

OBSESSION FOR FINDING ROOTS IN MAGIC SEEDS

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ABSTRACT

This article is on V S Naipaul's latest novel *Magic Seeds* which is a sequel of *Half a Life*. The protagonist of *Half a Life* is Willie Chandran who is in search of completeness throughout the novel. At the beginning of the novel *Half a Life* Willie questions his father why his name is after an English writer. It means that his negation of the self, starts at his very early stage. For his completeness Willie goes to London but unfortunately he finds himself in a different situation. There seem to be some biographical sketches in the last two novels. At the end of *Half a Life* Willie marries Ana and goes to Africa as Ana's London man without his personal identity. After he gets a slip while coming down step at Ana's house, while getting treatment in the hospital, he realizes that he has wasted part of life being Ana's London man. So he leaves Ana and goes to Berlin to stay with his sister Sarojini but even in Berlin he can't find himself and starts searching his roots. *Magic Seeds* starts where *Half a Life* ends.

KEYWORDS: Magic Seeds, Roots, Half a Life

INTRODUCTION

Most of the writings of V S Naipaul have some biographical sketches or else Indian names with Indian based stories. V S Naipaul, writing to his mother from Oxford on May 3, 1954, said, "I don't see myself fitting into the Trinidad way of life. I think I shall die if I have to spend the rest of my life in Trinidad. The place is too small, values are all wrong, and people are pretty... Ideally I would like first of all to arrange for some sort of job in India..." (*Between Father and Son*, p. 277). In his article *Naipaul: An Indian Who is not an Indian* Rama Kundu comments,

"Even in the days of his childhood the author had not learned to look at Trinidad as separate distinct 'homeland' in its own right. He was born and brought up in an island which was ethnically considered, but a replica of India." (*V S Naipaul: Critical Essays*, pp. 127-128).

In *The Comedians* of Graham Greene's the protagonist Brown,- a youth without a country or friends or relatives, reflects:

There are those who belong by their birth inextricably to a country, who even when they leave feel a tie. And there are those who belong to a province, a country, a village, but I could feel no link at all...; transience was my pigmentation, my roots would never go deep enough anywhere to make me a home or make me secure with love (*The Comedians*, p. 223).

Brown here is talking about the angst of the perpetual exile who is ever engaged in the frustrating search for "roots that clutch" which elude him perpetually. The writers sent out from their homeland for all sorts of reasons and giving voice to their alien experience may, of course, be traced far back in history. One may think of Ovid spending years

of exile in Tomi at the Black Sea where he wrote letters and poems overshadowed by the feeling of isolation and existential anguish. Luminaries like Dante, Swift, Heine, Wagner, *et al* had produced works of art out of their experience of life in exile. In the last century the galaxy of writers and artists who left Germany in the 1930s—including stalwarts like Thomas Mann, Brecht, Musil, Stefan Zweig, among others - reflected in their works on the experience of exile and the resultant emotional dislocation. The complexity and diversity of the problem of literary exiles—voluntary and involuntary as well as the scale and intensity of the traumatic experience in the post-war era has been focused in literary and culture studies in Europe and America. The experience of exile and loneliness/footlessness is a common theme of literature today. Some interesting psychological dimensions of this empirical phenomenon may be tracked back much earlier in the colonial situation of the indentured labourers in Canada and the Carib islands which may have special bearing for the Indian reader in particular.

It is to be located in the psyche of the displace marginal/marginalised uprooted man through generations in the colonies of Asia, West Indies, among the slaves and indentured labourers, who were perhaps the worst victim of white imperialism. After the horrible history of the Caribbean islands in the previous centuries,—the genocide of the Arawaks and Caribs, the sugar plantations and slave trade came the indentured labourers from Asia and North Africa, the so-called "immigrants."

