

## Minority Subjects at the Juncture of Identity and Agency in Four Novels by V.S. Naipaul

الأقليات عند منعطف الهوية والوكالة، دراسة في أربع روايات بقلم و. س. نيبول

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Abstract	Article info
<p>Comparing and contrasting Pratt's idea of 'anti-conquest' with Said's notion of 'voyage-in', this paper has attempted a reading of four novels by V.S. Naipaul to assess the formation of identity for the minority Indian subjects who undertake the journey to the metropolitan center. In particular, it aimed to show that Naipaul highlights the significance of place in this respect by applying the strategy of 'negation' of the center, using it as a means of writing back to the same center in depicting two kinds of identities formed for his characters. Contrary to the perspectives stressing Naipaul's advocating of an individualistic sensibility in his works, this article proved that he favors a collectivist approach. Hence, in his view, those subjects who are competent to get a grasp of their real identity in the world by reverting to their own culture and community are able to become agents of their cultures.</p>	Received 15/01/2024
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	<p><b>Keyword:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Anti-conquest:</li> <li>✓ Identity Formation:</li> <li>✓ Metropolis:</li> <li>✓ Minority Communities:</li> <li>✓ Voyage-in:</li> </ul>

المخلص	معلومات المقال
<p>قام هذا البحث بدراسة التشابه والتباين لمفهوم "ضد القح" عند ماري لوبيس برات و"الرحلة الذاتية" حسب نظرية إدوار سعيد، من خلال تحليل أربع روايات للروائي و. س. نيبول. هذا ويهدف تقييم تشكيل الهوية للأقليات الهندية التي تبادر إلى الرحلة إلى المراكز الحضارية الكبرى. بشكل خاص، سعى البحث إلى إظهار أن نيبول يبرز أهمية المكان في هذا الشأن من خلال تطبيق استراتيجية "النفي للمركز". ويستخدم هذه الإستراتيجية كوسيلة للكتابة المضادة لنفس المركز في تصوير نوعين من الهويات والتي تشكل شخصيات رواياته. وعلى النقيض من وجهات النظر التي تبرز دعوة نيبول للحس الفردي في أعماله، أثبتت هذه المقالة أنه يفضل نهجا جماعيا. وبالتالي، في رأيه، أن الأفراد- الذين هم متمكنون على إدراك هويتهم الحقيقية في العالم بالرجوع إلى ثقافتهم ومجتمعهم الخاص- قادرون على أن يصبحوا وكلاء لثقافته</p>	تاريخ الارسال: 2024/01/15
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## 1. Introduction

The movement of people, more specifically, the voyages in and out of colonial subjects and the metropolitan agents to and fro the periphery and the center, has been an important feature in characterizing and establishing the relationship between the two sides. Prior to the conquest of “primitive” lands, an influx of people from the center undertook the toughness of the journey to the fringes of the world to “discover” new worlds and find new ways of annexing new lands or bending their people culturally to the mother country. This has been a non-stop process even in the post-independence era up to the present time. On the other hand, there have been a large majority of people who have been uprooted as a consequence of the discoveries and ventures of the previous group, who have also been sent as slaves and workers to other parts of the world, even to the mother country.

Mary Louis Pratt’s term “anti-conquest” as referring “to the strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony” (Pratt 1993, 7) is contrasted and paralleled with Edward Said’s concept of “voyage-in”. By “anti-conquest”, Pratt emphasizes representation and agency for the European subjects overseas. Said’s definition of “voyage-in” bears out the hypothesis, here, about the importance of the intellectuals’ representative role and their agency for subject people. His agents of “voyage-in” are “figures who address the metropolis by using the techniques, the discourses, the very weapons of scholarship and criticism once reserved exclusively for the Europeans, now adapted for insurgency or revisionism at the very heart of the Western center” (Said 1993, 29).

In his narratives of journeying, Naipaul consciously focuses on the moment of arrival of (former) colonial migrants to the metropolis. For him, the consequences of travel in expanding the outlook of subject people are more significant than the mere act of travelling. Travel in his works varies from forced migration, i.e. exile, to (self-)expatriation and diaspora, which is mostly concerned with the issue of place/displacement in building

up an identity for his characters. The relevance of three kinds of life—the traditional life of their community, the host country's methods of life, and finally the life of the Western agents—in the subject characters' formation of identity is unquestionable. The later generations of minorities have the chance of indulging in the life of the metropolitan center, which the previous generations lacked because they were obsessed with the two-fold life of diasporic communities.

This paper, thus, attempts to trace the movement and migration of second and third generations of minority Indian people from the margins to the center and to examine the identity politics of these characters by tracing the question of agency and by probing the relevance of geography and history in the construction of specific forms of identity for them. Especially in this current conjuncture—which has generated a more intensive interaction between people than in the post-independence era—this undertaking is of greater importance.

