

Revista **Alicantina** de **E**studios **I**ngleses

nº 16, November 2003



Departamento de Filología Inglesa
Universidad de Alicante

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Marcial Pons Librero
San Sotero 6
28037 MADRID (Spain)
revistas@marcialpons.es

Portada: Enrique Pérez
Gabinete de Diseño de la Universidad de Alicante

ISSN: 0214-4808

Depósito Legal: A-22-1989

Edición de: COMPOBELL, S.L. Murcia

Estos créditos pertenecen a la edición impresa de la obra

Edición electrónica:



**Narratives of Displacement: V.S. Naipaul's
Indians in Exile**

Jesús Varela-Zapata

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Narratives of Displacement: V.S. Naipaul's Indians in Exile

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Abstract

This paper analyses the characterization of Willie Chandran, the protagonist of Naipaul's latest fictional work *Half a Life* (2001), within the context of the fabric of Naipaul's fiction, in which exiled Indians constitute the most identifiable type or category of characters. This is only to be expected from a writer who has championed the condition of the third-world expatriate and has never lost contact with the Indian roots of his ancestors.

As happens in the case of previous characters, Willie attempts to improve his present condition by remaking his past and his own personality. He also complies with the stereotype of the Indian expatriate who feels displaced in a metropolis he had presumed to be acquainted with (because of the cultural impositions of colonial-

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ism) but which proves to be a totally unknown, not to say hostile, environment.

Finally, taking into account that the most significant characters in Naipaul's work are the protagonists of works such as *The Mimic Men*, *A Bend in the River* or *The Enigma of Arrival*, all of them first-person narrators of their stories, we will consider to what extent does Willie Chandran, portrayed mainly through third-person narrative, depart from the overall positive characterization accorded to them.

Indian heritage looms large in V.S. Naipaul's biography and literary career. Obviously, he was been aware from his childhood that the connection of Trinidadian Indians with the land of their ancestors had been affected by the passing of time and physical separation. Eventually, he becomes an agnostic who finds that the religious rituals performed at home are odd and even unpleasant. However, one of his first literary journeys takes him to India, in a clear attempt to trace his roots.

It is noteworthy that Naipaul is convinced that colonialism has created a historical vacuum in the Caribbean; Suman Gupta (1999: 35-36) summarizes the writer's negative perception of the Caribbean, as it is portrayed in *The Middle Passage*: "Naipaul sees little that is positive in the racially mixed population: in his view the racial and cultural communities do not

harmonize, inevitably there is conflict amongst them. More importantly, instead of synthesized hybridised culture appearing, he encounters cultural and racial conservatism, which is matched by the absurdity of their displacement from their origins". *The Middle Passage*, published after a seven-month tour of the region, sponsored by the Trinidadian Prime Minister, Eric Williams, explains why Naipaul never considered coming back to his country after his stay in Britain to attend university. The relationship between the difficulties in the West Indies in the transition from colonialism to independence and Naipaul's antagonism towards the region is documented in various authors (Varela-Zapata, 1996).

In this way Naipaul, permanently looking for roots, has adhered with increasing conviction to his Indian background. He explains his writing on the land of his ancestors by saying: "I was close to India in my upbringing. I grew up in a very, very Indian household. That was the world for me". This seems to confirm Fanon's perception (1963: 148-149) that "when dealing with young independent nations, the nation is passed over for the race, and the tribe is preferred to the state". This is in keeping with the fact that one of Naipaul's earliest travel books, *An Area of Darkness*, reflects his first and, to a large extent, disappointing, encounter with India. He feels deeply troubled

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and is shocked by the extreme poverty and, above all, by the shortcomings in social organization which hinder any prospects of economic and human development. As happened in subsequent journeys to other regions in the world, objectivity fell prey to anger and it was not uncommon for Naipaul to explore the ground that separated him from Hindu nihilism and chaos, to the extent of disclaiming his Indian connections. For all this criticism, Naipaul's emotional attachment to the land of his ancestors was not severed and in *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990) he redressed the balance to mark his partial reconciliation with the country. Helen Hayward (2002: 111) sums up Naipaul's writing on India by stating:

He begins by writing a travel book and comedy of manners in *An Area of Darkness*. In *India: A Wounded Civilization*, he appears in the guise of a prophet of doom, and has excited hostility by assuming the position of one who knows more about India than Indians do, and by forecasting an impending chaos in Indian civilization, while satirizing the progress of Indian self-rule. In *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, Naipaul is reborn into a new persona: accepting and tolerant, he listens to characters as they recount the narrative of their own lives, and he refrains from offering overt authorial judgements.

For all his interest in the country, however, the writer will not consider settling down in India and, reluctant to come back

to the West Indies, his residence in the U.K. becomes permanent, with long periods of travelling and reporting all over the world. As Timothy Weiss has stated (1992: 16-17): “Exile, then, as an experience of not-belonging, as an epistemology, and as a manner of perception and encounter informs Naipaul’s works, variously shaping their characters, themes, narration, and views of the world”. In this way, Naipaul has joined the ranks of a myriad of individuals from former colonial outposts now claiming a status as citizens of the world; in an interview (Adrian Rowe-Evans, 1971: 59) he states: “I come from a small society; I was aware that I had no influence in the world; I was apart from it. And then I belonged to a minority group, I moved away, became a foreigner [...] Because one doesn’t have a side, doesn’t have a country, doesn’t have a community; one is entirely an individual”.

Naipaul has been criticized for this detached attitude; Rob Nixon (1992: 17) exposes his “fashioning and sustaining an autobiographical persona who is accepted at face value as a permanent exile, a refugee, a homeless citizen of the world”. However, it is surprising to note that other critics, from very different backgrounds and attitudes to the world, such as is the case with Gayatri Spivak (1990: 37-38), refer to their expatriate condition in terms which remind us of Naipaul: “I think

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it's important for people not to feel rooted in one place. So, wherever I am, I feel I'm on the run in some way. [...] I'm devoted to my native language, but I cannot think it as natural, because, to an extent, one is never natural ... one is never at home". Graham Huggan (2001: 85) points out that the perception of not belonging, shared by established writers such as Naipaul or Rushdie, with long careers in Britain, is largely subscribed by critics and academics who will label them as 'cosmopolitan,': "to suggest that in some deep-rooted, almost atavistic sense, they are immigrant writers who 'really belong' somewhere else".

Given Naipaul's condition as an exile and the claim of his Indian ancestry, it is not surprising that Indian characters living as expatriates cover a large section in Naipaul's production: Ralph Singh, in *The Mimic Men*; Randolph, in "A Christmas Story," written in 1962 and published in the collection titled *A Flag on the Island* (1967); Santosh in "One out of Many" and the unnamed protagonist in "Tell Me Who to Kill" (both stories included in *In a Free State*,); Salim, in *A Bend in the River*; the unnamed protagonist of *The Enigma of Arrival*. They make up a gallery which complies with Bhabha's definition of the global society (1990: 291): "Gatherings of exiles and emigrés and refugees, gathering on the edge of 'foreign cultures';

gathering at the frontiers; gathering in the ghettos or cafés of city centres; gathering in the half-life, half-light of foreign tongues”.

The latest contribution to this list is Willie Chandran in *Half a Life* (2001), a work whose critical assessment is unavoidably linked to the fact that Naipaul had previously avowed not to write fiction any longer. He considered, at a certain point in his career, that the novel as a genre was dead because of the unsuitability of this artistic form to reflect adequately the contemporary world. In an interview he admitted having lost faith in fiction and the possibilities it offered to the writer to develop his ideas: “Before the novel in Europe there was the essay, the narrative poem, theatre, the epic poem [...] There is no need for us to consider the novel now as the principal form” (Rashid, 1997: 167). Naipaul further accounted for his decision to give up writing novels (2000: 28): “Fiction had taken me as far as it could go. There were certain things it couldn’t deal with. It couldn’t deal with my years in England; there was no social depth to the experience; it seemed more a matter for autobiography. And it couldn’t deal with my growing knowledge of the wider world”.

