

Unhomeliness and Hybridity in V. S. Naipaul's *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds*

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Abstract

In this study, the notions of homelessness and unhomeliness are studied in 2 novels by Naipaul: *Half a Life* (2001) and *Magic Seeds* (2004). Naipaul has been viewed by many postcolonial critics as an imperially complicit writer, for his controversial views of places and societies, particularly his disdain for non-Western societies. This study examines whether the imperatives of the postcolonial context, where boundaries and idealistic vision of place are unsettled, have influenced Naipaul's view of places and ways of belonging to them. It is argued that his recent novels accept that the reality of homelessness renders the quest for home futile and approves of cultural exchange and hybridity as possible ways of belonging. However, the 2 novels show possibility as only tenable in certain Western societies (like England) and refuses to accept the possibility of hybridity and cultural exchange in postcolonial societies.

Keywords: Naipaul; *Half a Life*; *Magic Seeds*; Hybridity; Homelessness; Unhomeliness; Postcolonial Studies

1. Introduction: A Writer From a Wrong Place

When Naipaul was asked about his feelings for his homeland, Trinidad, he replied that "I just wanted to go to a prettier place. . . . I just felt I was in the wrong place" (Levin, 1997, p. 93). Naipaul's consciousness of place until he left his homeland to go to England in his early twenties was shaped by classifying the world into right and wrong places. The persistence of such ideas prevails in some of his novels, commentaries, and travelogues on India, Africa, the Caribbean, or the Muslim countries such as Pakistan and Iran, among others. In these works, Naipaul seems to have an imaginative idea of the right place with which he constantly compares and contrasts the (post)colonial or non-Western societies at large. Naipaul's view of the postcolonial societies as degraded and backward has been challenged by many postcolonial scholars, including Edward Said, who dismisses him as an imperially complicit writer. Said (2000) criticizes the "anger, desperate bewilderment, and bitter sarcasm" of Naipaul's work which is directly in line with imperialist ideology about the primitiveness of non-Western societies (pp. 86-88). At the time when international critics and intellectuals negotiate and examine the

ways of dismantling colonial hegemonic discourses that generated throughout the world geographical and racial marginalities, Naipaul's worldviews pose a challenge.

At the start of the new millennium and after decades of a writing career so intricately bound up with the ideas of place and the question of belonging, Naipaul depicts the familiar theme of the quest for home in *Half a Life* (2001) and *Magic Seeds* (2004), which is a sequel to the former novel. In this study, I will examine whether Naipaul sustains his divisional vision of place in the two recent novels. Bhabha's (1994) widely used notions of unhomeliness and hybridity have been welcomed and critically examined by many writers and critics. To what extent Naipaul's recent works are informed by such ideas and notions remains to be discussed. I will discuss the two novels in relation to their questioning the idea of home and reinforcing the idea that home is nowhere for profoundly unsettled postcolonial individuals; however, I will argue they approve of the possibility of hybridity as a new way of belonging in certain societies.

2. Homelessness, Unhomeliness, and Hybridity

Bhabha (1994) in *The Location of Culture* has explored the notion of unhomely homes and the predominant unhomeliness of contemporary world literature. According to Bhabha (1994), national cultures or universal humanism are no longer the main theme of literature. It is transnational histories of the migrant, the colonized, or the political refugees that are depicted in the narratives. His examples are the novels of Toni Morrison and Nadine Gordimer, which depict the theme of sociocultural displacement through unhomely houses (pp. 9-13). Such houses mark "deeper historical displacement" (p. 13) based on race, gender or geographical origins. However, Bhabha (1994) believes in the possibility of moving beyond the binary opposition of the colonized and colonizer or at-homeness and homelessness. Living in an unhomely world is not a nostalgic existence, but a hybrid one that is inherent in the costume of "extraterritorial and cross-cultural initiation" (p. 9). In other words, unhomeliness disorients the boundary between home, and the world and endows the individual a more dynamic "borderline existence" (pp. 13-15). Bhabha (1994) further argues that colonial and postcolonial cultures and social structures are created in an in-between space, a space where absolutism and hierarchy between the cultures is dissolved and new forms are created. Such new hybrid forms enact strategic reversal of the process of domination. Hybridity, the most discussed term in postcolonial studies in the recent years, is as much a celebration of borderline identities as it refers to mixing of linguistic, artistic, or cultural forms and creating new transcultural forms.