## ***2. Coalesced Identities through Reception of the Center***

Working during school holidays in Iran—a considerably long period of three months—was not an unusual thing for the students of my age in late 1980s. This was a time concurrent with the atrocious Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988). As a result of the prolonged war the policy of the then government was to promulgate the virtues of thrift and hard-work. A large part of this mission was to be fulfilled in raising a generation respecting and practicing such virtues, by devoting a substantial amount of the Children's Channel's productions picturing these ethics. There was one such animation depicting a boy of my age, who was sent by his father to learn a job, and to 'earn a living or bread' as it was said at that time, when there was no concern for child labor. The boy in complicity with a sympathetic mother pretended that he was going to work, while playing in the alleys with a fiver given by his mother to present to the strict father at the end of the day as his wage. The conclusion was not that hoped by the mother and the son, since as soon as he produced the money, his reticent father threw it into the fireplace. This was repeated everyday and the child's only reaction was to whine and protest, nothing more.

Then the day came when our hero really found a job and earned his own money. The same reaction was shown by the father. This time the boy could not stand seeing his money burning down to ashes in the fireplace and attempted to take it out. It was only at this time that the sage father appreciated his son's attempts at securing the hard-earned money, the result of his own labor.

There are three kinds of identities entrenched in this story which I would like to extend to the identity formations of the minority characters in Naipaul's novels. First, it is the identity "given" or "granted" to the boy by his mother, as a lazy and spoiled child with the money in his pocket (or by the society or the imperial culture in the case of Naipaul's characters); second, the "fake" identity, the mask worn by the child (or the characters) in his (or their) immediate surroundings; and third, the identity "gained", something for which he (the character) has toiled, something he has hardly achieved and is reluctant to lose.

The fact that all types of agents belonging to the center have been active in pursuing a single aim, that is, promoting the state of their own country (culturally or economically), is well known in post-colonial theory. However, the problem arises when we want to talk about the agents or more properly individual subjects belonging to the periphery. They are in search of different things and it depends on the way they have made the journey, e.g. those who are expatriates have a different purpose for their movement compared to that of the exiled or the diasporic communities. The limitations imposed by geography and place upon the minority communities sow the seeds of departure to the metropolis in their minds, where there would be access to the wider world, dodging the limitation of the periphery. The colonial subject makes use of every friction with the wider world and its events to attach himself to it. In *Mystic (The Mystic Masseur)* Ganesh's first attempt in his initiation ceremony is to depict the Indian minorities' wish to rejoin the world, to escape from the cast-off state inflicted on them by the imperial process. Ganesh and such characters as Singh in *Mimic (The Mimic Men)*, Indar in *Bend (A Bend in the River)* and even Willie in *Half (Half a Life)*, in a sense, are similar (all have divided social identities). His loitering around the Wharf and his thought of leaving the island (Trinidad)—right after the quarrel with the teachers at school, as a consequence of which he loses his job—sounds remarkably like Singh's image of the boy waiting to be rescued by the ships, or Indar's wandering by the

Thames in England after failing to find a job. Willie is also dreaming of leaving India for England by reading *The Vicar of Wakefield*, facing down asleep on his bed. The coalesced identity, indicated at the title of this section, is apparent in the case of these characters just before departure to the metropolis. They have been raised in traditional Hindu families, but their dreams have been of England, or as Theroux (1972) mentions “The children have other fantasies, of Oxford, and New York [...]. On their island, in their ramshackle houses, the fantasists speak constantly of leaving” (Theroux 1972, 40). They have conceded to the transformation in their identities long before leaving for England. The emergent identity for them at the end of the stories is a merging of the two identities, (the inherited identity has given way to) the granted one by the metropolis and the masks they have worn as their identities in the world.

The fluidity of identity for the main characters makes it difficult to ascribe fixed identities to them, since in every phase or turn of their lives they adopt or take on a specific identity. No wonder, in the case of such characters as Willie, Singh, Indar, Salim and evidently Ganesh, long before departure to the metropolis, their Western identity-formation has already been initiated. It could be either the identity granted by the Western culture through education or transferred through the characters’ readings and scholarly undertakings, or the mask of an identity worn by them in their own societies and elsewhere. No trace of national identity could be seen for these characters, even for Singh who is a minister in the new nationalist multi-racial cabinet.

In his perceptive work on Naipaul, Weiss sees the reason for the fall of characters such as Ganesh in that they lose their “inner sense of self”; he sees only a set of masks through which their lives get only an exterior (Weiss 2022, 39). There is a long distance between Ganesh the mystic and the politician. Ganesh wears several masks in the story, whose initial function is to serve his own interests; moreover, he wants to cure the ills of the people around him. His degeneration begins when he grows to value only the material aspect of his job, when he tries to charge people an entrance fee to his ashram, the “exterior” of which is fabulous after renovation. His movement to Port of Spain, and later on to England (literally by his short visit to the mother country, and metaphorically through his changing allegiances), completes the degeneration process for him. He reverts to his

titles later on, granted by the British, and dons their clothing. We see a merge of identities for him, the granted one and the mask of an identity worn by the character himself. This mask is evident in the last scene of the novel in London when he takes on a new name: G. Ramsay Muir, to suit his surroundings. Hence, Ganesh's life and identity is seen to be centered around England and far from Trinidad.