This was their way of facing the threat of consistent erasure of their identity in the 'story lessness' and historylessness of the place. It was a challenge for the writer to create in this vacuum and find out some adequate frame of reference in order to salvage or construct the identity of the people in exile. The Nobel laureate of this year is a glorious case in point. Edward Said, in his recent book *Reflections on Exile*, a collection of essays writes in the title essay:

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unbearable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever (p. 173).

The works of V.S. Naipaul, who is known for his angularities, his frequently puzzling observations and baffling responses, particularly *vis-a-vis* India and Trinidad, may, however, be better understood and his enigmatic statements better placed and appreciated if studied in the light of the above. After getting awarded the Nobel Prize, Naipaul reacted with an adequate and un-Naipaul-like response of genuine happiness and expressed his hearty thanks which include England and India, but surprisingly no mention of Trinidad; of course if such epithets as 'surprising' or 'unexpected' or 'unusual' could at all be applied to Naipaul who has all along remained unpredictable, paradoxical, enigmatic and apparently enjoyed being so. The brief statement he made from his home in Wiltshire after receiving the award was:

"I am utterly delighted. This is an unexpected accolade. This is great tribute to England, my home, and to India, home of my ancestors and to the dedication of my agent, Gillon Aitken" [*The Telegraph* 12-10-01].

The tribute to a plurality of 'homes,' if deconstructed, may underscore a disturbing feeling of homelessness which has been identified by Margaret Drabble as one of his "recurrent themes" (Drabble 711). On being asked why did he leave out the Caribbean from his tribute, Naipaul dismisses the query with a deceptive casualness:

"It would have encumbered the dedication. If I had said 'last but not least'.... The truth is that for the last forty years I have been attached to India. I am much more intellectually there than I am at Trinidad. It has been a long time since I went to Trinidad, nearly fifteen years" (*The Telegraph*, 15-10-01).

In the same address Naipaul claims his knowledge of and insight into India, which, he stresses, is the outcome of his firsthand experience of India: "I do a lot of work in India. I talk to a lot of people. And when I go, I don't just sit in towns but go to the villages. I have some depth of knowledge of India." He even makes a tall claim to which many in India may not agree: "I helped them to see in a way," he goes on to insist, "I helped India with this self-assessment in the last few years." Understandably the Indian reaction has not always been too indulgent or sympathetic. As Amit Chaudhuri, the young Indian writer in English, reminisces about his boyhood when "he (Naipaul) was mentioned as a curiosity, *an Indian who was not quite an Indian* (emphasis added), and his name was uttered with a mixture of disapproval and mischief. He apparently visited 'our' country, took advantage of 'our' hospitality and said unpleasant things about India." Such an affection Naipaul has towards his mother land.

Naipaul's latest novel *Magic Seeds* brings the protagonist to India from Africa. *Magic Seeds* is the sequel of *Half a Life*. *Magic Seeds* begins where *Half a Life* ends. At the end of the novel *Half a Life*, Willie is in Africa in Ana's house, living as Ana's London man.

He has forgotten his origin and his roots so that he becomes very curious for finding roots. He does not want to live there without identity. When he slips down from steps in Ana's house he realizes that he has wasted part of his life by being Ana's London man. Finally he, Willie, says to Ana:

I am forty-one. I am tired of living your life....the best part of my life has gone, and I have done nothing...it would be still your life. I have been hiding for too long. (*Half a Life*. p. 227).

It seems that both of them are sailing in the same boat so Ana said, "Perhaps it wasn't really my life either." (p. 227). Willie writes a letter to Sarojini and goes to Berlin. *Magic Seeds* starts in London with his sister Sarojini. The new air of Berlin has been a great relief after the gloomy period in Africa, but soon we come to realise that all Willie's constructive purposes of taking control of his life are not destined to be fulfilled. His visa is expiring soon and Willie, exactly as it happened in London years before, is forced to face the reality of thinking about what to do. But the only answer that he is able to give his sister is:

I don't see what I can do. I don't know where I can go (...) I was always someone on the outside. I still am. What can I do here in Berlin? (*Magic Seeds*. p. 55).