The two novels discussed here can be read as a response to the ideas of hybridity and unhomeliness. They explore and weigh up the relative merits of Africa, India, and England as places of belonging for an immigrant from a

postcolonial country. These are, in fact, the three places with which Naipaul is affiliated, due to his Trinidadian background and via his extensive travels. The novels examine the possibility of establishing a comfortable life for an immigrant in these societies. Among them, India and Africa are shown as lacking the capacity to change towards progressive and stable societies in the postindependent era; thus, they are presented as unhomey. England, on the other hand, is shown to be forming a multicultural society. Such an outlook seems familiar in Naipaul's work; yet, what might be seen as new in these recent novels are, first, their addressing the possibility of establishing a society based on dynamic cultural exchange and, second, their accepting the idea that the reality of homelessness renders the desire for home futile. Whereas the novels advocate cultural exchange, they refuse to endorse the idea to accept unhomeliness or hybridity unconditionally.

Some critics, like Parry (2004), Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk (2005) have expressed doubts about the credibility of hybridity, meaning cultural exchange based on equal values. Firstly, they believe that such an idea neglects and negates the inequality of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized or the hegemonic power of the West over the postcolonial societies. Parry (2004), for example, views such a poststructuralist approach merely textual rather than based on facts on the ground. Secondly, they believe that in practice, the visitor's culture is either assimilated in the capitalist market or it is overlooked under the hegemony of the host culture (Kalra, Kaur, & Hutnyk, 2005). Even Bhabha (2013) has recently expressed his concern for persistence of boundaries, in the face of "xenophobia and nationalism" in our times (pp. viii-xii). He argues that despite the growing virtual communities and cyberspace and the phenomenon of "deterritorialization" in the "global" times, the reality of homelessness is still insistent (p. xi).

It is argued here that Naipaul negotiates the idea of hybridity in a way distinct from Bhabha (2013) and even those who are critical of his notion of hybridity. Naipaul's *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds* endorse the notion of hybridity as a new way through which an individual can relate to the world, but the efficiency of hybridity is conditioned by the imperatives of location. For the protagonist, there is a prospect of a comfortable life in the multicultural England, but not in postcolonial societies that lack capacity for social growth. Yet, recent studies on the lives of immigrants and diaspora in England prove that the implementation of cultural exchange on equal grounds is far more complex. Drawing on those studies, the following discussion highlights the novels' refusal to engage with more serious issues about the difficulty of cultural integration of immigrants in England.

2.1. *India: A Country Divided by Castism*

Willie Somerset Chandran, the protagonist of *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds*, is born and brought up in an Indian family in a village in India. His curiosity to

know more about the origin of his Anglo-Indian name drives him to commence a journey of self-discovery in relation to the places he assumes he belongs to. He travels to and lives in England, Africa, and India. Having lived in these very different contexts and feeling at home nowhere, he finally gives up his quest for a place of belonging. *Magic Seeds*, which is a sequel to *Half a Life*, manifests a revision of Willie's earlier ways of seeing places. Whereas the former novel shows the futility of the quest for home and belonging, the latter novel examines the new ways an individual can relate to the world and societies.

There are two settings of India in the novels: The India in which Willie is brought up, and the India to which he returns later with the hope that he might change it. Willie's understanding of India is shaped by these two encounters which do not contradict but complement his idea of India. The idea is that castism has hindered the sociocultural progress of the country and achievement of a unified nationhood. The story of Chandran family's involvement with castism for three generations (i.e., his grandfather, his father, and himself) reveals the depth and rootedness of this cultural system in India. Willie's father, a Brahmin of high caste, was an outcast as a young college boy and always at odds with the standards that the school and his father set for him. Willie's grandfather wanted his son to continue in the way of life of high caste and to marry a schoolmaster's daughter. Yet, Willie's father was determined to rebel against them. His rebellion, as he notes, was not informed by a thoughtful cause, but simply out of defiance of the rules set by those who had authority over him. Thus, despite his father's disapproval and at the cost of his scholarship to study medicine he marries the first low-caste girl he meets at school, in order to, in his own words "live a life of sacrifice" (*Half a Life*, p. 12). His defiance unexpectedly leads him to more serious political involvement. His fight with the high caste people, who created a fraudulent case against him in court, make him a "holy man" fighting for the disadvantaged caste of "untouchables" (*Half a Life*, p. 14). Willie's father, far from pursuing his cause, contradicts his own ideas and political vision later in life. He gradually grows to feel ashamed of his marriage to a low caste woman and of his support for the low-castes. The social forces of castism in the country turn out to be stronger than his will to fight them. Ultimately, he yields to the caste values that dominate Indian society.

