

*In The Name Of  
God*



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**Postcolonial Reading of Two Novels by V.S. Naipaul:**

*Half a Life*

*The Mimic Men*

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement of Degree of  
Master of Arts in English Literature

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## Abstract

The present paper offers a postcolonial reading of two of the best novels by V. S. Naipaul – *Half a Life* and *The Mimic Men* – in five chapters. The focus of this research is on different notions of postcolonial criticism and their application on the two novels as discussed from Homi Bhabha's and Frantz Fanon's points of view.

Having introduced the life and literary career of V. S. Naipaul in the first chapter, the thesis is followed with a survey of postcolonial criticism and concepts of ambivalence, mimicry, hybridity and marginality. In the third chapter of the thesis, Naipaul's novel *Half a Life* is studied from Postcolonial perspective in which the situation of the main character Willie is discussed as a colonial subject in the metropolitan London as he tries to mimic the culture of England but cannot associate with it that results in a sense of exile and alienation. Chapter four deals with another novel, *The Mimic Men*, it has been tried to study Ralph Singh's character as a politician and colonial subject living in a private hotel in London with special regard to the notions of mimicry, hybridity and marginality. Ralph and Brown engage in politics and in Fanon's terms, they are middle class bourgeoisie who try to nationalize their economy but, nationalization is only an illusion inaccessible under the colonial domination.

This research analyzes how Naipaul's novels, *The Mimic Men* and *Half a Life*, show the clashing of the colonizing and the colonized cultures in

different settings. When the heroes travel to London to continue their education they find London a disappointment. Therefore, the formation of the identity is inseparable from ambivalence, hybridity, and mimicry which are the result of the effects of the opposing cultures on each other. Ralph and Willie are both the marginalized subjects in their colonized hometowns and the new brave world of England also brings nothing for them but a sense of exile and alienation. Moreover, they are placed in a third space which is not totally the white culture nor totally their own. In fact, in-betweenness is a main problem for both of them. They cannot find a proper place as home and all places they travel to are important in their identity-formation processes.

These exiled characters escape the disorder they feel in their country and by mimicking the dominant culture they want to be like the colonizer. But their mimicry is only a partial resemblance to that culture and there would be a mockery in their mimicry. By using English language as the representative of the dominant culture they try to mimic the colonizing culture. Willie, in his compositions tries to give himself an English identity and pretends that he is a Canadian boy who is ashamed of his own culture. When they travel to London, it is for both of them a place of great and final disorder and chaos.

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# Chapter One: Introduction

## *General Overview*

Sir Vidiyaahar Surajprasad Naipaul was born in Chaguaras, Trinidad, on 17 August 1932, the eldest son of a second-generation Indian. He was educated at Queen's Royal College, Trinidad, and after winning a government scholarship in England at University College Oxford, he worked briefly for the BBC as a writer and editor for the 'Caribbean Voices' program. His first books are comic portraits of Trinidadian Society. A spirit of pure comedy flows through Naipaul's early works. In his early fictions, the Trinidad trilogy, including *Miguel Street*, *The Mystic Masseur*, and *The suffrage of Elvira*, the author wields irony in order to manifest the corruption and failure of Trinidad he cannot bear – the stifling atmosphere – and therefore must fix a position in the world for himself. *Miguel Street* (1959), which is a collection of short



stories, won a Somerset Maugham award, and *The Mystic Masseur* (1975) won the mail on Sunday John Llewelyn Rhys Prize in 1958 and a film with a screenplay was made based on it by Caryl Phillips in 2001.

Naipaul began to write about colonial and post-colonial societies in the process of decolonization. Subsequent novels developing more political themes include: *The Mimic Men* (1967), winner of the WH Smith Literary Award in 1968, *In a Free State* (1971) winner of the Booker Prize for fiction, and *Guerrillas* (1975) and *A Bend in the River* (1979), the two novels which he considered the colonial condition of Africa. *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) is a personal account of Naipaul's life in England. *A Way in the World* (1994) is a formally experimental narrative that combines fiction and non-fiction in a historical portrait of Caribbean. *Half a Life* was published in 2001 and follows the adventures of Indian Willie Chandran in post-war Britain, a new life initiated by a chance encounter between his father and the novelist W. Somerset Maugham. *Magic Seeds* (2004) continues this story.

