

## **Laura Fernanda Bulger**

Universidade de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro

### **Cultural and Fictional Crossroads: A Portrait of V. S. Naipaul as an Artist**

Post-colonialism is by no means a pacific field of studies; it covers a wide range of controversial issues, such as historical relationships, racial and religious discrimination, struggle for self-determination, decolonization, displacement, linguistic and cultural clashes, and so on. Nonetheless, the oppositional standing regarding colonialist power is common ground among post-colonial theoreticians. Stephen Slemon<sup>1</sup> looks at post-colonialism as a *portmanteau* term for, among many things, a literary and cultural critique, the object of which is the literary text produced by writers, resident or non-resident in former colonies. This paper will focus on the latter topic, namely on V. S. Naipaul's major fictional works, after a brief introduction underlining some problematic positions in post-colonial theoretical discourse.

On the question of linguistic and cultural contamination<sup>2</sup> – some use the term assimilation –, it is an open sore for those who, says Simon

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Slemon, "The Scramble for Post-Colonialism," Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London, New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 45-52.

<sup>2</sup> According to Diana Brydon, white Canadian writers use "Native spirituality" as a way to assert their own identity. Brydon speaks of "contamination", her designation for "cross-cultural imagination", and calls their texts "creole texts". Contamination leads to a kind of "globalism", as she further explains: "This new globalism simultaneously asserts local independence and global interdependencies. It seeks a way to cooperate without cooption, a way to define differences that do not depend on myths of cultural purity or authenticity but that thrive on an interaction that "contaminates" without homogenizing..." (p. 141). Diana Brydon, "The White Inuit Speaks, Contamination as Literary Strategy," Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London, New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 136-42.

During, “have been victims of imperialism” and aspire to an “identity uncontaminated by universalist or European concepts and images”<sup>3</sup>; it is a claim supported by people who consider a native language to be the sole vehicle to express both the psychological and socio-cultural traits that shape identity. Thus, societies seeking independence tended to reject the tongue of the colonizer on the assumption that a foreign language failed to impart their distinctiveness, or uniqueness, besides carrying with it resonances of old colonial power. Sometimes, they had no choice, says During, and the imperial language has become the linguistic tool used by former colonized nations not only to communicate with the rest of the world, or even among themselves,<sup>4</sup> but also to open the way for a new poetics that, people may say, does not bestow the “emotional make-up” and the “style” of the indigenous expression.<sup>5</sup> As

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<sup>3</sup> Simon During, “Postmodernism or Post-colonialism Today,” Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London, New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 125.

<sup>4</sup> Braj B. Kachru comments on the use of the imperial language as a way of neutralizing the political power of certain native groups, as in the case of India, where English, although still a language of “both power and prestige”, is no longer a “marker” for castes, religion or region; it provides native peoples with a verbal means of communication free from ancient prejudices. Braj B. Kachru, “The Alchemy of English,” Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London, New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 291-95. Regarding today’s aid programmes and scholarships, sponsored by old or later colonizers, it would be naïve to believe that they spring out of mere generosity towards the poor nations of the so called Third World. Besides their bringing cultural prestige to European countries, and to other wealthy potencies like the United States, they also help expand economic markets and create spheres of influence that ultimately translate into political power. Notwithstanding the hidden agendas behind linguistic and cultural transactions, imperial languages have sustained national unity in countries other than India, like in African countries, where both the foreign and the native languages are a common practice. As a kind of self-serving remark, where irony plays its part, European languages have introduced the Western reader to a literary and cultural world that otherwise would remain unknown to us, except for the odd text printed in translation by someone’s good will, or vision of a potential commercial hit.

<sup>5</sup> Raja Rao, “Language and Spirit,” Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London, New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 296-7.

a consequence of the interaction with European languages and aesthetic models, literary mimicry would be inevitable, if it were not for the re-invention of words, syntactic structures and rhetorical strategies that convey new meanings to the so-called post-colonial literature; it is innovative not only in terms of language<sup>6</sup>, but also in its form, putting into cause old concepts of genre.

Although globalization has not prevented some self-segregating groups from fighting for their distinctiveness, in a world as ours, where every day a flux of migrants crosses the old frontiers of each continent, physically or virtually, a notion such as “uncontaminated” identity appears to be as far-fetched as the one that calls for racial or religious purity. Recently, the Mozambican writer Mia Couto, a white who supported the Frelimo war against Portugal, used an oxymoron to describe his own quest for identity as a “flight from identity”. Mia Couto, whose fiction and poetry are written in the language of the colonizer, looks upon his ontological doubleness<sup>7</sup> as a liberating condition rather than a dilemma.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> On the use of the English language by former colonized peoples, it is worth listening to Salman Rushdie, himself an English-language author, who comments: “As for myself, I don’t think it is always necessary to take up the anti-colonial – or is it post-colonial? – cudgels against English. What seems to me to be happening is that those peoples who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it, becoming more and more relaxed about the way they use it – assisted by the English language’s enormous flexibility and size, they are carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers.” Salman Rushdie, “Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist,” *Imaginary Homelands, Essays and Criticism 1981-91* (London: Granta Books 1992), p. 64.