The mode of sociocultural analysis that Naipaul adopts for India is limited to castism. Indeed, the dynamic and complex social disposition of India is reduced in the novel to the conflict between castes and the maintenance of the tradition due to the strong prejudice of Indians towards their caste. The India that Willie knows is the claustrophobic small town he is brought up in. He has no sense of Indian history before or during colonization and no sense of city life. The point to note here is that the stand-off of Willie's father against castism in his small town in the late 1940s

coincides with anti-imperialist movements throughout the country. But in *Half a Life*, anti-imperialist movements are shown as insignificant in the small cities and communities where the hegemony of caste and class was far stronger than the British. In fact, anti-imperialism is shown as a national movement completely separate from the caste struggle in small towns. Willie's father is aware that his defiance against castism looks insignificant at the time in comparison with the anti-imperialist movement in the wider political context of India: "Everywhere in the country they were talking of Gandhi and Nehru and the British. Here in the maharaja's state, they were shut off from those politics. They were half-nationalists, quarter-nationalists, or less. Their big war was the caste war" (*Half a Life*, p. 8). This passage shows that although between the two political struggles, anti-imperialism received more publicity, the more difficult struggle is the caste war which has a stronger root than imperialism in India's culture and history and the possibility of uprooting it is shown to be a real challenge.

The idea presented in *Half a Life*—that castism hinders the unity of India against oppression and corruption is not new in Naipaul's writing. Indeed, Naipaul views India as a society with several fields of complexities: religion, class, caste, and colonial history. Each of these complexities and the unbridgeable gap they have created in the social sphere are discussed and presented in Naipaul's nonfictional trilogy, *India: An Area of Darkness* (1964), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977), and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990). Nearly four decades before *Half a Life* was published, in *India: An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul (1968) denounced Indians' and Gandhi's lack of racial sense: "Race is something that they detect about others but among themselves they know only the subcaste or caste, the clan, the gens, the language group. Beyond that they cannot go; they do not see themselves as belonging to an Indian race; the words have no meaning" (p. 157).

Naipaul attempted to prove that Indians had no national unity or sense of nationhood and, in effect, the very notion of independence was, thus, meaningless in India. A decade later, in *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977), Naipaul upholds a similar idea about India. He argues that the "crack" of civilization in India is wide open, because of a twofold reason, first, "archaism of national pride" which has been aroused by nationalist movements and second, "the promise of the new" (Naipaul, 1977, p. 39). In other words, he considers that in the absence of "the intellectual means" (Naipaul, 1977, p. 40), there is a lack of understanding about India's past history and its need to regenerate new ideas and visions. Accordingly, the positive change that independence promised to bring to India's culture did not materialize.

The idea that revolution or national movements for reform are doomed to failure reappears in *Magic Seeds*. Willie leaves India to go to England and then to Africa. But disappointed by his unsuccessful quest for home and a place of

belonging, he decides to return to India and join a revolutionary movement for equality and reform of the political system. Willie belongs to the postindependence generation and, therefore, his role model is Mahatma Gandhi. His sister compares him to Gandhi and the caste war to anti-imperialist movements based on the fact that Willie is a latecomer to political activism, just as Gandhi was when he started his revolution at the age of 46. To them, through insight and determination, Willie like Gandhi, could create "the wave" and become "a true revolutionary" (*Magic Seeds*, p. 21). But Willie is shown to have reduced war against castism "to a terrible simplicity" (*Magic Seeds*, p. 36). He underestimates the complexity of the social and cultural condition of India and Hindu tradition which hints at his imminent failure.