Willie is still lost, his only active force being that of escaping from places and situations confiding every time in a new start. His sense of displacement is not diminished after the departure from Africa, and Berlin does not seem to be the city where he could finally settle. His decision to leave Africa might have seemed as a signal of a rupture, as the point where he manages to change attitude primarily towards himself, yet when he re-join him in Berlin, Willie remains concerned with the same questions. That Willie is still uncertain and confused suggests that his determination was just temporary and did not derive from a real, substantial change in his character personality.

The fact that Willie has not gone through such a profound change, is also proved by his persistent refusal to share his personal thoughts, even with the sister. Moreover, the narrator explains that Willie refuses to reveal his true feelings to both other people as well as to himself; thus, at this point of the narration, Willie's extreme difficulty in creating any form of authentic dialogue or form of communication becomes evident. He rejects his previous life in London and Africa as an unauthentic life in which he did anything but hiding his true self both to others and to himself. All his previous desires and needs now seem to him to have been "false", as they were not part of himself but the product of an alienated condition. It is at this point that Sarojini starts telling him about an Indian guerrilla movement whose leader is a certain Kandapalli: according to Sarojini this revolutionary movement, which fights to emancipate the poor low-caste Indian villagers from the land owners' abuse of power, is part of the same regenerative process in our world. Willie decides to join the movement and therefore leaves Berlin for India. A new kind of emotional life came to Willie" the time spent in Berlin seems like a time of reconciliation and revelation, a time in which Willie eventually manages both to find his location in the world and to develop a different, new and more authentic way of relating with himself. After more than twenty years Willie saw India again:

India began for him in the airport in Frankfurt, in the little pen where passengers for India were assembled. He studied the Indian passengers there (...). He saw India in everything they wore and did. He was full of his mission, full of the revolution in his soul, and he felt a great distance from them. India began to assault him, began to remind him of things he thought he had forgotten and put aside, things which his idea of mission had obliterated; and the distance he felt from his fellow passengers diminished. (...) He felt something like panic at the thought of India he was approaching. (...) He felt 'I thought of the two worlds, and I had a very clear idea of the world to which I belonged. But now, really, I wish I could go back a few hours and stand outside the Pat- rick Hellman shop in Berlin, or go to the oyster and champagne bar in the KDW64. (*Magic Seeds*. pp. 25-26).

Somehow, he joins the guerrilla group and starts to live in the jungle, sometimes finding shelter in the small country villages, sharing his time exclusively with the other members of the movement. Willie's mind is with a number of questions about his position.

Willie lost himself in conjecture about the people around him. (...) They were all people in their late thirties or early forties, Willie's age, and he wondered what weakness or failure had caused them in mid-life to leave the outer world and to enter this strange chamber. (...) Among these people (...) he was a stranger. (p. 52).

After years of purposeless and risky life, here, lost in the jungle, Willie realises that he is losing also himself, and therefore the only purpose becomes that of surviving. Willie says

"I've forgotten myself. Now I'm truly lost. In every way. I don't know what lies ahead or behind. My only cause now is to survive, to get out of this."(p. 125).

Eventually, together with another deserter of the movement he escapes and he gives himself up to the police: for his involvement with the revolutionary actions he is given a ten-year sentence. Fortunately, Willie will not spend much time in jail due to the intervention of his sister Sarojini and his friend Roger, a lawyer, whom Willie met when he was in London, after six months Willie is free and again bound for London. His return to London signs the last stage of Willie's

peregrinations around the world. Willie during his entire life keeps looking for his roots everywhere. Willie said, “It is the one thing I have worked at all my life, not being at home anywhere, but looking at home.” (p. 74). There seems to be no magic in the life of Willie Chandran but history is being repeated. Displaced life is not going to cease at all. The quest for roots still continues.

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