<sup>7</sup> One could look upon this doubleness as a type of hybridism, a controversial concept in post-colonial theory, because it is understood as downplaying cultural differences or even worse, because of its pejorative use by former colonizers. For Homi K. Bhabha, hybridism occurs through the articulation and appropriation of cultural symbols and signs the dynamics of which allow for cultural differences and, hopefully, for new forms of artistic expression. Homi K. Bhabha, “Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences,” Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London, New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 206-9. We might add that hybridism can also be interpreted as a two-way ongoing process that counteracts the idea of cultural unity and distinctiveness defended by emerging nationalisms. It does not eradicate old traditions, or impose a fixed norm, as

Colonialism, as well as open or concealed neo-colonialisms, implies the subordination of indigenous cultural practices to imperial dominance, also known as “hegemonic control”.<sup>9</sup> Colonialism as a political system reaches far back in time<sup>10</sup>, as historical landmarks scattered all over Europe still remind one of former empires. Nineteenth-century imperialism by European potencies was just a kind of revivalism of old crusades carried out in the name of civilization, a term replaced nowadays by democracy. There are, though, various degrees of subordination and of dominance, reflecting different “brands” of colonization, so to speak, some overtly brutal, others prompted, apparently, by less obvious purposes than pure exploitation. Time and locale are also relevant to understand methods and nuances carried out by imperialist countries in colonized societies. The interaction with the native populations has not been the same everywhere, as one may gather from British and Portuguese colonial rule in both India and Africa, or British and French colonization of Canada and the Caribbean. Thus, the relations between the colonizer and the colonized should not be explained, as it often happens, as if it were a mere struggle between oppressor and oppressed, a polarization that simplifies the complexities of such relations, sometimes pervaded

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underlined by Edward Brathwaite, who writes about the process of creolization in Jamaica, where old and new cultural and linguistic forms coexist in apparent harmony. Edward Kamau Brathwaite, “Creolization of Jamaica,” Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London, New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 202-5.

<sup>8</sup> Lebanese-born Amin Maalouf seems to share identical feelings: “Depuis que j’ai quitté le Liban en 1976 pour m’installer en France, que de fois m’a-t-on demandé, avec les meilleurs intentions du monde, si je me sentais “plutôt français” ou “plutôt libanais”. Je réponds invariablement: “L’un et l’autre!” Non par quelque souci d’équilibre ou d’équité, mais parce qu’en répondant différemment, je mentirais. Ce qui fait que je suis moi-même et pas un autre, c’est que suis ainsi à la lisière de deux pays, de deux ou trois langues, de plusieurs traditions culturelles. C’est précisément cela qui définit mon identité. Serais-je plus authentique si je m’amputais d’une partie de moi-même?” Malouf, Amin, *Les Identités meurtrières* (Paris, Grasset et Fasquelle, 1998), p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies, The Key Concepts* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 117.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Fuchs and David J. Baker, “The Postcolonial Past,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 65:3 (September 2004), pp. 329-40.

with ambivalence; it may cloud interpretations of colonialism and post-colonialism as historical and political processes<sup>11</sup>; it may also impoverish academic research regarding the literary creativity emerging in colonial societies after the independence movements, in some cases surpassing, aesthetically, literary production in former empires.

In a field of studies like post-colonialism, where cross-cultural relations, the upshot of old and new empires, should be the main object of inquiry, a scholarly critique is expected to have a grasp of historical, social and political interrelations as well as sensitivity towards issues as delicate as racial or religious tensions. Although too vast and ambitious, an eclectic type of approach – rather than one that keeps looking for past grievances – may be the best solution to analyse today’s post-colonial interdependencies, thriving, if not out of a happy co-habitation, at least out of a mutual need to co-habit in peace. The literary critic, particularly, cannot be kept away from the post-colonial battlefield, not so much for the question of sensitivity, a notion too often attached to literary criticism, but for the belief that he or she may have something to say on how colonialisms, neo-colonialisms and post-colonialisms, past and present, are rendered in the literary text, an aesthetic construct that usually eludes universals created by – isms of all kinds.