Therefore, the publication of *Half a Life* came as a surprise and it has not been greeted with unanimous acclaim. In jour-

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nal and newspaper reviews several authors have pointed out its technical failures and inconsistencies (time gaps, abrupt shifts in point of view, the presentation of barely sketched characters or the cliché-ridden and badly written prose) and somehow tend to attribute these shortcomings to authorial neglect. (note 2) The writer himself admits (Dhondy, 2001) having sketched this work while he was engaged with what he calls *major books*.

Half a Life is generally considered as a kind of coda to Naipaul's production, where we can track down many of his earlier themes and characters. The fact is that the protagonist, Willie Chandran is one more in the long list of Indian characters created by Naipaul, although one of the few to have been born in India. As happens with his fictional counterparts, the issue of the quest for his self looms large in the narrative. This is reflected in the fact that Willie decides, at some point in his life, to give himself a new identity (2001: 60),

He could within reason re-make himself and his past and his ancestry [...] now he began to alter other things about himself, but in small, comfortable ways. He had no big over-riding idea. He took a point here and another there. The newspapers, for instance, were full of news about the trade unions, and it occurred to Willie one day that his mother's uncle, the firebrand of the backwards, who sometimes at public meetings wore a red scarf (in imitation

of his hero, the famous backward revolutionary and atheistic poet Bharatidarsana), it occurred to Willie that this uncle of his mother's was a kind of trade union leader, a pioneer of worker's rights. He let drop the fact in conversation and in tutorials, and he noticed that it cowed people.

By remaking his past, more to his liking or convenience, he is following his father's example, who had also decided to wear a mask which suited him best in his effort to find a place in society; as he says: "I began to acquire something like a reputation -modest, but nonetheless quite real- in certain quite influential intellectual or spiritual circles abroad. There was no escape now. In the beginning I felt I had trapped myself. But very soon I found that the role fitted" (31-32). Similarly, Willie is reported to have written a composition for the Canadian missionaries who taught him, pretending he was Canadian himself: he called his parents "Mom" and "Pop" and he created a story of an archetypal Western middle-class family. The third-person narrator in *Half a Life* remarks, "All the details of this foreign life -the upstairs house, the children's room- had been taken from American comic books" (39-40). Willie's compliance with colonial assumptions will be rewarded with full marks, an early encouragement from the establishment to carry on with the impersonation. Once in London, he follows similar strategies: "he adapted certain things he had read, and

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he spoke of his mother as belonging to an ancient Christian community of the subcontinent, a community almost as old as Christianity itself. He kept his father as a Brahmin. He made his father's father a 'courtier'. So, playing with words, he began to re-make himself. It excited him, and began to give him a feeling of power" (61).

This attitude in both members of the Chandran family resembles other passages in Naipaul fiction where characters play similarly with the fuzzy edges of appearance and reality. This is the case with Ralph Singh's conscious decision to abandon his real name, Ranjit Kripalsingh, so as to do away with some aspects in his past. The shortened Anglicized name partly erases his condition as an Indian; this is more surprising when we consider that the young Singh is only eight years old, but already capable of concocting such an elaborate strategy: "The name Ralph I chose for the sake of the initial, which was also that of my real name. In this way I felt I mitigated the fantasy or deception" (1969: 93). Like his father had previously done, he wants to *relocate* himself questioning his Asian roots in the West Indian milieu. Singh is explicitly for the manipulation of one's image: "We become what we see of ourselves in the eyes of others" (20); this can be also interpreted as a defensive strategy against a hostile reality:

“I exaggerated the role they admired” (21). Similarly, Salim says in *A Bend in the River*: “Africa was a place where we had to survive” (1980: 126). The individual comes to realize that sometimes it is more advisable to play a fictional role rather than keeping to one’s own personality; thus, Salim is not reluctant to go into this kind of deception and his narrative is full of references to his acting differently according to specific social contexts. Obviously, this attitude is related to the multi-layered and ambivalent concept of mimicry, deeply embedded in the colonized. Although it encapsulates originally the hierarchical assumption and imitation of metropolitan values, mimicry can be subverted so as to become an instrument of mockery and menace on the part of the colonized (Bhabha, 1994: 86). In the case of Naipaul’s characters, mimicry can also be interpreted as one more strategy of resistance or a strategy of survival.

Willie Chandran is very close to the protagonist of a short story from the early period of the writer. Randolph in “A Christmas Story” is an Indo-Caribbean who estranges himself from his community by becoming a Christian. Like Willie, he is attracted by Presbyterian Canadian missionaries and he will also get engaged to a headmaster’s daughter, so as to get social promotion. He changes his name from Choonilal to

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Randolph, in an effort to erase his roots; for him, Hindu religious practice is perceived as an empty and messy ritual, he considers traditional clothes such as *dhoti* embarrassing; in contrast, Christians are perceived as more rational and even neat. However, Randolph values more than anything else the professional opportunities he will have by opting for the new religious denomination. Presbyterians will enable him to become a teacher, a coveted position for humble rural Indians who would be delighted to marry their daughters to him “to acquire respectability and the glamour of a learned profession” (1967: 31-32). When he is promoted to school principal Randolph thinks he has achieved the zenith of the social ladder. It is interesting to note, however, that a pessimistic feeling pervades the story from the very beginning since his career will prove a failure because of his managing incompetence; what is worse, Randolph will resent his estrangement from the community and he pitifully evinces his attachment to the deepest Hindu feelings: he misses eating with his fingers and has to resist a profound disgust to eating beef. Randolph will end up characterized as an archetypal mimic man whose impersonation verges on the pathetic: “I hung my treasured framed teaching diploma on the wall, with my religious pictures and some scenes of the English countryside. It was also

my good fortune at this time to get an old autographed photograph of one of our first missionaries” (34).

Randolph departs from the model of Indians depicted by Naipaul insofar as most of them are expatriates trying to find their place in foreign environments, although he is commonly referred to as an exile within his own community. It is well known that exile revolves around the splitting of one’s personality, sometimes leading to mental disorder such as depression (haunting Naipaul himself for some periods of his life) or schizophrenia. Furthermore, the plight of the exiled colonial may arise from the hardship at facing the reality at the place of arrival and confronting it with the stereotypes and imaginary landscapes created in schoolrooms, through canonical literature or films.

Thus, Santosh is reported in “One out of Many” to have been leading a happy life surrounded by friends in the streets of Mumbai until he moved to Washington, only to find isolation and lack of communication; once in the United States he faces the quest for his identity. The old bonds of friendship in India, materialized in ritual behaviour that had made him feel integrated in his social milieu, are shattered by the coldness and distant attitude of the Americans, especially whites. The sudden transition from one society to another makes his

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isolation in America even more poignant. Similarly, in “Tell Me Who to Kill” the West Indian protagonist comes to London, where his experience as an exile is equally traumatic. He is detached from the new environment where he merely does routine chores since his working activity is only intended as a means of survival, not leading to any kind of social integration. Opposite the British Museum, the immigrant ponders on and envies the better fortunes of tourists who will know their immediate future, once they board their buses (1973: 94). John Thieme (1987: 154) points out that this character is “less obviously Hindu” than Santosh since his ancestors, like Naipaul’s, had come to the West Indies as indentured labourers, in this way severing the links with the motherland. However, Thieme recalls several passages that confirm that “After years of living in England, his deepest feelings remain Hindu”.