The misconception about Ganesh is that he goes to England for good, but as the narrator of the novel asserts, in the very final page, he is on a short visit to London to attend a conference as a colonial statesman. The narrator's consciousness of Ganesh's state as a colonial is contrasted with that of Ganesh who takes himself as a British by bequeathing the title of MBE, and by representing and defending the mother country's interests in the UN. The structure of the story and its plot represent the course for Ganesh's identity formation. This is one of the rare cases in which the outcome of one of Naipaul's novels is actually the wrapping up of the events, while in most other works, the denouement is presented at the beginning or at the middle. The unfolding of the events toward the denouement, presented at the beginning, through the gradual culmination of single incidents, in those other works, depicts the subjectivity of the characters and their identity formation. Their open ending, at least, leaves the reader hopeful, for the characters' settlement may be in another place. But the ending of *Mystic* signifies the loss of Ganesh, the loss of hope for the pundit who was the receptacle of help for the destitute people of rural Trinidad.

If going native by adopting the culture and language of the primitive communities was a threat to the European individual and hence society, portrayed in canonical works of the center, how shall one read the reverse, i.e. the adoption of Western manners and mores by the Third World subjects in Naipaul's novels? Although in most of his works, especially in his non-fictions, Naipaul reviles such characters for their adoption of others' cultures and manners (whom he calls mimic men), he shows an admiration for them as long as they seem to be in control of their lives, and, against the past. Naipaul is hostile to the weak, no matter what the cause for their weakness is. He is critical of the idealization of weakness as it was promoted by the early agents of Western imperialism.



Naipaul does not conceal that he has washed his hands off such personages as Ganesh and later on Indar. Ganesh fits into the mould Hall suggests for identity, or more precisely, identification, that his identity seems to be a construction, never solidified into a whole form, hence always incomplete (Ashcroft et al. 2002, 218). The fact that he presents a malleable identity at different situations and settings shows his resilience. However, his final transformation or metamorphosis fixes his identity in two clear-cut shapes, defined as “coalesced” in this section. He is articulate enough to wear different masks for his identity at different stages of his variant occupational life. And the second identity is the one granted to him through the Western education he receives on the island. Ganesh is the progenitor for those characters who have transformed long before their leaving of the colony for the center. He even approaches the third kind of identity discussed in the boy and the fiver example above. However, his success in attaining this kind of identity is doubtful since he changes loyalties very soon and shows no willingness to preserve the things he has toiled to attain.<sup>i</sup> He is just a time-server looking for wind-fall opportunities.

Indar is also ill at ease with Indian culture, and after failing to find a job with the English committee, directs his hope towards his mother country, i.e. India. His consequent rejection by the India House in London leaves him in a desperate state of losing hope with the country which has not been protective of people like him and his fathers who have had to migrate to East Africa, and in his generation, to the metropolitan London. He shows his rage in the following way: “I felt in that building I had lost an important idea of who I was [...]. For the first time in my life I was filled with colonial rage” (2002a, 152). His rage is directed at England, at empire, but equally also at “the people who had allowed themselves to be corralled into a foreign fantasy” (ibid). How could people like Ganesh, and Indar be agents and representatives of their cultures as long as they are concerned with individual gains and losses? Agency by its nature requires an allegiance to an institution, group, tradition, state or even religion for whose benefits one turns to a life of action. Indar boasts of leading a life “without a side” (2002a, 153), which makes him sound remarkably like Naipaul himself, but one in whom the idea of refuting a side leads him to a life of inaction. His is a misunderstanding of identity formation, since he sees himself in the eyes of the Western admirers, as he illuminates on his warm reception by the American

sympathizers with the Third World: “Everything which I thought had made me powerless in the world had also made me of value, and [...] I was of interest precisely because I was what I was, a man without a side” (2002a, 154). We can only find his delusion later on in his own words, that he has been misled by those admirers, that he has invested too much in such admirers’ ideas, and has failed to see that they were not like him, people far from his miserable condition. Indar has no intention to correct his judgment of the world and instead reverts to a life of fantasy, of living in a cottage in a remote landscape.

Although Naipaul rarely favors a communal life and is mostly individualistic in the sensibility he advocates, he cannot show respect for such characters as Ganesh and Indar who seem to have lost their self-understanding. Their claims that they have found the true course in their lives are superficial by virtue of their volatile nature and because of easily changing their sense of selves. They seem to be representatives and agents for the diaspora and exiled groups, in the first glance, by their critiques of their mother country which has left them at the mercy of others, but their turning their backs on their societies makes it null and void.