As to post-colonial fiction, it explores individual experience in a world depicted as in historical, social and emotional upheaval, fertilizing ground for the narrative to flow and characters to interact in a milieu marred by anger or indifference, both traits of alienation, one of the recurrent themes in the novels written by V. S. Naipaul, one of many English-language authors born outside of Britain. It is worth

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<sup>11</sup> According to Linda Hutcheon, who discusses the concerns that overlap post-colonialism and post-modernism, both movements re-think history by turning to self-reflexivity and to irony to subvert “from within the dominant culture”. The Canadian theoretician acknowledges, though, that each one has its “distinct political” agenda. While post-modernism speculates on the *textualized accessibility* of history, post-colonialism digs into the past looking for truth in order to question the present. Linda Hutcheon, “Circling the Downspout of Empire,” Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London, New York: Routledge, 2004), pp.130-35.

noting that before the second half of the twentieth-century, when the process of decolonization began in Africa and Asia, only two names would immediately come to mind: Conrad and Joyce, a foreigner from Poland and an Irish Catholic. Things have changed, though, and literature has overturned national, religious and language frontiers, reaching much further than the old Eurocentric concept of *Weltliteratur*. For obvious political and pragmatic reasons, readership in English has also expanded world-wide. It means that neither the English language nor the *great tradition* belong to one empire, or to any empire at all. It also means that English departments may have to be renamed to include in their literary curricula English-language writers who do not come from Britain, or Ireland, or the United States, an issue highlighted by Salman Rushdie's comments.<sup>12</sup>

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul was born in Trinidad, from a family of Indian immigrants who moved to the British West Indies.<sup>13</sup> He is one of the most skilful writers in handling the English language today. Naipaul was awarded The Booker Prize in 1971; the T.S. Eliot Award for Creative Writing in 1986; the David Cohen British Literature Prize in 1993; the Nobel Prize in 2001.

Naipaul's extensive production intertwines fiction, autobiography, journalism and travelling writing, a "body of work" that Lillian Feder describes as "genre fusion"<sup>14</sup>. In his novels, autobiographical hints<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Rushdie, "Commonwealth Literature", pp. 61-70.

<sup>13</sup> In *On the Margins, The Art of Exile in V. S. Naipaul*, Timothy Weiss explains the metaphoric title of his book as follows: "To be on the margins is to be part of yet no part of; in the self's encounter with others, the exile can live a 'double exteriority' for he or she belongs to two cultures without identifying wholly with either. The exile can engage in a cross-cultural dialogue and through that dialogue can affirm both his uniqueness and the interrelationship between himself and others". Timothy Weiss, *On the Margins, The Art of Exile in V. S. Naipaul* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), p. 13. Ironically, Naipaul's Eastern origin and British colonial education did not make him a marginal writer; on the contrary, his uniqueness, the result of that "interrelationship between himself and others", gave him worldwide recognition and acclaim.

<sup>14</sup> Lillian Feder, *Naipaul's Truth, The Making of a Writer* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Whenever asked to give biographical data about himself, Italo Calvino used

blur even more any boundary that may exist in an already boundless genre such as the novel. The links, or “affiliations”, as Feder calls them, among his various narrative forms may turn into a pitfall for anyone who does not discriminate between fiction and autobiography, oblivious of the fact that self-narration in the past turns into fiction<sup>16</sup>, or that “fiction changes reality, in the sense that it both ‘invents’ and ‘discovers’ it.”<sup>17</sup>

One of Naipaul’s harshest critics<sup>18</sup> is the late Edward Said.<sup>19</sup> In his opinion, Naipaul’s texts – fictional, autobiographical or journalistic

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to supply only trivial information, such as the sign under which he was born, or his favourite place to live as a foreigner. He said no more for fear of being psychoanalyzed. Italo Calvino, *The Literature Machine* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 339. Unlike the Cuban-born author, Naipaul has not spared his readers with autobiographical details, often written under the guise of fiction. It may partly explain the reason why he is one of those writers who has been psychoanalysed, probably as much as Kafka and Joyce have been. Lillian Feder notes that both Slwyn Cudjoe and Rob Nixon tend to interpret Naipaul’s mind: The former “... constructs from Naipaul’s writings a psychological biography of the man”. Nixon, who is one of his “recent detractors,” psychoanalyzes Naipaul through his nonfiction. Lillian Feder, *Naipaul’s Truth*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>16</sup> See Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds, Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978).

<sup>17</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, Mario Valdés (ed.), “The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality”, *A Ricoeur Reader, Reflection and Imagination* (Toronto, Buffalo: Toronto University Press, 1991), pp. 117-36.