Naipaul began to travel for long periods in India and Africa. It was at a time of decolonization, when so many people over the whole world had to reassess their identity. Naipaul saw for himself the resulting turmoil of emotions, that collision of self-serving myth and guilt which make up today's bewildered world and prevent people from coming to terms with who they really are and to know how to treat one another. Critics have sometimes argued that people – in the third world especially – are trapped in their culture

and history without possibility of choice, and can only be free if others make them so. To them, V. S. Naipaul's vision that they have to take responsibility for themselves can seem like some sort of first world privilege and a conservative philosophy. It is no exaggeration to say that, he has shifted public opinion towards this understanding as no other writer has done.

The lack of acceptance and sense of exile are the two recurrent themes which appear in a number of V.S. Naipaul's early works and the culmination of which is found in *A Bend in the River*. What causes these two qualities to continuously appear as a part of Naipaul's 'tragically flawed' characters? While many viable solutions have already been presented to this point there is one contributing factor which has been little explored. Throughout his works Naipaul's characters often misperceive their surroundings. As a result, they feel alienated in a world that they thought they knew, but which they realize they know very little about. In a number of examples Naipaul's characters even end up questioning their own role in this alien environment. Naipaul tries to show the efforts by colonial subjects to forge a new and unique national identity. However, many of the dynamics of this development cause an even deeper sense of exile and alienation.

For examining themes of exile and alienation in Naipaul's works it is most beneficial to study the source of these emotions and how they are used in some of his early works. Naipaul's early writings focus on the experience of Trinidadians during the early twentieth century, a time when the concepts of

national and cultural autonomy first begin to appear on this island nation. These writings mirror Naipaul's own sense of cultural isolation. Literary critic, Selwyn R. Cudjoe, speaks of Naipaul as an "East Indian who can never reconcile his cultural heritage with the British-ruled and predominately African-inhabited island of Trinidad. As a result, he travels to England to begin his writings. However, he does not find peace there.

Naipaul represents the colonial subject in the colonizer's land. His Eastern Hindu heritage does not easily conform to Western Judeo-Christian society. In *An Area of Darkness*, he states that: "London was not the center of my world. I had been misled; but there was nowhere else to go" (Cudjoe 21). During this period he writes mostly in short story form as he seems unable to organize his thoughts into a coherent novel in which he expresses his solitary condition while living in London. Naipaul's works ultimately begin to examine the problems of East Indians as a whole rather than his personal despair.

Naipaul examines the plight of East Indians in Trinidad as an ethnic group who is separated from everyone else because of their vastly different religious and social beliefs. As a result of this isolation, the younger generations begin to adopt many western cultural traits, an acculturation which signifies a split between the original East Indians in Trinidad and their creolized sons and daughters. Naipaul cites this split as the decay and breakdown of the Hindu family, a phenomenon which according to Cudjoe leads the East Indians in Trinidad into a new era. This new era represents a

period when the East Indian community in Trinidad is in "transition from feudalism to capitalism" (Cudjoe 37). Many of Naipaul's first novels examine this transition. Feudalism is represented by the way of the Hindu religion: arranged marriages, the belief in not educating women, and the idea that one's fate is predetermined and irreversible. These concepts are incompatible with the more modern teachings of Christianity and Western culture which stresses individual freedom and self-determination. To accommodate these western beliefs, Naipaul advocates rejecting certain Hindu traits in order to assimilate more easily into Western culture. However, in all his infinite wisdom at this point in his career he does not advocate a complete renunciation of Hindu beliefs. He hopes that East Indians can strike a balance between East and West.

Naipaul's fictions and nonfictions since the 1960s have reflected an unenthusiastic view of postcolonial nationalism and nation building. He has had difficulty in believing in the ability of new nations in Africa and the Caribbean to raise themselves to a condition of economic autonomy and cultural authenticity. He has also been against a political rhetoric and agenda that calls for breaking cultural ties with European nations. Instead political skepticism, western cultural conservatism, and realist and modernist aesthetics have determined the selection and treatment of subjects in Naipaul's writings. These approaches have caused postcolonial intellectuals to complain about his lack of interest in local culture and to grumble about his

choice of material that reflect pessimistically on politics, revolution, and the prospects of national renewal.