The perpetual processes of exile and of personal exploitation are two of the consequences of colonization which permeate in the post-colonial or globalization eras in *Bend*. The characters in this novel, ironically, find refuge only in the country responsible for their exilic and diasporic states in the world. Lacking a meaningful identity, their identities are only to be found within the metropolitans’ eyes. They are satisfied with the marginal status given to them in the metropolis and misinterpret it for a true personality and individualization they have attained themselves. Indar’s state is a case in point. In his illusions he is personally exploiting himself, ignorant of the force of the institute or “the costume” which is really exploiting him. Cudjoe perceptively sums up the situation of people like Indar when he asserts that for them “The discovery of a social role does not coincide, therefore, with a discovery of self, rather it implies the adoption and maintenance of a mask” (Cudjoe 1988, 145). After his return from Africa to Europe, he is faced with a collapse of the identity he had long believed to be his by the bounty of the metropolis and his own education. He has invested too much in



attaching himself to the British culture but to no avail. When the costume gets wrapped up, people like Indar have no place to go.

With the exception of Nazruddin's and his family's migration in *Bend*, all the other migrations to the metropolitan center by Naipaul's protagonists are done 'individually'. Hence, only his journey along with his family can be taken as diasporic, since, according to Brah, it is concerned with the settling down and the putting roots of a 'group' in a place other than its home country (Brah, 1996, 182). For Nazruddin, identity, far from emerging as a product of the past, is embedded in the present, and is open to the prospects of the future. He is shown by the narrator to be a modern man, who has adopted the manners of the Europeans in the African country where he has settled his business. He has the philosophy of 'seizing the day', while also remembering to foresee the future as a merchant, the traditional job of the Indian diaspora in Africa. His consequent uprooting in Canada and England proves that his philosophy of life is no longer relevant to places where the virtues of truth and abiding by one's words only raise laughter and reveal the weakness of their practitioner. He is twice deceived in Canada and in England. His two ventures at securing a job, first, buying a Theatre in Canada, and then, investing in property in London, amount to nothing for him. He is deceived by the poor Third World immigrants who do not pay him rent, for whom he voices his concerns by disclosing to Salim "What were they doing in London? [...]. What place is there in the world for people like that?" (2002a, 255).

Nazruddin is a person who wants to live in one place with the traditions of another place. The irony is that his philosophy of life has been irrelevant to his own expatriate Indian community in Africa, therefore he was taken as an iconoclast. It is equally inappropriate in the West where he is told that he should return to the Indian Ocean with such a philosophy of trade. He has superficially picked up some mannerisms and styles (exterior things) of the Europeans but little seems to have changed in his mind after all the contacts he has had with the Europeans in Africa and in the West. He is like Salim who tries to disengage himself from the Indian community and its tradition, but who has to revert to the same tradition. This is akin to Hall's definition of identity which for him is something ethnically located by arguing that "our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are" (Ashcroft et al. 2002, 5).<sup>ii</sup> Nazruddin and some other characters in the selected

novels (namely, Willie, Sarojini, and Indar) attest to Hall's contention by being products of the socio-political and historical conditions in which they are born. For Salim there was a possibility of return to Africa, for Nazruddin there was none. He is much like Indar, both feel and experience the irrelevance of the West to their kind of life, both feel exclusion, a split of self and other-ness, but refuse to return home. Their identities are the result of the Western hegemony and the masks they have tried to wear as their identity in the world.

If agency is defined by action and the taking up of the responsibility of making changes, Singh's (early) life, even up to its political side, is barren. Lawrence Grossberg traces the history of the term. The definition which is of prime importance in his research is that of agency in cultural terms: "in broader cultural terms, the question of agency involves the possibilities of action as interventions into the processes by which reality is continually being transformed and power enacted" (Grossberg 1996, 99). Singh's life is full of moments which require his action, of taking measures, while he refuses to act. He declines to attend a match at school for which he had gone through a long preparatory process. He refuses to put himself in the place of the distressed Indian people who recount stories of their hackings to him, the Indian minister in the Cabinet. He resorts to his recurrent fantasy of the Indian horsemen on Gangetic plains and invites the distressed people to attend his dreams, unable to face the reality he resorts to imagination and fancy. He shows an inclination to create a new identity (mask) during his first travel to England as a student: "Coming to London, the great city, seeking order, seeking the flowering, the extension of myself that ought to have come in a city of such miraculous light, I had tried to hasten a process which had seemed elusive. I had tried to give myself a personality" (Naipaul 2002b, 32). His major phase of life is the one spent in a hotel in England as an exilic politician, where he goes through writing to the very beginning and to the origin of everything. It is at this stage that Singh conforms to Naipaul's philosophy of an agent of culture through writing.