<sup>18</sup> Brent Staples’s explanation for the criticism on Naipaul’s pro colonialism and Englishness is based on stereotyped misconceptions: “Much of the criticism stems not from what Mr. Naipaul writes but from expectations about what he *ought* to write, given that he is a brown man (of Indian descent) born into the brown and black society that is Trinidad.” Lillian Feder, *Naipaul’s Truth*, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Edward Said accuses Naipaul of lack of involvement with colonial politics, as well as of insensitivity towards the dispossessed by imperialism: “To say that Naipaul resembles a scavenger, then, is to say that he now prefers to render the ruins and derelictions of postcolonial history without tenderness, without any of the sympathetic insight found, say, in Nadine Gordimer’s books, rather than to render that history’s processes, occasional heroism, intermittent successes; he prefers to indict guerrillas for their pretensions rather than indict the imperialism and social injustice that drove them to insurrection; he attacks Moslems for the wealth of some of their number and for a vague history of African slave trading, thus putting aside many centuries of majority struggle and complex civilization; he sees in today’s Third World only counterfeits of the First World, never such

alike – reveal the writer’s negative view of the “Third World”. After stressing Naipaul’s inability to “explain” what he “observes” in colonial societies, Said remarks: “he only regrets sarcastically.” The adverb, “sarcastically”, is perhaps a bad choice. Said appears to have ignored that both irony and sarcasm are rhetorical devices often used to conceal failure and grief. Emotional involvement and humour are not missing, for instance, from the stories told by the adult narrator of *Miguel Street*,<sup>20</sup> as he recalls Bogart, Hat, Laura, Popo, Man-man, the comic-tragic characters with whom he learned about life, as a boy growing up in a racially mixed slum of Trinidad’s Port of Spain. *Miguel Street* is the beginning of a fictional world, where Trinidad is a social and political referent, the “starting-point” for the author’s self-reflective literary texts. Naipaul’s relationship with his native island could never come to an end, as the unnamed narrator of *The Enigma of Arrival* leads the reader to believe. West Indianness<sup>21</sup> is a trade-mark of the author’s writing and Trinidad will be re-created in fiction as long as he is writing it.

Naipaul has declared that the time of the novel is over and that “only nonfiction” can capture “the complexities of today’s world.”<sup>22</sup> Regardless of the author’s disenchantment with the genre, one cannot

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things as apartheid or the wholesale American devastation of Indochina.” Edward W. Said, “Bitter Dispatches from the Third World,” *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta Books, 2000), pp. 98-104.

<sup>20</sup> *Miguel Street* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987).

<sup>21</sup> Naipaul explains the difficulty in finding a proper name for the East Indian community in Trinidad, given the ambiguity of the English word “Indian”: “In the British territories the immigrants were called East Indians. In this way they were distinguished from the other types of Indians in the islands: the American Indians and the West Indians. After a generation or two, the East Indians were regarded as settled inhabitants of the West Indies and were thought of as West Indian East Indians. Then a national feeling grew up. There was a cry for integration, and the West Indian East Indians became East Indian West Indians.” V. S. Naipaul, Pankaj Mishra (ed.), “East Indian,” *Literary Occasions, Essays* (Toronto, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), p. 40.

<sup>22</sup> “The novel as a form no longer carries conviction.” V. S. Naipaul, “Conrad’s Darkness and Mine,” *Literary Occasions*, p. 180. In his recent interview with Rachel Donadio, from *The New York Times*, Naipaul also mentions the limitations of the novel as a genre. “The Irascible Prophet: V. S. Naipaul at Home,” (*NYT*, August 7, 2005).



find a more poignant rendition of the human chaos in today's world than in his novels, where it is rendered as if "in flux", matching the author's own perception of history.

A talented craftsman, Naipaul mingles Eastern Caribbean cultural and speech patterns with a Western inheritance that includes Latin, French, Spanish and English literatures<sup>23</sup>. His name is already inscribed in European literary history. Using social and political referents, Naipaul constructs imaginary societies that rise out of equally imaginary empires, rendering an anti-hero in struggle against an alien society<sup>24</sup>, before being forced to surrender, or turning to writing to survive. His characters are depicted as beings stranded in their fantasy islands, refugees or drifters with nowhere to go. Their lives are conditioned by a common fate that turns them into outcasts of some sort, even in their native countries. They are losers, seldom losing, though, their sense of humour, curiosity in discovering their surroundings, strength to face up to their ordeals.

Like himself, some of Naipaul's characters leave their native homeland and go to England to study on a scholarship. They too aspire to be writers<sup>25</sup> and after several attempts some of them become journalists,

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<sup>23</sup> "I wished to be a writer. But together with the wish there had come the knowledge that the literature that had given me the wish came from another world, far away from our own." V. S. Naipaul, "Reading and Writing," *Literary Occasions*, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> "To be a colonial is to be a little ridiculous and unlikely, especially in the eyes of someone from the metropolitan country. All immigrants and their descendants are colonials of one sort or another, and between the colonial and what one might call the metropolitan there always exists a muted mutual distrust." V. S. Naipaul, "East Indian," *Literary Occasions*, p. 38.