The ideology of the revolutionaries, in the Gandhian tradition, is to fight the oppressiveness of social divisions and poverty that have made India "one of the saddest places in the world" (*Magic Seeds*, p. 37). The main obstacle in the way of change in India, as identified by the leaders of the guerrilla fighters, is the historical class and caste discriminations. According to one of these leaders, Joseph, "[t]he old lords oppressed and humiliated and injured for centuries. Now they are gone away . . . They have left these wretched people as their monuments" (*Magic Seeds*, p. 41). Joseph upholds the Marxist ideology that revolution and communism would be an alternative to oppression. Another commander believes that the proletariat is also part of the problem. To him, the main hindrance to success is lack of a strong will for change. In their guerrilla warfare against landowners, he tries to persuade the villagers to take over the land of the lords, but among villagers, there is no sense of urgency to take action:

We've told them about the wickedness of the rule of the old days. They agree with all of that. But when we tell them that it is up to them now to take over and plough these acres, they say, "it's not our land." . . . You can get them to clean out water-tanks. You can get them to build roads. But you can't get them take over land. (*Magic Seeds*, p. 117)

However, revolution is hardly an alternative to the oppressive system, as the leaders are corrupt and their intentions in the guerrilla fight not as genuine as they claim. For Joseph, leadership is a personal ambition and he would do anything to obtain power. For the other leader, revolutionary activity is a psychological drive to cover up his physical weakness. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that this man of high caste has sexual inadequacies, and political activism for him is a psychological substitute for masculine power. The corrupt leadership raises suspicion about the possibility of any positive transformation in the event that revolution actually happens.

The picture of corrupt political activism in *Magic Seeds* is a confirmation of Naipaul's skepticism about Gandhian tradition, expressed in *India: A Wounded Civilization*. The book is highly critical of manipulation of people under the name of intellectualism and a return to the principles associated with Gandhi. To Naipaul, revolutionary leaders, regardless of their ideology, primarily follow personal advancements rather than nationalist agendas. From Naipaul's cynical perspective, even Gandhi lacked the credentials for leadership, and in focusing exclusively on the anti-imperialist struggle, he failed to address caste, class, and religious divisions within India adequately (Naipaul, 1977, p. 43).

Contrary to Naipaul, Young (2001) argues that Gandhi's "voluntary poverty," was a strategy oriented towards the support of the peasantry and subaltern classes (p. 321). His view contradicts Naipaul's claim that Gandhi ignored castism and class divisions. Also challenging Naipaul, Nandy (1983) argues that Gandhi's ideal cultural form was not a pure precolonial India; rather, it was the model of a hybrid culture. To Nandy, Gandhi saw the salvation of India in the mixing of Western and Eastern cultures as well as Hindus and non-Hindu populations as a substitute for colonial culture. In fact, Nandy suggests that long before Bhabha introduced the notion of hybridity to postcolonial studies, Gandhi proposed his own version of cultural hybridity, though without using the term (1983). If the model failed to be substantiated completely and flawlessly in India, it is unfair and imprudent to hold Gandhi or the anti-imperialist movement responsible for it. Naipaul seems unable to acknowledge that the nonviolent anti-imperialist movement led by Gandhi is evidence of the will of the Indian nation for change. Naipaul's attempt to underplay the achievements of Gandhi seems propelled by an overinvestment in Western democracy as the only model for the modern nation state.

To Naipaul, the complexities of caste and the lack of prospects for change are enough reasons to make India an uncomfortable habitus and an unhomely place. Willie finally gives up freedom fighting and surrenders himself to the police. His failure in making a contribution to the reconstruction of India is not a personal failure, but as the novel implies, it is a failure of India as a nation. The social space presented in the novel lacks any progressive element or room for transformation. Neither is there any prospect of unity across historical divisions generated by the Indian tradition. Weiss (1992) interprets Naipaul's approach to India as an "idea" rather than observation of place, saying that for Naipaul "India is not precisely a place, but an idea, a state of mind" (p.18). Naipaul shows traditional forces in India not only restrict the agency of the colonial subjects for personal or national growth, but also resist transformation of the corrupt and passive system. Thus, given that places cannot be easily transformed, individuals should give up on the idea of

belonging and can only choose their habitats. For Willie Chandran, who has the possibility of immigrating to more dynamic and less divisional place, living in India is shown not to be the best option.