Willie Chandran is one more character travelling from a Third World country to London. His arrival in the metropolis is as puzzling as that of the author and his other Indians. The previous assumptions created by literature, films and all sorts of colonial preconceptions about the centrality of the Empire are soon questioned, when confronted with reality:

He knew that London was a great city. His idea of a great city was of a fairyland of splendour and dazzle, and when he got to London and began walking about its streets he felt let down. He

didn't know what he was looking at [...] The only two places he knew about in the city were Buckingham Palace and Speakers' Corner. He was disappointed by Buckingham Palace. He thought the maharaja's palace in his own state was far grander, more like a palace, and this made him feel, in a small part of his heart, that the kings and queens of England were impostors, and the country a little bit of a sham. His disappointment turned to something like shame -at himself, for his gullibility- when he went to Speakers' Corner (52).

Willie is not able to match his previous images of the land and the real city; therefore he is reported to be routinely doing his university academic assignments "with a kind of blindness," living "as in a daze," "within that idea of make-believe," and feeling "unanchored, with no idea of what lay ahead" (58). His situation will be further complicated when racial riots break out and he retreats into hiding, obviously recalling Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the stereotype of the inner exile that can be tracked down elsewhere in *Half a Life* in the figures of Willie's father or the white settlers in Mozambique. Timothy Weiss's account of Ralph Singh's experience in *The Mimic Men* at the moment of arrival can serve to explain the feelings of Willie and other exiles, including Naipaul himself (1992: 96): "His images reflect a colonial and neocolonial dualism, which considers the metropolis or First World as central and true and the colony as marginal and false. A product of his co-

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lonial background, his romantic, quasi-religious images of the metropolis and the world beyond the colony assure his disappointment and eventual disillusionment on his arrival there”.

It is significant that the most prominent accounts of exile in Naipaul's work are told by the protagonists themselves, sometimes acting as proper writers. This is the case with Ralph Singh and the unnamed narrator of *The Enigma*, who are both presented while in the process of creating the story we are reading. This is the result of their artistic devotion and the vehicle to express their feelings; in fact, writing may prove to be the only way to give coherence to a chaotic outside world, whose lack of order is partly responsible for the individual's emotional instability, leading him to question even his own existence.

Writing reinstates his inner balance, a process that can be traced to V. S. Naipaul himself; as Victor Ramraj says (1984: 193): “Little of importance in his past existed for him until he started writing about it in *Miguel Street* and subsequent novels. And little existed for him in the present; he was overwhelmed by a sense of extinction [...] until he acquired a less illusory, more tangible existence by becoming a published writer. Through writing he came into being”.

In fact, once and again, in essays, letters and interviews Naipaul equates writing to survival. In *Reading and Writing*, one of his latest autobiographical pieces, the first words give some clues about his vocation: "I was eleven, no more, when the wish came to me to be a writer; and then very soon it was a settled ambition" (2000a: 3). It seems that a complete series of details will follow but this short piece (only 35 pages in the first edition) does not allow for such coverage. In turn, the narrator indulges in references about his school reading list and prescribed books. In an earlier autobiographical piece, *A Way in the World*, it seems as if the same voice is recalling another episode of his vocation when he is guided by his father through Port of Spain, until they reach the newspaper streets, arousing in the six or seven year old boy "this new excitement, of paper and ink and urgent printing" (1994: 12). This scene also reminds us of Stephen Dedalus' trip to Cork in the company of his father, who represents all the negative values associated with Ireland, so that when he goes on a drinking spree with his cronies, the sensitive young boy feels humiliated. On the contrary, Naipaul reveres his father and appreciates the influence of his modest writing career as a local journalist on his own vocation. Thus, the young Vidia Naipaul writes to his "dearest Pa" immediately after graduating from Oxford (2000b: 268): "As soon as I have got a job, you

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are to come and live with me and fulfil an ambition of mine to have you idle, content -and I shall certainly see that you have some whisky to hand”.