<sup>25</sup> Some of Naipaul's characters are mere potential literary creators, that is, they never write anything worth mentioning. In *The Enigma of Arrival*, Alan wanted to be a poet, but dies before writing anything, and Mr. Stone, the sixty-year old misanthropic Londoner in *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985) never writes anything either. However, Mr. Stone is the creator of Knights Companion, a philanthropic organization that provided the pensioners of Excal, the firm where he had been a librarian, with an interesting social life. The Knights of the Round Table, as its members were called, gathered for dinner and other occasions, whenever they were awarded *Excaliburs*. Mr Stone used the Arthurian mediaeval romance as an escape from his dull London life, and as an inspiration to keep old people, like himself, busy and happy.

if they cannot make it as writers. The reader is left wondering if there is no other way out for the misfits and homeless of this world than turning to literature as a kind of life-raft.

The protagonist of *A House for Mr. Biswas*<sup>26</sup> is an outcast in his own Trinidadian society, a condition prompted by his ill-starred birth. Mohun Biswas was born in the wrong way and with six fingers; the pundit was called in and, after consulting his astrological almanac, advised Mr. Biswas's parents to keep him away from water because he had an "unlucky sneeze". Mr. Biswas's wretched childhood may explain his resentment of the wealthy Tulsis, his wife's family, his individualism or the tenacity with which he tries to undercut his earlier handicaps. Without much formal education, Mr. Biwas becomes a tabloid-like reporter for the *Trinidadian Sentinel*, but his plans to be a writer fall through. It would have been embarrassing for a respectable family man, like Mr. Biswas, to write stories about a thirty-three-year-old man's sexual attraction to a young virgin, the theme for the stories he never finishes, ironically named "Escape". Mr. Biswas does not leave Trinidad; he builds his own house, though, and his son, Amand, wins a scholarship to study in England, two priorities in his life. Rendered as a comic-pathetic figure, Mr. Biswas shares some traits with the anti-social character of the picaresque novel, and is considered to be one of Naipaul's most enduring and moving creations.

Another Caribbean born of Indian descent is Ralph Singh, the protagonist-narrator of *The Mimic Man*<sup>27</sup>. Singh is a well educated businessman with social and political aspirations, who goes so far as to anglicize his Indian name to suit the role he chooses to play in life, one of a snob, a mimic man. After being pushed out of Government, Singh is forced to leave his island, Isabella, and settle in London, where, in better days, he mixed with the English upper society. In exile, his earlier idealized image of London changes; now he speaks of "the forlornness of the city and of the people who live in it" (*MM*: 9). Already in his forties, Singh's drive to writing takes the form of memoirs, where, by analysing his life in retrospect, he seeks to understand his past and possibly rid

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<sup>26</sup> *A House for Mr. Biswas* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001).

<sup>27</sup> *The Mimic Man* (New York: Vintage International, 1995).

himself of it: "... writing, for all its initial distortion, clarifies, and even becomes a process of life" (*MM*:300). He finishes his book with the Latin word, *Dixit*, as if he had put all his past to rest. Nonetheless, the reader will never know what Singh will do with his new-found freedom in a place like London where he sees himself as a "greater shipwreck", greater than in his native island that, from afar, begins to look like a paradise he has lost for ever. Singh might have sorted out a few things in his past, but writing did little else than help him resign himself to an empty lonely life in London.

When Roger advises his friend, Willie Somerset Chandran, to improve his Indian stories by avoiding a sequential type of narration, he seems to be referring to *Half a Life*<sup>28</sup>, the novel where they both interact as characters. It moves far back before it really begins, remains in the middle, has no "tidy end",<sup>29</sup> and goes on in a sequel. The first part of the novel, "A Visit from Somerset Maugham", renders a dialogue between father and son meant to explain the reason for the boy's middle name. Willie's name sake had once visited India to get material for his novel, *The Razor's Edge*. It had been inspired by the spiritual life of Willie's father in an *ashram*, a story that Willie had been told several times since childhood. It is retold by an "I" narrator, who shows the psychic turmoil of a guilt-ridden, Brahmin-born Indian whose loveless marriage to a "backward girl" was the "sacrifice" he had to pay in order to end the caste system. Willie was the off-spring of this socially mixed marriage, which made him a half, a start in life as bad as Mr. Biswas's. In the second part, oddly called, "The First Chapter", Willie leaves India, after receiving a scholarship to study in a London teachers' college. Instead of studying, he spends most of his time in the company of other immigrants from the colonies, or working as a script-writer for a BBC programme on the Commonwealth. He also takes Roger's advice and writes a book that, though not a best-seller, changes his life. Because of it, Willie meets Ana, a half-breed like himself, and the only person

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<sup>28</sup> *Half a Life* (London: Picador, 2001).