Willie is also leading a half and half life as the title of the novel (*Half*) signifies. He is putting on a set of masks, most prominently in the university in England, to show his family's status in India higher than it really is. Willie carries India within him, but at the same time conforms to London expectations of him. He is led through the complicated and queer life of the metropolis by such men-about-town as Percy Cato, the Jamaican

boy, raised in Panama, and his girlfriend, June. It is June, who, like the other Western women in Naipaul's selected novels, leads the colonial subject (here Willie) from the immature state (in sex) to experience.<sup>iii</sup>

The conclusion, here, of Naipaul's major characters' ventures is that although Naipaul is known as an author who favors individualism, he finally finds an allegiance to a group as the most suitable ground for the identity formation of his characters.<sup>iv</sup> In a sense, self-understanding only gets meaning when performed within a context. This is somehow a restatement of Eric Fromm's assertion on freedom, quoted by Weiss, that "if freedom does not lead to involvement, 'freedom from' leads to new bondage" (Weiss 2022, 168). Hence, the agents discussed so far in this section, who are either preoccupied with their own affairs, or even if they come to a realization of their misfortunes and identities in the world, refuse to take constructive measures, cannot be good agents in Naipaul's epistemology.

### ***3. Demystification of the Center: Rejection of the Essence of Imperial Power***

There are many parallelisms used in Naipaul's oeuvre in terms of characters and events, and the one which is repeated is the compare and contrast between the two types of persons embarking on the journey to the motherland. But more than that, he uses the parallelism between the subjects of the center and those of the periphery in terms of the strategies taken by them in their contact with the agents of the other side. The rhetoric (or strategy) of "negation" undertaken by the West towards the Rest is one of them. Naipaul's characters who attempt a demystification of the center also adopt this technique.

The very presence of the (formerly) colonized subjects in the center is an interruption in the natural flow of life and culture in the metropolis, let alone their intellectual engagement with the culture of the metropolitan center. The geographical and historical movement of the diaspora could work as a metonym for the political and cultural process of "interpolation", which is termed by Edward Said as "voyage-in". Both these processes signify an active engagement with the dominant center, in their effort to transform the dominant center's conceptions of the periphery and to make the voice of the periphery heard. Said introduces "voyage-in" as the

sentient effort to “enter into the discourse of Europe and the West, to mix with it, transform it, to make it acknowledge marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories” (Said 1993, 261). This is an interruption in the flow of the dominant discourse by those agents of the subject nations who defy being passively receptive to the values and strategies of the center. This frontal engagement with the dominant discourse can be equated with the “negation strategy” of the center towards the periphery, and as Ashcroft contends “It is through this process of negation that they [Third World intellectuals who engage with the dominant discourse] are able to *become selves* as opposed to the identity of mere *others* that they inherit” (Ashcroft 2001, 48). This is more effective when the characters challenge the center from within the metropolitan space itself.

In *Mimic*, London is shown as the home to the exiled politicians of other colonial revolutions with whom Singh has some occasional encounters. In the concluding London section of the work, in his memoir, he asserts that “For those who lose, and nearly everyone in the end loses, there is only one course: flight. Flight to the greater disorder, the final emptiness: London and the home counties” (Naipaul 2002b, 6-7). This is to be contrasted with Indar’s assertion to Salim that “I belonged to myself alone and didn’t want to surrender my manhood to nobody, there was only one civilization for someone like me: London” (Naipaul 2002a, 151). Both feel rejected by their societies, and are conscious of the prevalent disorder there, but their attitudes towards the metropolis are divergent. While Singh rightly sees the defects of the center where the failures of the world seek refuge, Indar chooses to close his eyes to the prevailing injustice of the British in giving jobs to the migrants, and rather tries to pleasure himself with the magic of the big names of London places and factories he has heard all through his life.

Characters such as Indar are consistently making the same mistake in their attitudes towards life and in their consequent resolutions about it. His idea of trampling on the past was radical at the beginning, his reliance on Western civilization compounded his first mistake, and his final destitute state of exile and dream of returning home was the last flaw in his approach. He is trapped in a loop, an endless maze. Everything he does brings failure and greater withdrawal into the self. His flaw is that he thinks returning “home”, to a geographical entity, is the solution for a life of wandering and exile in an insecure world. But as Joshi asserts,

the problem of diaspora is not a geographical problem but a spiritual one (Joshi 1994, 170). The paradox in Indar's last attempt to return home is best shown in his own magnificent ten-page monologue at the center of the story where he says "Why do we want home? To hide?" (Naipaul 2002a, 152). How is it that he forgets his own assertion? Naipaul repeatedly expresses his disagreement with this character. It is no doubt an intentional attempt on the author's side to match the beginning and the ending of the novel with two similar statements and ideas expressed by his narrator, Salim. He approves and advocates living in the world the way it is, in the following extracts, one at the beginning and the other near the ending: "The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it" (Naipaul 2002a, 3); and, "There could be no going back, there was nothing to go back to, we had become what the world outside has made us, we had to live in the world as it existed" (Naipaul 2002a, 244). What he proposes as a solution to the problems of the diaspora seems to be privileging the idea of inaction, while his resolution is to evade looking for the sources of one's disillusionment only in the outside world.