2.2. *Africa: The Unstable Continent*

The next place that is explored and assessed as a dwelling place is Africa. Willie meets Ana, an African girl of Portuguese decent, in London. He marries Ana and follows her to Africa with the hope of living a comfortable family life in a large homely estate. Also, to Ana, Willie's presence seems a good opportunity because she also needs "a man on the estate" (*Half a Life*, p. 141). But neither is Africa the home Willie assumed, nor is Willie the supportive man Ana looked for. Willie fails to integrate with African settlers during his stay and until the end he remains "Ana's London man" whose presence is just a means "to reinforce Ana's authority" (*Half a Life*, p. 145). The extravagant social life of the European settlers in Africa attracts Willie in the beginning. He indulges himself with parties and affairs with women—something he did not have in India or London. However, gradually he realizes that such a rich and exciting life leaves him feeling deeply insecure and fails to compensate for the sense that he is living in the shadow of an impending disaster. Similar sense of insecurity is shared by other settlers and immigrants, who keep their investments in bank accounts in London and Switzerland, in case of war.

In *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds*, life in the community of European settlers is portrayed as a life of indulgence, insecurity and violence (*Half a Life; Magic Seeds*). The country in Africa to which Willie travels is not identified, which emphasizes Naipaul's view of Africa as a homogenous and static continent—a view presented in his earlier article, "Conrad's Darkness" (1977). Naipaul's Africa is informed to a large extent by Conrad's pessimistic view of Africa (1977, p.54). Naipaul approves of what he reads as Conrad's view of Africa and describes the continent as "the demoralized land" of plunder and licensed cruelty (p. 58). On the influence of Conrad on Naipaul, Nixon (1992) criticizes Naipaul's portrayal of "apparently endemic African degeneration" (p. 91). To Nixon, the influence of Conrad on Naipaul's vision of Africa is twofold: "Naipaul's familial and autobiographical attraction to Conrad converges with something else: the Western tradition of 'doing' Africa via *Heart of Darkness*" (p. 91). There is little difference between the European presentation of Africa and Naipaul's presentation of it in *Half a Life*. To Coovadia (2009), Naipaul in peripheral societies looks for political and cultural authority that he has experienced in the West. *Half a Life* pictures a paradigm of a society entangled with corruption and violence. On the one hand, the Big Man, a dictator portrayed after Ugandan Idi Amin, or the president of Zaire, Mobutu Sese Seco, holds all the means of power and authority in his hands with which settlers like Ana should comply. On the other hand, the fear of guerrilla attack

or robbery looms large in the settlers' life, as if the country is on the verge of an imminent war.

It is in this context that Willie decides to leave Ana and Africa. Ana stays in Africa, though. Unlike Willie, she has financial and emotional bonds with Africa. Ana is of a hybrid African-European background and her family who for three generations lived in Africa took root in the land. For this reason, despite her European connections, Ana has a sense of belonging to Africa. The mixed (African-Portuguese) identity of Ana, her fair skin, but curly hair, is a sign of her nonbelonging to a particular race, culture, or habitat. For Ana, just as other settlers, life in Africa is entangled with betrayal and violence. Ana's powerlessness in the face of Willie's betrayal and in the face of the imminent handover of the town to guerrillas is expressive of the settler's insecurity in the face of the insurgencies that Africa has undergone after independence. The "primitive government" in Africa fails to secure the assets and life of its countrymen (*Magic Seeds*, p. 36). But her sense of belonging is established through living, working and protecting the land she inherited from her grandfather. She says, "I'm not running away. Half of what my grandfather gave me was stolen by my father. I will stay here and protect the other half. I don't want people squatting in my house or sleeping in my bed" (*Half a Life*, p. 226).

Indeed, Ana's insistence on staying in Africa reveals the complex ways in which individuals establish a sense of place and belonging. Ana's determination to keep the estate that belongs to her shows that the sense of place and belonging are quite personal and conditional. In the two novels discussed here, the individual's affiliation to a place is conditioned by their background, financial interests and their status. Ana has the possibility of leaving to live in England or Portugal, which might be more secure places. To her, Africa is not homely, yet, her familial, and financial bonds render the place her place of belonging, and she attempts to keep her family roots intact. Willie is homeless; yet, the idea of living for the sake of survival in places like Africa or India is meaningless to him. So, the novels suggest that in a world where there is no longer a secure home, there are possibilities to choose a habitat, a place where individuals can establish some kind of connection with or a prospect of a comfortable life. Having no emotional or financial bond to preserve in India or Africa, Willie prefers to settle down in a more secure society like England.