One example of Naipaul's literature on post-colonialism is *The Mimic Men*. This novel analyzes the role of former colonial subjects in a post-colonial society. Naipaul focuses on the first post-colonial generation or the first free East Indians. As a result, they face a challenge which never existed in earlier generations. Cudjoe illustrates this situation by stating that since "slavery and colonialism reduce people to almost exclusively their economic functions the primary goal of independence should be to enable them to realize their social functions" (Cudjoe 101). However, this change is difficult for post-colonial citizens, because their former social functions were to be obedient colonial subjects, hardly a position which encourages self-realization. His characters are unable to realize their true function because they "mimic the men of the New World . . . colonial people are doomed forever to be pale reflectors of the dominant power" (Cudjoe 102). As a result, Naipaul's characters in *The Mimic Men* are in a constant state of disarray.

The related themes of homelessness, alienation, and dislocation are characteristic of Naipaul's novels. Most critics deal with his sense of homelessness, focusing on his early writings. Naipaul indeed goes through a series of life stages between homelessness and home as so vividly portrayed in his fictions and nonfictions.

If Naipaul's cultural displacement and existential unease would seem to explain why he is quick on the trigger with his opinions, two forces from his Trinidadian childhood and youth help to explain the occasional racial caste of his opinions and the effect of these opinions on his fictions. These two forces are an undertone of Indian pessimism and a persistent lack of generosity in one's estimation of blacks. Throughout his political fictions – including *The Mimic Men* (1967), *In a Free State* (1971), *Guerrillas* (1975), and *A Bend in the River* (1979) – these attitudes direct, shape, and color his work. At the core of the power of *The Mimic Men*, for example, is a passive East Indian protagonist who anticipates failure and explicit racial characterizations. The preoccupation of the narrator with the body odor of Africans in *In a Free State* has understandably focused much debate on Naipaul's possible racism. As for the influence of Naipaul's ancestral pessimism it may be seen in the forgotten colonial towns and decaying hotels in *In a Free State*, in the acidic skepticism turned on white Western radicals in *Guerrillas*, and in the delineation of Salim's experience of historical vulnerability in *A Bend in the River*. In each stance there is an almost Eastern sense of the inevitable emptiness and false pride behind worldly endeavor, of the transience ultimately of all power and empire.

Born in Trinidad, the descendant of indentured laborers shipped from India, Naipaul, has come on a long and marvelous journey. His upbringing familiarized him with every sort of deprivation material and cultural. Courage and persistence were required to hold a belief quite so unfashionable in recent

years. But, it is this belief that has made Naipaul the universal writer and humanist that he is. The comic spirit is still present though submerged in his later books beneath a darkening sense of tragedy. Naipaul has written about slavery, revolution, guerrillas, corrupt, politicians, and the oppressed, interpreting the rages so deeply rooted in our societies.

### *Objective and significance of the study*

Postcolonial discourse like the other minority discourses is mainly about the location of culture. This newly emergent literary study describes an on-going process of identity loss and identity recovery for non-Westerners. In the domain of postcolonial Literature different ethnic groups have their ethnic, cultural, and historical specificities based on their different original, cultural heritages. Hence, the condition of the dislocated and dispossessed is complicated, because they cannot find a 'home' of their own. Andrew Gurr in his book *Writers in Exile* argues that "deracination, exile, and alienation in varying forms are the conditions of existence for the modern writer the world over. The basic response to such condition is a search for identity, the quest for a home through self-discovery or self-realization" (Gurr 14). The slave colonies of the West Indian island exemplify this genre to which many displaced people belong. They have been uprooted from their native land to be transplanted into alien environment, which give rise to their sense of homelessness, placelessness, alienation, and deracination.

V. S. Naipaul is focused on the people living within a post-colonial environment. The remaining effects colonialism has on culture and society trickle down to the individual. The human beings live with a feeling of displacement, insecurity, and disorientation due to a social environment which is half-developed and half-eradicated. These are the leitmotifs that carry through the characters of *Half a Life* and *The Mimic Men*. The environments he exposes himself to, have one similarity: he examines the post-colonial life of individuals. He talks to people of all social classes and professions and visits urban as well as rural areas. In this venture he finds idiosyncratic themes of people living in a sphere torn between native and foreign cultural significance, indigenous, and imported religious values, and the interests of individuals with and without power.

The first thing to be said about *Half a Life* is that, it is a much quieter performance than previous Naipaul fiction. The style of the book is carefully stripped down to leave us with an unornamented narrative line. The novel is made up of three fragments each of which takes place on a different continent. This novel records Naipaul's exiled life and manifests the ruptures among subjectivity, geography, and language toward multicultural and fluid identity. The masterpiece also portrays the protagonist Willie's constant exiled life from India, England, Africa, and Germany, so as to rediscover and affirm his self-identity. Willie Chandran a blank, innocent figure, who wanders



around rather like Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* looking for the good life he believes to exist somewhere else without ever locating it.