In *The Enigma of Arrival*, one more attempt by Naipaul at painting the portrait of the artist, the protagonist is about to start a trip to Europe, a hallmark in his literary career: “This journey began some days before my eighteen birthday [...] It was the journey that took me from my island, Trinidad, off the northern coast of Venezuela, to England” (1987: 97). (note 3) In *A Way in the World* the narrator also refers to the redemptive quality of writing: “at the age of twenty-two, unprotected, and feeling unprotected, with no vision of the future, only with ambition, I had no idea what kind of person I was. Writing should have helped me to see, to clarify myself” (1994: 84). In this way, it is interesting to return to Naipaul's earlier masterpiece, *A House for Mr Biswas*, to realize that the writing vocation is a constant in many of Naipaul's Indian characters, even those who do not undergo the plight of exile. Biswas will soon be aware of the fact that he is endowed with a literary vocation, rising from the deepest layers of his soul. After his mother's funeral writing soothes him and helps him recover his emotional balance: “he got out of bed, worked his way to the light switch, turned it on, got paper and pencil, and began to write. He addressed

his mother. He did not think of rhythm; he used no cheating abstract words [...] The poem written, his selfconsciousness violated, he was whole again (1969: 484)".

First-person narrators in *The Mimic Men*, *The Enigma of Arrival* and *A Bend in the River* show an attitude towards books and learning which often verges on fascination and fits into the pattern defined by Bruce King (1993: 9) as the "Brahmin's devotion to study, scholarship, philosophical thought" ascribed to Naipaul. In *The Enigma* the great pleasure experienced by the protagonist at being in a book-shop is confronted with memories of the smaller and miscellaneous shops in Port of Spain, where books were grossly mixed with assorted everyday common gadgets, as an indication of the sterility of intellectual life in the British colony. Once in New York he buys a copy of *The New York Times*; this ready availability is a source of wonder for a person who has evinced his artistic and literary inclinations, as the multiple references to painters, writers or the classical world indicate. Salim in *A Bend in the River* regrets not having had the chance to go abroad so as to carry on with his studies, something he perceives as a privilege others have enjoyed. Throughout the novel there is a deliberate insistence on his attempt to fill his cultural gaps by reading all

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sorts of materials. Given his background and circumstances his ability to quote Latin inscriptions is also noteworthy.

It is in this respect, the intellectual stature and attitude to writing and learning, that we will realize that there are overt differences between Willie Chandran and the protagonists of *The Mimic Men*, *A Bend in the River* and *The Enigma of Arrival*, considered so far. These are all first-person narrators who are somehow allowed to poeticise some elements in their biography. Lillian Feder (2001: 235-6) points out that “The affinity between Ralph Singh or Salim and their author, for example, is readily apparent”. Furthermore, taking into account the well-known autobiographical nature of the protagonist in *The Enigma*, Feder (2001: 235) states that “Naipaul has\$ ‘split’ himself into a variety of characters who share certain of his traits and qualities of his background. This is especially true of those who write”.

Willie Chandran is also a writer but it is difficult to place him in such direct relationship with the author. In the case of Willie, the desired distance with the character is established mainly by means of third-person narrative, used in most sections of the novel. In this way, some elements in his characterization are clearly demeaning. The paternal influence on his writing career is not conveyed in the reverential tone mentioned

above in connection with works such as *The Enigma, A Way in the World* or in Naipaul's biographical collection *Letters Between a Father and Son*. On the contrary, Willie hates his father as much as Stephen in Joyce's *Portrait*. After his progenitor's 10-year-long Herculean task of telling the history of their family he asks his son for a comment; he spits out laconically: "I despise you" (35). Furthermore, Willie writes the story of a man who makes a vow to kill his father; this alarms Willie's father to the point of thinking he has reared a monster: "This boy will poison what remains of my life. I must get him far away from here" (43); "His mind is diseased. He hates me and he hates his mother," 47. His fears are later turn to alarm when he catches a glimpse of another story by Willie where a father kills, although accidentally, his two sons.