2.3. England: A Potential Site of Hybridity

Right before joining political activists in India, Willie ponders where he belongs. The conclusion he draws on his place of belonging reflects a view of the world as divided in two and it is as follows: "One world was ordered, settled, its wars fought. In this world without war or real danger people had been simplified. They looked at television and found their community [. . .]. In the other world,

people were more frantic. They were desperate to enter the simpler, ordered world” (*Magic Seeds*, p. 10). Based on such an outlook, India and Africa belong to the disorganized world that lacks direction and orientation. As a young man, Willie thinks it is to this world that he belongs, but given the complexity of the process of change in India, Willie realizes that insisting on belonging to the world he hopes to change is idealistic rather than realistic. Therefore, rather than looking for a place of belonging, he decides to choose a habitat for himself, and his choice is England.

The process through which he comes to the decision to settle down in England illuminates Willie’s changing attitude towards the very idea of home. On his first arrival in London in the late 1950s, Willie shares a similar sense of place with Naipaul—he has a sense of alienation and loneliness. Both Naipaul and his character find the metropolis dull, unwelcoming and lonely. Naipaul (1976), in an essay entitled “*London*,” expresses his dislike of what he calls “the privacy of this big city” (p. 15). Even after a show or a play, Naipaul believes one “comes out alone into the cold streets, private” (p. 15). Willie also finds the sense of being lonely in London disturbing. He initially saw the privacy of the big city and his anonymity as an opportunity to escape from the hatred of his family background and “playing with words, he began to remake himself” (*Half a Life*, p. 61). But this happiness over anonymity does not last long and it is replaced by a nostalgic longing for belonging to a community or a family (*Half a Life*). Moreover, immigrants in London appear to be outsiders with no prospect of integration or of a hopeful future: “Few of the immigrants had proper jobs, or secure houses to go back to. Some of them were truly on the brink and that gave an edge to the gaiety” (*Half a Life*, p. 72). *Half a Life* ends with Willie still holding on to the old perception that there is a need for home, and that there is a homely place for everyone. It is in *Magic Seeds* that such an outlook is revisited and, in the concluding lines of the novel, the very concept of an ideal place is questioned: “It is wrong to have an ideal view of the world” (*Magic Seeds*, p. 293).

In *Magic Seeds*, Willie arrives in London 30 years later than his first arrival and begins to see the place anew. His second arrival is particularly interesting because not only has the place transformed from a gloomy postwar state to a multicultural society, but also Willie has changed from an inexperienced man into a mature middle-aged man with knowledge of different places and societies. Driven by experience rather than emotion, he returns to London, viewing it as a habitat with its own exclusive dynamic relations and social forces. England of the 1980s appears to Willie a better habitat because the tensions and contradictions of the postwar situation seem to have resolved in such a way that a hybrid and coordinated society is created. The change in England is not in terms of the appearance or architecture, because as Willie moves around London he views “the same little college with

mock-Gothic arches, the fearful Notting Hill squares” just as 30 years ago (*Magic Seeds*, p. 195). Yet, he notices that the human landscape of London has changed with migration. In the streets of central London, he found “black people everywhere, and Japanese; and people who looked like Arabs” (*Magic Seeds*, p. 196). Willie realizes that poverty-stricken immigrants have developed into diasporas who have contributed to make London a vibrant, multicultural metropolis. Cultural exchange and the breakup of boundaries are new forces that postmodern and postcolonial society has generated. As Willie observes, the challenge of such sociocultural forces has been immense: ‘There has been a great churning in the world. The world is now being shaken by forces much bigger than I could imagine’ (*Magic Seeds*, p. 196). In the new world of the metropolis, the old sense of belonging to the places of one’s origin is lost. It seems that these diasporic subjects have accepted a sense that home is elusive: There are just habitats.

It is not only England that has changed, but also Willie’s way of seeing England. He recognizes that the view of place based on homeliness or unhomeliness cannot be maintained. He can belong to England by adapting himself with the social and cultural imperatives of the place and the capitalist era. Accordingly, he decides to pursue a career in accordance with the needs of the capitalist market and enjoy the cosmopolitan and multicultural space that is created in the metropolis. This process of coordination between individuals, cultures, and places in England can be recognized as a process of hybridization. In other words, it is the move towards hybridity that renders England in Willie’s eyes a more comfortable habitat for immigrants from the former colonies.