In this research, Bhabha's theories of ambivalence, hybridity, and mimicry are applied to these two novels and also in discussing the marginality of the colonized nations, Fanon's theories regarding the notions of anti-colonial movements and the formation of the national party in a colonized society are debated. In the light of Post-colonial approach the researcher tries to answer the following questions:

- What is Naipaul's treatment toward the notion of mimicry?
- Regarding the notion of ambivalence, how the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is defined?
- What is Naipaul's treatment of the notion of hybridization? How the identity of colonizer and colonized is constructed?
- What is the significance of adopting western names for the heroes of these two novels?
- What is Naipaul's reaction toward Eastern marginality? Who is the Other and therefore marginalized in the text?
- How does Naipaul represent the Isabella society in *The Mimic Men*?
- How does the masculinity of a colonized man is menaced by his confrontations with the British counterpart?
- How does Naipaul depict the anti-colonial movement and the formation of the national party in a colonized country?

- What is the middle class bourgeoisie phase in the struggle towards independence in a colonized nation?

Using Lacan and Derrida's ideas about psychoanalysis and deconstruction, Bhabha tries to answer questions about identity, identity formation, and crisis of identity. In his essay on Fanon, Bhabha writes about identity in relation to the ambivalence of psychic identification. Identity does not subsist in perceiving a self relation in human nature or a place for the self in a distinction between culture and nature, but in a relation to the Other. Only through the Other can the subject locate his desire for difference, while constructing and finding confirmation of the fantasy of its identity. Colonial identity is a problem arising between the colonizer and the colonized, a nervous condition of fantasy, a desire, a violent neurotic relation far different from the civilizing ambition of colonial government and society.

Answering the question of identity formation is a crucial factor in post-colonial criticism. For Bhabha – the main critic in this research – an inquiry into the structures of colonial discourses must be complemented by an analysis of subjectivity and consciousness. Bhabha's notions of ambivalence, hybridity, the third space, and mimicry best sums up Naipaul's colonial situation, his search for the identity and the narrative strategy that emerges from it. Naipaul's writings frequently carry references to his complex cultural heritage rooted in three countries: Trinidad the country of his birth, India

whose ancestral ties regulated his tightly-knit family circle, and Britain the source of his colonial education.

V. S. Naipaul has been a controversial writer everywhere: in Trinidad and Tobago and the West Indies where he was born; in India on which he wrote three books; in England where he has lived all his life; in Africa where he has located some of his fiction, in Latin America and in the United States where his work became known fairly late in his career. Even among the literary critics who write about his work, there is a fair amount of controversy. Naipaul's controversial nature is due to a brutal honesty and his unwillingness to be diplomatic or give politically correct answers. Such a writer is to be celebrated and embraced if we truly believe that the quest of an artist is to discover and reveal truth, and that one of the roles of an artist is to provoke and to cause us to think and rethink.

In *Half a Life* and *The Mimic Men*, he demonstrates the colonial subjects' predicaments and their struggles for a place in the world stemming from their feelings of alienation, isolation, homelessness, rootlessness, and placelessness. These are the novels that best show the notions of hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence of colonial discourse which are discussed from Bhabha's point of view, and also the notion of marginality and anti-colonial resistant movement of a colonized nation and Fanon's theories regarding the notion of the middle-class bourgeoisie in an underdeveloped society. In these two novels, there are encounters of the colonizer and the colonized cultures, ambivalence

of their relationship, clashing of the two cultures, the mimicking of the colonizer's culture by the colonized subject, marginality of the colonized nation, and resistant struggles against colonial domination. So, the researcher tries to apply the post-colonial approach to these novels in order to explain these notions in these novels.

### *Materials and Methodology*

Postcolonialism develops from 4000-year of cultural relations between colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Western world. During this time the West becomes as colonizer and African and Asian countries as colonized. In nineteenth century Great Britain was the largest colonial power in the world and terms such as British Empire and colonial interests were common terms in international policies. There was a belief that British people were biologically superior to any other race and these people themselves believed that Great Britain was destined to rule over the world. By the early twentieth century England's domination over its territories began to disappear. This was a process known as decolonization.

Postcolonial theory emerges when the colonization occurs and the colonized people's oppression and the loss of their identities are concerned for a close study. The direct clashing of the colonized' culture with the conquering culture and their hopes about their identities in their colonized nations are the main debates for postcolonial theories. How the colonized