Salim's vision is expanded through his contact with the Europeans in the Domain, the miniature Europe constructed in Africa. His introduction to it is through Indar, his schooldays friend, who is now a tutor there. He attends a night party given by Yvette, wife of the head of the Domain, Raymond. The "night" and the dim light indoors have mystifying effects on Salim. But the "daylight" reveals the defects to him, as Feder points out Salim finds the sham in the apparent grandeur of the Domain "built out of foreign greed and African opportunism" (Feder 2021, 231). Salim has a preparatory introduction to Europe in Africa long before his departure. He confesses that closeness to power through Yvette and Raymond has induced in him a sharper look "I could no longer consider statues and photos as background" (Naipaul 2002a, 185), unlike what he did at the beginning, by taking for granted the Belgian lady's (the ex-owner of his house's) artistic interest and in Father Huismans' time about the African masks and wood carvings, which to him were only pieces of wood. The Domain and its people are venerated for their ability to be in contact with the world, what is far-fetched for the people outside it, that is why Salim asserts that he had found the kind of life he had always wished (Naipaul 2002a, 129). This friction with the wider world also provides him with the ability to see the people most

involved with that world as people in need of guidance. He describes the Domain people as unreal people or tourists leading lives separate from that of the true life of the people around (Naipaul 2002a, 116). It means they were so detached that they could not have a correct idea of what was going on. After the party in the Domain, and after Indar's account of his life, Salim sees through his old friend's duplicity, that "I saw his style not created by him, more as a man touched by the glamour of the great world" (Naipaul 2002a, 156). Consequently, after a short-term guidance by Indar across the world which Salim had long been yearning to join, he feels that Indar is the one to be guided and in need of his help.

Salim also gets a better idea of his immediate surroundings by his contact with the Domain people. He hears Yvette, during the daylight which has revealed her disordered stuffy house, complaining about the Big Man's exaggerated idea of the needs of the Europeans. The Big Man's misunderstanding of the Europeans and their needs can only be equated with the misunderstanding by the agents of Europe about Africa and her inhabitants, at the time they erected magnificent monuments or through ideal agents like Father Huismans, and Raymond, of the vain hope in the future of Africa. He also detects Raymond's lack of knowledge about Africa through a professional critique of the latter's works. Indeed, it is worth asking if Salim finds so much about the Europeans and the Africans, how it is justified that he loses his property to the events of Africa. I believe that Naipaul could not put an end to his story at this stage, because it is in the nature of his writing to provide his (subject) characters with a center for self-discovery. Africa was not the center, it only furnished the way for the center which was England, that is why Naipaul brings up Salim's and Yvette's adulterous love affair into the story to detach his main character from the life around. Naipaul also wants to highlight the center's revealing power to the subject people. Salim goes to England to rejoin the world, to find a safe house. These are what he says, but deep down his intention for going there is only to assure himself of what he had previously found about it. His initial observation in London is enough to finish off all his excitements about Europe's grandeur. He says he craved for the "Europe to which gifted ones among us went, [the] airplane brought me to another Europe, something shrunken and forbidding, [...], hundreds of thousands of people like myself" (Naipaul 2002a, 229).



The problem with Naipaul and his characters is that they travel with set minds, and become disappointed when they fail to find what they have internalized about the places they have travelled to. They presume that they are in search of new and modern things while they are in search of what they lack within their own cultures. The only remedy they find is within their own way of life not within others' lifestyles. The characters' failures to find deliverance from their problems prove that the problem does not lie only in the society or in the surrounding environment, be it the Third World countries from which they come or the metropolitan center. Their restless minds come to a state of peace only when they come to realize that the source of almost all their misfortunes lies within themselves. That is why they are neither satisfied with their own countries nor with the center. The danger lying within such a philosophy is that it reduces the causes of the problems of the colonized to the lack of self-knowledge. No wonder colonization and the imperial processes have been largely influential in creating the state of mess for the minority communities. With the passage of historical processes, what remains to be done is not to grieve over them, but to try to be articulate in the face of the new hegemonic practices of the West.

Naipaul's selected stories like most of his fictional works draw on his autobiographical writings as we see reverberations of one of his early autobiographical pieces, "Conrad's Darkness" in *Mimic*, *Bend*, and finally *Half*. His view of the metropolitan center has not altered all through these years, encompassing his period of prodigious writing in the 1960s to the full maturity expected from a writer in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century. As he asserts in this article, London to which he migrates is no more than a mirage for the poor colonials who have invested their whole lives in the hope of finding fulfillment of their various dreams therein. This strategy of negation recurs in almost all his proceeding works. *Mimic* shows an endorsement of the same idea, where Singh considers his life in Isabella as "the shipwreck", and the life in England as the "greater shipwreck". Indar in *Bend* for a few pages takes the lead as Naipaul's mouthpiece and distributor of his ideas in his memoir recounted to Salim about his awful London experiences. The purpose of these works is to demystify London, to dismantle the utopian picture presented in the colonies, and to show that it is a dystopia rather.