<sup>29</sup> Roger, a British lawyer, explains the reason for his advice: "Life doesn't have a neat beginning and a tidy end. Life is always going on. You should begin in the middle and end in the middle, and it should all be there" (*HL*: 83).

who had been moved by his stories. Like Singh, Willie “re-makes” his self, this time as a half-Christian to conceal his mother’s low caste. Like Singh, he becomes disenchanted with London, where, in his view, he had been living in “a fool’s paradise”. After the racial riots in Notting Hill, Willie moves to Portuguese East Africa, where he helps run Ana’s estate for eighteen years. The last chapter, “A Second Translation”, narrates Willie’s experiences in the “bush”, his sexual awakening through a succession of affairs with African women, his “weariness” with Africa, or, rather, with the threatening colonial war. Willie leaves Ana and moves to Berlin. The alternation of the first-person with the third-person omniscient narrator and the temporal shifts in the narration allow the reader to observe not only the characters’ puzzlement when confronted with an alien environment – Willie’s father in Gandhi’s new India, Willie in immigrant London of the late 50’s, or in a Portuguese colony on the verge of war –, but also the protagonist’s fear of losing whatever was left of his already damaged identity as a half caste. From the ambiguous dialogue between Willie and Ana at the end of the novel, one may only conclude that half a life is after all the only life a half is allowed to live. But, not everything is told in *Half a Life*. The reader will have to wait for *Magic Seeds*<sup>30</sup> to find out what happens to Willie Chandran after Berlin, where he shares a flat with his westernized sister, Sarojini. He moves to India, where he joins a guerrilla movement and is jailed. Willie is released from prison on account of the book he had published in London twenty-eight years before; it proved to his jailers that he was no revolutionary but a “a pioneer of Indian post-colonial writing” (*MS*:180). His book was just an alibi to get him out of prison because Willie had given up writing. Back in London, he is the same loser that he was during his first incarnation in *Half a Life*. *Magic Seeds* ends with Willie’s nihilist remark: “It is wrong to have an ideal view of the world” (*MS*: 280).

Writing becomes a gruesome exercise in *Guerrillas*<sup>31</sup>, as Jimmy Ahmed, the leader of a revolutionary movement, goes on writing notes

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<sup>30</sup> *Magic Seeds* (New York, Toronto: Alfred Knopf, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> *Guerrillas* (London: Penguin Books, 1975). The novel is a fictional reconstruction of several accounts on the Black Power in Trinidad, including Naipaul’s essay

on a pad as instalments for his so-called “novel”. In *Guerrillas*, the setting is a Caribbean island, represented as a society where violence spares no one. Its main characters are rendered as outcasts, halves, wanderers, rootless people. Meredith, a black solicitor and a failed politician turned host of a local radio show, is a victim in the hands of his own people, who take advantage of the ethnic tensions in the island to humiliate him. Harry Tujan, a Jew, feels discriminated and thinks of moving on. Peter Roche, a white South African who had fought Apartheid, returns to England in time to save his skin. His lover, Jane, a middle-class English woman, is brutally murdered before trying to leave the island. The most alienated of them all is Jimmy Ahmed, who writes not so much out of a need to create, but of a pathological urge to feed his narcissism and relieve his frustrations. He uses a female as a surrogate writer for his “fantasies”, better described as hallucinations. His imaginary worshipper – a woman in awe of his beauty and greatness – describes him as a “prince”, a “saviour”, a man of noble birth<sup>32</sup>. Ironically, the character that emerges is Jimmy’s opposite, bringing forth the concealed writer’s self-contempt and megalomania. Ahmed’s real name was Jimmy Leung, born “in the back room of a Chinese shop”, the son of a black woman and a Chinese man (*G*: 143). Like Singh, Jimmy changed his name to suit his role as a black leader, in London, where he passed for a hero. In his letters to his English friend, Roy, Ahmed speaks of his insecurity as the leader in a commune where poor black boys like Bryant, Jimmy’s lover, are trained to hate whites and be guerrillas. In his letter to Marjory, presumably his former lover, Jimmy holds her responsible for his “manhood;” since then, he writes, he had “to behave like a man” to fight against those who wanted to “destroy” him or make him “nothing” again. Ahmed’s dark visions finally materialize in his sadistic murder of Jane. For him, a woman-hater, she embodied the image of the colonial oppressor. Once his former

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“Michael X and the Black Power Killings in Trinidad”, in *The Return of Eva Peron*, 1980.

<sup>32</sup> He is compared to Heathcliff of *Wuthering Heights*, seen through the eyes of Catherine: “Your mother was an Indian princess and your father was the Emperor of China”. (*G*: 62).

prestige as a revolutionary leader is lost, and his assassination of Jane perpetrated, Ahmed's earlier impudence also vanishes<sup>33</sup>. As a half caste, he sought refuge in a make-believe world, losing contact with reality. Jimmy Ahmed is rendered as the most extreme case of nonentity. As he waits for death, he realizes that in spite of having fought his own guerrilla war, he had indeed become a "nothing"<sup>34</sup>. His creativity, born out of hate and self-delusion, could only lead to tragedy.