It is not possible to equate mechanically first-person narrative and a positive treatment of the protagonist, since this rule would be broken in "A Christmas Story" as we have already seen, but the fact is that we might consider this an exception in the writer's career. Suman Gupta helps to explain this oddity by saying that Naipaul, in this story from a very early stage in his career, is experimenting "with narratorial voices which emulate characters that are not omniscient or identifiable with the author" (26).

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It is not difficult to realize that Willie's involvement with culture gets ridiculed and his relationship to writing seems very trivial and there is an air of foreboding in the family connection to Somerset Maugham, who will scornfully answer Willie's letters asking for help. It is to be expected that someone named after a celebrity, for the sake of friendship, be let down when reading, in laconic terms: "It was nice getting your letter. I have very nice memories of India, and it is always nice hearing from Indian friends. Yours very sincerely"(58). Willie's irrelevance is further emphasized by other letters from family acquaintances, such as the one who grossly insults him by making a fatal spelling error: "Dear Chandran, Of course I remember your father. My favourite babu [...] 'Babu', an anglicised Indian, was a mistake; the word should have been 'sadhu', an ascetic". The narrator not only foregrounds the humiliation inflicted on Willie's family but, what is more relevant, also evinces an ironic distance from the protagonist, exposing Willie as less than dignified: "But Willie didn't mind. The letter seemed friendly" (56).

In this line it will not be difficult to interpret Willie's writing career as a mock endeavour. He starts writing stories to give vent to his anger because of his father's disdainful attitude to him. However, this is not a genuine enterprise; the narra-

tor makes us aware that Willie is writing what is expected of him, an attitude he will resume once in London, although his attempt at fashioning a writing career there seems more serious. Even in this case, his first steps as a published writer are determined by chance: "Roger said, 'I still have no idea what you intend to do. Is there a family business? Are you one of the idle rich?' Willie had learned to keep a straight face when embarrassing things were said and to walk round the embarrassment. He said 'I want to write.'" Once more the point of view from which story is told remains instrumental for the negative image projected by the character, and it does not go unnoticed that the narrator is eager to point out immediately: "It wasn't true. The idea hadn't occurred to him until that moment, and it had occurred to him because Roger, embarrassing him, had made him think fast" (82). Willie's stature as a writer is further toned down when we realize that he is applying the simplistic writing recipes of an opportunist turned into a literary agent: "You should begin in the middle and end in the middle, and it should all be there ... Have you read Hemingway? You should read the early stories. There's one called 'The Killers'. It's only a few pages, almost all dialogue" (83). Soon after, the narrator reports Willie planning to rewrite one of his pieces, making it "almost all dialogue" (85). It is clear Willie is exposed as a futile, worthless writer, an idea which is

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corroborated if we bear in mind that Naipaul expresses in an interview (Rashid, 1995: 167): “Different cultures have different ways of feeling, seeing, different visions, ideas of human achievement and behaviour. If you try to write like Hemingway and you are writing about India it will not match”.

Willie's mimicry goes to the extent that the narrator considers that it is easier for him to write borrowed stories far outside his own experience. Mention of the most canonical of writers in English cannot be but one more step in the ironical depiction of this character: “Shakespeare had done it, with his borrowed settings and borrowed stories, never with direct tales from his own life or the life around him” (86). Willie's antiheroic departure from his literary career also deserves mention. He rejects a commission to report on race riots in London; when a BBC producer tries to allure him into this kind of vicarious writing, sacrificing truth and journalist ethics to the advantage of commercialism and drama his indignity leads him to bargain for the fee; only the disagreement about monetary issues makes him turn down the offer.

As a conclusion, we can say that V.S. Naipaul, a descendant of indentured Indian labourers transported to Trinidad in the XIX century, has never adopted any kind of West Indian allegiance, turning instead to a search for roots in the Indian

tradition. Early in his career he started writing about the land of his ancestors and to this day he still shows interest and preoccupation with current affairs in India. However, the fact is that he has neither considered settling down in this country nor coming back to the Caribbean, claiming his status as a citizen of the world and permanent exile which has earned him much criticism from certain quarters.