The question raised here is whether hybridity has worked well in practice in Britain, just as *Magic Seeds* suggests. Before discussing Naipaul’s approach to hybridity, presented in the wedding scene towards the end of the novel, I want to examine the evaluation of social analysts of hybridity in Britain. The manner in which such a space has been created in Britain is studied by Gilroy (1991) in terms of formation of black culture, as well as Kalra et al. (2005) in terms of integration of immigrants and diasporas. To Gilroy, the possibility of the formation of a hybrid culture is contingent on transgression of fixed categories and absolutist notions of national and racial identity (1991). In his influential article, “*It Ain’t Where You’re From, It’s Where You’re at,*” Gilroy (1991) suggests that identity is a combination of both the routes that take one to the place you are at and one’s roots in a particular place. By emphasizing the importance of the place you are at, rather than from, Gilroy (1991) challenges the national, racial, and ethnic borders that create divisions between routes and roots when identifying people.¹

A study entitled, *Hybridity and Diaspora*, has examined the extent to which hybridity has been implemented in Britain. The writer’s definition of hybridity as

“an articulation of rights and assertion of autonomy against the forces of essential identities” (Kalra et al., 2005, p. 70) is in line with that of Gilroy (1991) in the sense that they also emphasize a change of categorization of identities. Yet, despite many advocates for such a cultural configuration, as Kalra et al. (2005) observe, the efficacy of hybridity is debatable in the metropolis. One of the challenges posed to the idea of hybridity is that in the metropolis one group is seen as the host, and the other as the visitor which makes the claim to home and ownership the right of the host rather than the visitor. In fact, the host in the cultural exchange is not hybrid, but reinforces “white supremacy and national chauvinism” (Kalra et al., 2005, p. 88). The example they give is the racial landscape of urban Britain which appears to manifest a “geography that disguises deep-seated entrenched inequalities” (Kalra et al., 2005, p. 89). The second challenge to this notion of hybridity is its incapacity for resisting the hegemony of the dominant cultures. According to Kalra et al. (2005), chicken Tikka Masala, being the favorite food in Britain, or the Indi tattoo, running up David Beckham’s arm, are not manifestations of hybridity. Such celebrated forms of integration, “that enables an opening for the capitalist market to difference, migration and the exotic does little to challenge ‘practices of hegemony’” (p. 95). In other words, inviting people to engage in cultural exchange is usually carried out within certain limits and boundaries, rather than being in line with true integration. Therefore, the writers argue, although there have been attempts to displace cultural divisions, hybridity in practice has not truly achieved the objectives defined for it in the West.

The outlook that *Magic Seeds* presents of hybridity in Britain is approving, although the novel’s engagement with cultural exchange is minimal. Unlike Kalra et al. (2005), Naipaul does not regard the British culture as a dominant force that overshadows the influence of other cultures. Rather, he shows there have been attempts for formation of a relatively more integrated social space in England. Establishing a bond between colonial and metropolitan identities and cultures is presented in the novel in terms of the marriage between an English girl and son of Marcus, a West African diplomat, whose dream is “to have a white grandchild” (*Magic Seeds*, p.240). The way the groom’s father is characterized has prompted one book reviewer to argue that “Naipaul is suggesting that our racial and ethnic fate is sealed; we can never escape who we are . . .” (Atlas, 2004). Another reviewer reads the novel as an expression of Naipaul’s typical cynicism, saying that “the book . . . attempts to explain multiracial Britain seem to be located within a depressingly archaic framework of ideas about race” (Phillips, 2004). To these critics, the postcolonial clash in the novel ends with a disappointing conclusion.

Here, in contrast to those responses to the novel, I read the wedding scene as confirming that Britain is now recognizing cultural exchange. It is insisting that

cultural exchange is conditioned by time and place, meaning that it could happen only in dynamic and stable societies like the English society at the time of the dominance of the late capitalist culture. The novel refuses to engage with the questions that critics of hybridity have noted. Issues such as complexities of integration for the immigrants and the hegemonic power of the dominant English culture are ignored. However, hybridity is not shown as a celebratory dominant cultural force that levels the hierarchies. Rather, *Magic Seeds* suggests that living through hybrid cultural exchange would be inevitable in the postcolonial era when the idea of home and belonging is no longer tenable. The image of a decaying grand country house in which the wedding is taking place brings to attention the timing of the emergence of hybridity. The roofless country house symbolically suggests that it is only at this point in history (after the break-up of empire) that the marriage between the colonial and metropolitan cultures is possible. The aristocratic family of the bride—just like the house—is past its prime:

The founder of the girl's family was actually a great man, early in the nineteenth century. He was a supporter of the practical scientist Faraday, who was a kind of early Edison. ...Something happened to the family after this moment of glory. They produced no other great figure. Complacency perhaps, or genetic failure. In the great imperial period which followed, whereas so many other families came up, they went down, generation after generation. Some years ago they decided to let their house rot. (*Magic Seeds*, p. 286)

In a sarcastic tone, the narrator downplays the background of the English family and what remains from their past glory. The decline of the English family's grand past parallels the decline of the state of their roofless house (*Magic Seeds*). Such imagery quite suggestively emphasizes that the marriage between an English girl and the son of a West African diplomat marks a moment in the history of the relationship between the former colonies and the metropolis which was only possible in the aftermath of the dismantlement of empire.

The wedding is presented as exotic as the house in which it takes place. The exoticism is displayed in the music of the ceremony and a black and white couple among the guests. The black man with his braided oily hair, his bare chest and his sandals looks to the narrator, "a fantastic production" (*Magic Seeds*, p. 290). Although the manner and outfit of the fashionable couple seem to defy the sacredness of the occasion, together they form the new image of "late-capitalism."² Moreover, the bride and the groom having had two children before they get married is another signifier of change in the traditional and cultural values.

But the climax of the wedding is the music with which the novel ends. After parts of Othello and some of Shakespeare's sonnets are recited to the guests, a Dutch-Antillean band plays African-Caribbean music. The combination of English literature and the Caribbean music in the wedding signifies the marriage of two cultures. What is interesting about the music is not the performance, but that the guests attempt to pick out the beat and despite the fact that the music sounds unfamiliar, they attempt to be in tune with it: "The din was fearful, but some of the fair women in new frocks were swinging their slender shanks, as if they were picking out a beat, and it was already too much to resist" (*Magic Seeds*, p. 293). Appreciation of ethnic and black music as a fluid cultural practice by the English guests suggests that they are trying to become in tune with cultural exchange in their country. Gilroy (1991) regards Black music as a creative expression and commitment to a better life whose aim is "to bring Africa, Europe and the Caribbean seamlessly together" (as cited in Kalra et al., 2005, p. 38).

The music in the final scene is rather a romanticized view of cultural exchange. The Caribbean music invites people of colonial and imperial cultures to be in-tune with hybrid forms and consequently in harmony as a nation. The music stays with Willie through to the end of the novel, and it brings the memories of slavery and the plantation system through to the migration of the descendants of laborers of the colonial societies to the metropolis. The scene suggests that the imperatives of immigration, and the new dynamics of postmodernism and late capitalism has rendered cultural exchange inevitable in England.

3. Conclusion

Half a Life and *Magic Seeds* recapitulate Naipaul's approach to how individuals relate to places. These novels show that individuals' quest for home and a place of belonging is complicated first, by the reality of homelessness, and second, by the sociocultural complexities peculiar to every place. For a postcolonial migrant, living in a multicultural society like England is shown to be a better option than living in, what he views as, unstable, divided and corrupt societies. A hybrid life in the metropolis is considered as a new way of belonging in the postcolonial and the late-capitalist era. However, his novels refuse to answer how hybridity can be attainable for the immigrant if we consider it in the sense of integration of cultures on equal grounds. Naipaul's view of cultural exchange is not in line with the idea of rejection of absolutism with regard to cultures and societies in an increasingly connected world. Rather, his stance is dubious and mainly reflective of his long-held idea of the existence of hierarchy among the metropolitan and the postcolonial societies.

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Notes

¹In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, drawing on the notion of “double-consciousness” coined by W. B. Du Bois, Gilroy argues that for a black British person developing a way to identify him or her as both black and British is necessary. Gilroy’s thesis has pertinence in the case of immigrants, just as for the Black English people. Immigrants (like Willie), in Gilroy’s view, should develop a double-consciousness to identify with both their culture of origin and the culture of the country they adopt as their habitat. See Gilroy, P. (1993). *The black Atlantic: Modernity and double consciousness*. London, Verso.

²The term *late capitalism* is borrowed from a book by Fredric Jameson. For further information, see *Postmodernism and the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991).