Writing takes a different turn in *The Enigma of Arrival*<sup>35</sup>, Naipaul's most accomplished novel of the portrait of the artist cycle, here, as a middle-aged writer, revisiting England thirty years after his first journey to the big island as a young man. The unnamed narrator refers to his arrival as his "second childhood of seeing and learning" (EA: 82) in a country that meanwhile has changed. It is a self-narration type of novel, rendering the narrator's inner learning process, as he observes the English landscape with its flux of people, mostly outsiders, migrant workers, wanderers like himself. They are characters that resemble, he says, a Dickens "cast" with a "multiracial" touch.

The narrator's first remarks on English weather and his inability to distinguish one season from the other imply his estrangement in a country where he feels like a foreigner. For him, born and raised on a tropical island, winter was just a time when "snow was a possibility".

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<sup>33</sup> Ahmed's rebellious motto – *I'm Nobody's Slave or Stallion* –, a cry against the old colonial masters, no longer stands. Ironically, his last word in the novel – "Massa" –, the mocking title he used to address Roche, stresses his self-humiliation.

<sup>34</sup> To become "nothing" is also Salim's concern, the protagonist-narrator of *A Bend in the River* (New York: Vintage International, 1989). Salim begins his narrative with a Darwinian maxim: "The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it" (BR: 3). Unlike Jimmy Ahmed, Ralph Singh and Willie Chandran, Salim has no pretensions of becoming anything but a successful shopkeeper in the African town "at the bend of the river". Depicted as a Muslim Indian, Salim takes pride in his mixed origin: "... we can no longer say that we were Arabians or Indians or Persians" (BR: 11). It took sometime before he realized that he had no place in the new independent African country ruled by Big Man. Salim is forced to leave the country in a steamer, in an atmosphere of terror, with little else but his suitcase. Fate thwarted Salim's maxim, and he became a "nothing".

<sup>35</sup> *The Enigma of Arrival* (London: Penguin Books, 1987).

This time, his visit to Britain takes him to Waldenshaw, a Victorian-Edwardian manor near Salisbury, where he rents a cottage. The Wiltshire countryside reinforces his fantasy of England, fostered by his literary readings or by the pictures he had seen in his native Trinidad, like the Constable print of Salisbury Cathedral. Later, he remembers that literature worked as a lens through which he perceived reality: “So much of this I saw with the literary eye, or with the aid of literature” (*EA*: 22). His repeated literary allusions point to a classical education, enhanced by his continuous name dropping. Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Tennyson and Hardy are just a few that he associates with what he observes in his daily life, like the time the sight of an old man carrying wood on his back brings to his mind a poem by Wordsworth, or the time the glinting waters seen from the aeroplane remind him of another poem, this time by Tennyson, or when the geese in a farmyard help him understand an obscure line in *King Lear*. Dickens had given him a literary glimpse of London, a London that no longer existed, as he had found out as an aspiring young writer, living in Earls Court. He concedes having imitated “certain writers” in order to create a “writing personality” as “aloof” as Maugham, or as “sexually knowing” as Huxley, or as “elegant and so naturally” as Waugh (*EA*:125). On the other hand, he rejected the idea of concealing his “colonial-Hindu self” behind the aesthetic of late nineteenth-century British writers or the Bloomsbury group, “bred essentially out of empire, wealth and imperial security” (*EA*:134). After a while, he gave up writing “metropolitan stories”, and the drama of displaced peoples became the main theme for his books. But, the unnamed narrator in *The Enigma* never quite sheds the “fantasies” and “abstractions” of his literary colonial education; even later, he combines the idyllic world of the English countryside, as imagined in his childhood, with his “telescoped” perception of the decaying Waldenshaw manor. Fantasy together with reality matches his ambivalent feelings towards England. It is certainly a less extreme position than the one taken by hate-driven Ahmed, or by Ralph Singh, whose exile in London made him erase his earlier dreams of “ideal landscapes”.

The title of the first chapter in *The Arrival* is “Jack’s garden” and Jack and his garden are the main thread that holds the narration together.