These are the circumstances that can arguably explain why expatriate Indians make up the most distinctive pattern of characterization in his work. Their inadaptation and struggle to come to terms with an alien environment turns out to be a highly productive line in Naipaul's fiction, related to the numerous autobiographical passages in works like *A Way in the World*, *Finding the Centre* and *Reading and Writing*. In fact, in a work such as *The Enigma of Arrival*, the Indian protagonist and narrator can be identified to a large extent with the author's own voice and circumstances, giving rise to long controversial discussions over the real fictional condition of this book.

There is some evidence that allows one to consider that Naipaul's fiction is a continuum, confirming his own assertion that he is always writing the same book (Bryden, 1971: 367). In this way, we might expect Naipaul's latest fictional character,

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Willie Chandran, to share many of the features we find in the Indian protagonists of previous works. Like them, he undergoes the ordeal of exile, marked by loneliness, a quest for the self and an effort to grasp the outside world, which does not conform with previous assumptions made in a back-water colonial environment. This experience is related to the binary centre/periphery discourse that hierarchically structures reality so as to focus on metropolitan values that are transmitted and assimilated by the colonized. However, colonial individuals cannot appropriate the metropolitan reality so easily and, when confronted with its topography and social milieu, they realize poignantly that they do not belong in there, disrupting their sense of place. Thus Willie is reported to be “blind” or to go into hiding, in such a way as to seem a mere repetition of scenes from earlier works by Naipaul. Some of the coincidences with these have to do also with Willie’s delving into his past and his willingness to manipulate it so as to achieve a new identity. This may involve a certain degree of impersonation, related to the idea of mimicry imbedded in colonial subjects, as can be seen *passim* in Naipaul’s fiction.

The analysis of Willie Chandran, however, is not complete without a contrastive reference to other works written by Naipaul in approximate ten-year intervals, spanning the sixties,

seventies and eighties: *The Mimic Men*, *A Bend in the River* and *The Enigma of Arrival*. In the three cases the protagonists are endowed with remarkable intelligence and linguistic capacity, particularly significant since they narrate in first-person dignified accounts of their past and present plight. While they are telling their story, they are accorded privileges which Lillian Feder (2001: 225) explains referring to one of them: "As narrator, Salim is participant, observer, creator, and creation. At times he is unaware of his drives and motivations operating unconsciously in diverse combinations with external circumstances; at others he is a perceptive, conscious interpreter of his own thoughts and actions". There are many instances where we realize that Willie departs from this model of the vanquished enlightened exile, since there are passages in *Half a Life* in which third-person narration is intended to provide a distance from the character so that his literary ambition is clearly exposed as a sham. We can conclude, then, that the resulting mock-heroic portrait seems more in tune with that of the protagonist of an earlier story such as "A Christmas Story".

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1. I gratefully acknowledge the financial support given by the research authority (Xunta de Galicia, Dirección Xeral de Investigación e Desenvolvemento).
2. Among them we can mention the reviews by Paul Theroux (*The Guardian*, 1/9/2001), J.M.Coetzee (*The New York Review of Books*, 1/11/2001) and one, more favourable, by Amit Chaudhuri (*Times Literary Supplement*, 21/9/2001). All major newspapers and literary journals had scholarly contributions on *Half a Life*; this is the case with Paula Burnett (*The Independent*, 15/9/2001), Frank Kermode (*London Review of Books*, 6/9/2001) and Michael Gorra (*The New York Times Book Review*, 28/10/2001).
3. It is important to notice that he takes pains to place Trinidad on the map, by means of a reference to the closest neighbour on the mainland, this makes us aware of the unimportance of the narrator's homeland as Naipaul explicitly admits elsewhere: "The island was small, 1,800 square miles, half a million people" (Naipaul, *Reading and Writing*, 13).