decides on a new route for Africa. *"When they next met he said, 'Ana, I would like to go with you to Africa.' ... She said nothing. A week or so later he said, 'You remember what I said about going to Africa?' Her face clouded. He said, 'You've read my stories. You know I've nowhere else to go. And I don't want to lose you'"* (Naipaul, 2001: 122-23). Willie's determination originates from his uneasiness in England where he has been exposed to discrimination, isolation, and alienation, yet Ana's hesitation is mainly based upon the challenging lifestyle which she thinks Willie will have difficulty integrating into. With these questions and hesitations in mind, Willie and Ana leave from Southampton, and Willie finds himself having complicated feelings and thoughts, as he has much to ponder over: his book, his English, and a new language he will have to learn, his new destination, and so on. This time, he is taking a journey opposite to the one he took three years ago when he was travelling to England for his education at Oxford. Willie himself knows well that despite all unfavorable conditions he has experienced in England, again it was England that provided him with the freedom of his college education and ability to write books.

In conclusion, the sense of displacement or experiencing the sense of being in exile that the protagonist perceives contributes to the ambivalent feeling of unhomeliness not particular to the sense felt outside the home or hometown. Rather, it is the feeling that refers to Willie's complicated sense of belonging wherever he takes his journey but never meets his expectations to find a cozy place to settle. His quest for the right place as his home never concludes as he is drifted from one country to another. In other words, the protagonist never reaches his ambition of finding the nostalgic concept of home, so experiences a miserable notion of unhomeliness. In *Half A Life,* Willie Chandran's search for

an ideal home does not provide him a complete life unified with his expectations of finding a home, an overall identity, and a concrete sense of belonging. His sympathy towards the Western culture and his acceptance of the Western world as a comfortable zone do not come true as he dreams before he leaves his Third World life in India. Is it possible for Third World citizens to avoid this ideally presented Western culture? The manipulation of cultural values and presentation of the West as a civilized location to maintain an ideal life has always been influential on subjugated people. With the influence of this understanding, it triggers a kind of desire to migrate to the Empire. In order to justify this physical and psychological migration, most immigrants prefer rejecting their rooted culture or remaining indifferent to their traditional norms. With his fluctuated feelings of belonging and highly developed sense of homelessness, Willie's ambivalent dislocation drifts him from the Empire to the Portuguese African colony and then back to Europe. None of these places gives him the sense of home or terminates his loss of the feeling of belonging. His sense of belonging is disturbed by the presence of Indians, Bangladeshis, and Pakistanis in England. His decision of leaving England with an African girl to find a more secure home ends up with his disillusionment and humiliation as a result of guerrilla war in an unnamed Portuguese colony in Africa. Willie's disillusionment and humiliation originate from his sense of the rooted Third World traditional lifestyles, the turmoil and instability caused by the guerrilla wars, and his loss of a sense of belonging. All these related instruments contribute Willie to develop his sense of unhomeliness. As Naipaul acknowledges, the sense of belonging and the feeling of unhomeliness is visited and revisited due to the strong connection and feeling of Indianness.

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