In Naipaul's oeuvre, the maintenance of cultural boundaries is undertaken by individuals who have in one way or another violated the same boundary. These are characters who have rejected the dominant values and have severed themselves from their communities in the hope of salvaging a new identity for themselves, distinct from the unsatisfactory inherited identity of their communities. Singh's father in *Mimic* and Willie's father in *Half* are two of the iconoclastic figures attempting to shatter the coherence of their own traditional culture, but in the end they turn out to be fervent defenders of that same culture. Both end up as leaders of people, in the case of the former as leader of the guerrillas in Isabella and for the latter as a pundit in his ashram in India. But the major characters are different from their fathers in that they undertake the journey to other places as a way of severing themselves from their societies. Their journeys have transformative effects as soon as they settle in the new locales. After the immigration process and settlement, the issue of the journey of self-discovery comes to the fore for them since they are not received by their countries of residence. As Balfour (2007) puts on *Half*, "Sarojini and [Willie] Chandran are aware that their host countries offer them sanctuary while rejecting them on the basis of race." Once more we see the retreat into the individual state for those characters who have invested their lives and hopes in alien cultures.

Such social upheavals, as the race riots in *Half*, signify that the London presumed as the seat and ideal of order is itself subject to the disorder heretofore applied to the subject societies. Bruce MacDonald's assertion gains in value when applied to Naipaul's *Mimic* and *Half*, when he suggests that racial conflict symptomizes a deep frustration with the conditions of society: "man escapes in dreams and fantasies, racism being one of these" (MacDonald 1975, 41). At the time of the race riots in London, occurring between 1958 and 1962, Willie is studying at a college of education, and is simultaneously working for the Commonwealth Programs on the BBC. He is asked by the editor to play the man who is looking for trouble in the riot zones. Willie rejects the offer, but the incident is interpreted by him to be momentous. This significance is to be observed in the scene of a dinner party held by Roger, Willie's colleague in the BBC, where he introduces Willie to his own editor. The editor delivers a speech for the attendants of the party who comprise, Willie, Marcus—a black man of no particular status, Serafina—a Spanish Columbian mulatto, and some London publishers. He states a fact about

the England of the time, giving shelter to people like Willie and his Third World companions. He introduces his hometown and then comments on the state of the world: “our factories made goods that went around the world, but now the world has tilted, and it is only when I meet people like yourselves that I get some idea where the world is going” (Naipaul 2001, 98). He does not have a high opinion of the course the world has taken; he is equally implying the dominant racial attitude of the late 1950s on the threat of further opening the doors of the country to the refugees from the (former) colonies. This reflects a London crowded with the downtrodden of the earth who have come to the center to find what they think was taken from them by the imperial process, that is why Gorra alleges that “if Britain today is a postimperial nation, it is also, albeit in a special sense, a postcolonial one, a country whose recent history of immigration ensures that the conflicts of postcolonial identity are now enacted on the site of the imperial power itself” (Gorra 1997, 8). Hence, we can infer that the cultural contact zone is never a place of peace or order, be it the imperial center or the colonial periphery.

Naipaul’s and his characters’ critique of the metropolis is based on two grounds: firstly, it is because of their own illusory image of a once great but now shattered metropolis; and secondly, by virtue of a metropolis teeming with the helpless and desperate Third World people like themselves who are leading a parasitic life.

Different critics may have different interpretations of this “*reverse migration*”<sup>iv</sup> to the metropolis undertaken by subject people. What is important to me is to read Naipaul’s selected works as critiques mostly directed at the metropolis. At the same time, I should mention that Naipaul takes to task those people like Indar, Nazruddin and Ganesh who, although they come to a realization of the nature of the metropolis and the grounds for the construction of its civilization, decline to leave it. These are people who are more taken up by the idea of a geographical place than a homing desire. Salim criticizes such a perspective by saying that “That idea of going home, of leaving, the idea of the other place [...]. It was a deception. I saw now that it comforted only to weaken and destroy” (Naipaul 2002a, 244). There are series of events which show Naipaul’s obsession with place. Talking about *Mimic*, in the interview with Francis Wyndham, he mentioned that “I tried to write *Mimic* three times, [...] then I realised it needed a physical centre— and this would be the place where the man was

writing his memoirs” (White 1975, 164). Likewise, Salim in *Bend* muses that “for the first time I considered the idea of flight under strain, if there had been a safe house somewhere waiting, once there were many such houses” (Naipaul 2002a, 213). Willie also envies Percy’s ease in going to or returning to different countries but in his own case his choice is only limited to returning to India. He sees no reason why he should return there. Singh, unlike Willie, returns home from the stifling post-war atmosphere of London as a student, stating that “I thought of escape [from London], and it was escape to what I had so recently sought to escape from [Isabella]” (Naipaul 2002b, 31).