The artist-narrator's perceptions of post-colonial and post-war Britain come from watching the Wiltshire landscape, where Jack, a farm worker, had succeeded in creating a garden "on the edge of a swamp and a ruined farmyard" (*EA*: 87). The writer's first impression of Jack is of a "remnant" from an earlier age, fitting the farm worker into his vision of a perfect world long gone. Jack's capacity to adapt his environment to his needs is interpreted by the writer-narrator as a grandiose undertaking: "he had created his own life, his own world, almost his continent" (*EA*: 87). He perceives Jack as a man "rooted in his earth" and "in tune" with his land", the opposite of his rootless self. The farm worker is also depicted as robust and boisterous, someone in constant "celebration", even when faced with a mortal disease: Jack had gathered his friends in the local pub for a last drink. His death triggers a change in the writer's mood, as he declares: "My own time here was coming to an end" (*EA*: 82). Sentences resembling this one convey the closing of a cycle in the life of the wandering writer. "Weariness" of being a foreigner in England is also the reason for him to move on. Surprisingly, he always returns to England, as if it were his only destination, as shown in his quasi fatalistic comment: "I had only England to return to" (*EA*: 152). It was the place where he could make a living as a writer or a journalist.

In "Journey", the second chapter, the writer-narrator speaks of his psychological and physical "journeys", recalling the "labour" and "anguish" of his years as a young artist, compelled to write to quell his "anxiety" as a creator, but also out of "grief" for having to move "elsewhere" to have a "literary" life. He goes on mentioning places he has seen, people he has met, his earlier books, the book on which he is working, or the one he may write some day, like the story of a traveller who had got lost. The scene of desolation that he had perceived in "The Enigma of Arrival", a painting by Georgio Chirico, made him associate it with his second arrival in England. In the picture, one of the men standing on the wharf began to haunt him, becoming not only the hero for his classical story, but also the subject of his nightmares. The traveller had at last found his way back to the quay of arrival, but the ship was already gone. "The man on the run", the narrator says, had "lived out his life" (*EA*: 92). His delirious interpretations of Chirico's painting work like a story-within-the-story, underlining his anxiety, the



same the lost man had felt. He recognizes himself as the drifter in his own story.

In the third chapter, “Ivy”, as the narrator walks through the manor grounds, he comes across the “half-rotted-away carcass of a hare” (*EA*: 168). The incident triggers another change in the narrator’s perception of a landscape that no longer showed its earlier perfection. The tone of the novel grows melancholic as he describes his landlord’s “morbid, last depression, almost an illness” (*EA*: 173), that, curiously, resembles his own illness, a mixture of disappointment and physical affliction. His mysterious landlord, whom he never meets, was a wealthy landowner whose fortune had grown during the empire. They shared the same hazards of History, but the link between the two men also separated them, as he comments:

This empire explained my birth in the New World, the language I used, the vocation and ambition I had; this empire in the end explained my presence there in the valley, in that cottage, in the grounds of the manor. But we were – or had started – at opposite ends of wealth, privilege, and in the hearts of different cultures (*EA*: 174).

The writer holds on to “the idea of change, or of “flux” (*EA*:190), an imaginary shield meant to protect himself from decay - metaphorically represented by the ivy that smothered the trees – and “grief”, a word that, like “decay” and “change”, becomes a motif in the novel.

In the following chapter, “Rooks” – ominous “birds of death” with “big black beaks, big black flapping wings” “squawking” and “circling overhead” (*EA*:267) – change is brought about by death or the disappearance of some of the characters attached to the manor: Alan, the would-be writer, commits suicide; Mr. Phillip, the “country-house servant” collapses and dies; Bray, the driver, gets religion and withdraws from the scene; Pitton, the gardener, is fired by the landowner. Jack’s garden had also been gradually “destroyed” and “finally concreted over” (*EA*: 301). In his fifties, the writer’s sadness grows deeper and his nightmares, grimmer, both merging in his gloomy Mediterranean fantasy on Chirico’s painting, “The Enigma of Arrival”.

In the last chapter, “The Ceremony of Arrival”, Mrs. Gandhi’s assassination by one of her bodyguards, in India, and the death of his younger sister, Sati, heighten the writer’s fears of death. After returning from a trip to Trinidad, where he attended the rituals of his sister’s cremation, he reflects on his Indian inheritance, rooted in misinterpretations of colonial history. He no longer feels bound to the “sanctities” passed on to him by his family, or created by his own fantasies. Free from what he calls his “sacred world”, he turns to Jack’s story, which had been put on hold; the idea was to evade the end of his allegory, where the traveller missed his ship and died. It is death that makes him “write very fast about Jack and his garden” (*EA*: 318), the book he names *The Enigma of Arrival*.

As a writer re-living his life in a Proustian mood of narration, he comes to terms with his own strangeness by creating a world where in one way or another everyone is a stranger. Like Joyce, the young artist writing out of grief and loneliness “elsewhere”, but in his native island, Naipaul, in his portrait of the older artist, forges a story where self-discovery and self-accomplishment bring man and artist together, an achievement that distinguishes *The Enigma of Arrival* from the other novels, justifying, thus, the use of literature as an attempt, if not to heal, to soothe deep wounds, as a few still believe it does. An “old artificer” of some sort, be he Hindu or not, will stand this writer “in good stead”.