Leela Gandhi puts forward the same idea about Naipaul’s novels, as the one I proposed above— i.e. reading Naipaul’s works as critiques of the center— in the form of a rhetorical question: “might we read his anger with the third worlding of poor London as an anger about the repressed realities of the colonial encounter? There is enough in his prolific career that would suggest so” (Blake et al. 2001, 142). What incites Salim’s critique of the Third World peoples’ presence in the West is a restatement of his philosophy expressed just before the end of the work that “I couldn’t bear the idea of the lost coming together for comfort” (Naipaul 2002a, 215). His dismay of the West begins after reading Raymond. For him the very journey to England is a reassurance of what he had previously come up to about the West. Unlike other characters, he finds the truth about London prior to going there. By so questioning London, and to echo Tiffin and Lawson, by “residing in the space of questioning”, Salim and some of the other major characters discussed in this section become agents of resistance, where “Bhabha locates the condition of post-coloniality itself” (Tiffin and Lawson 2002, 24).

## 4. CONCLUSION

An indispensable part of the diaspora experience is the crossing of the boundary, both mentally and geographically. The protagonists in the selected novels by Naipaul undertake the uprooting, characteristic of the diaspora experience, in search of self-realization and identity, either through assimilation into, or rejection of, the center— which provides a better ground for their intended search. For them, identity is something rooted in their past and present experiences. Those who transform easily are satisfied with the coalesced identity of mere

‘others’, as products of different tides of history in the colonies and through the exertion of imperial power. The other characters, who add a new dimension to their search, by foreseeing the future and its impact on their identity formation, are ready to live an enlightened life in the world which proves to be hostile to the first group.

The danger involved in the characters’ immersion in new worlds is one of losing both language and identity. Such characters, who are produced by the imperial power are to be called subjects without agency. But those who preserve their ethnic identities besides their attained identities, are competent to effectively displace the hegemonic cultural constructions of the West. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* suggests that migrancy and hybridity propose rich intellectual possibilities. This lends credence to the theory, here, of seeing the second agents of subject societies as flourishing in the Western context. At any rate, Naipaul’s characters can be considered as people not feeling at home in their host countries and in the metropolis, thus showing the impossibility of belonging anywhere. The problem is that they are at odds with the alien culture they face in the metropolis—irrespective of their education.

Culture in its definition is space and time-bound and consists of specific codes of behavior or beliefs which have meaning for people within specific geographical and historical perimeters (Hussain 2008, 108). As the person moves to a new locale, these codes are subject to change for him, in order to have an easier life. The maintenance of cultural codes and behaviors specific to other locales in the new setting is what Naipaul cannot tolerate as he says in the interview with Andrew Robinson about those immigrants who resist taking new identities in the center: “‘They are migrating to allow their barbarism to flower, so they can be more Islamic or more Sikhish than they can be in the comparative economic stagnation of their home societies.’” (Jussawalla, 1997, 108). Naipaul’s paradoxical theorizing is apparent in this statement. He has devoted a large part of his professional career to attacking mimicry, nevertheless, he asks the subject people to surrender to the motherland by taking new identities to evade exclusion from the mainstream culture. Naipaul champions the resilience of the diaspora, which equips them with the means of others. The access of the formerly colonized (or marginal) agents to the center of power and to the interpolation of the means of power never means that the power in both

sides is even or equitable. Nevertheless, to use Bhabha's concept of ambivalence, one can conclude that the inherent instability within colonialist discourse itself suggests the power of resistance and agency of the colonial subjects.

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## Notes:

<sup>i</sup> This kind of theorizing identity may be troublesome as I may be accused of promoting a fixed identity for the diaspora. Where as, my attempt is to prove that identity for the diasporic characters is always in a state of flux. The third kind of identity that I value so much is achieved only when the characters get a grasp of their state in the world and become able to cope with the situations out of their control. Ganesh proves not to have attained this, as his final failure with the workers testifies my assertion.

<sup>ii</sup> Indar's long speech to Salim in *Bend* embodies Hall's philosophy, where he states that our civilization also serve as prisons for us, and that we are made by the simple life in Africa, hence, unable to grasp the ways of the outside world (142).

<sup>iii</sup> Singh in *Mimic* is also led by Lieni, the Maltese lady, in London, through the stores by choosing his attire, and advising him to arrive at the School in a taxi. Correspondingly, it is a white lady who advises Indar in *Bend* that since he is a man of divided loyalties, he should choose a diplomatic career.

<sup>iv</sup> In an early and often-quoted interview with Derek Walcott (1965), he states that it is impossible for one to abandon his allegiance to his community (in Jussawalla 5). Likewise, seven years later, in *The Overcrowded Barracoon*, he mentions the same thing that no matter how individualistic an author's vision is, he can never separate himself from his society thoroughly (25).

<sup>v</sup> See Blake et al. page. 142.