



About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



---

ISSN 2278-9529  
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal  
[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## Migration and Global City in V. S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* and *Half a Life*

**Padmavati Gangopadhyay**  
Assistant Professor (English),  
Kotshila Mahavidyalaya,  
Purulia, West Bengal.

### **Abstract:**

Migration has been an integral part of human existence on earth. Mankind has voluntarily or involuntarily migrated from one territory to another since time immemorial. In our paper we explore the condition of migrants and immigrants as has been depicted in V. S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* and *Half a Life*. We will see how the protagonists of the above-mentioned novels feel alienated in the global city of London to which they have migrated in order to find a home away from their homeland. When they are thwarted in their attempt to belong to the foreign city, they are confronted with a sense of what Albert Camus calls "absurd". The sense of alienation of Naipaul's protagonists in a global city is a reminder of the awful condition of migrant and immigrant communities in modern times.

**Keywords: Absurd, Alienation, City, Immigrant, Migrant.**

The concept of human migration incorporates the movement of people from one territory to another. According to English Oxford Living Dictionaries it refers to the movement "of people to a new area or country in order to find work or better living conditions." However, the term "people" in this definition includes different categories of migrants such as "guest workers," "undocumented/illegal migrants," "refugees and asylum seekers" etc (Migrant/Migration). Such varied kinds of migrants underline the multiple dimensions of the notion of migration which makes it an appropriate subject for wide-ranging investigation. Literature has also extensively explored the different areas related to migration. One such aspect of migration is the condition of migrants and immigrants in the global cities into which they migrate which has been dealt with in such literary works like Joan Riley's *Waiting in the Twilight* (1987) and Hanan Al- Shaykh's *Only in London* (2001). V. S. Naipaul has also deeply delved into the situation of migrants and immigrants in foreign cities in his works. Before moving on to the author's works let us take into consideration Naipaul's historical background that makes his perspective on human migration so very pertinent in the present times.

V.S. Naipaul's maternal and paternal grandfathers had been Indian indentured labourers in the colonial society of Trinidad. The inhuman system of indentured labour was meant to fill the deficit of labourers in the sugarcane plantations of the British Empire after the emancipation

of slaves in 1834. During this time, North India was under the grip of famine, drought and disorder as Patrick French says:

Most indentured Indians came from parts of north India that were suffering famine, drought or social upheaval. . . . The spread of European manufactured goods and changes in land-ownership after the decline of the Mughal empire meant that agricultural labourers, weavers and potters were often left destitute, particularly on the plains of the Ganges. (9-10)

As a result many people were left dispossessed. It was among these victims of extreme destitution, the recruiters selected labourers to serve under the indentured system. Those who were engaged to work in the plantations were not only made to undertake an arduous journey of three to four months across the sea to an unknown land but were also subjected to a distressing life in the West Indies as is said in the National Archives of UK Government, “In 1838 a special magistrate, Charles Anderson, wrote to the Colonial Secretary declaring that with ‘few exceptions they [the Indians] are treated with great and unjust severity, by overwork and by personal chastisement’” (“Forced Labour”; square brackets in orig.). Naipaul grew up with this knowledge of his ancestors’ experience of humiliation and pain as the early immigrants in the fragmented world of Trinidad. He also confronted the hardship of building his life in Trinidad, a land of bleak prospects and that too as a member of the Indian community which occupied a minority position among the different immigrant groups there. Patrick French describes the dismal condition of Indians in Trinidad at the time of Naipaul’s birth in these words:

At the time of Vidyadhar’s birth, the population of Trinidad stood at a little over 400,000, of whom about one-third were Indians, employed as agricultural labourers, merchants, spirit-vendors, clerks and shopkeepers. . . . Indians had a higher death rate and a higher birth rate than any other social group. . . . Literacy in Trinidad stood at 57 per cent . . . among Indians it stood at a pathetic 23 per cent, and among Indian women at 13 per cent. . . . In popular legend in 1930s Trinidad, Indians were depicted as poor, mean, rural, heathen, aggressive, ethnically exclusive and illiterate. (13)

Besides Naipaul’s difficult experience as a descendant of the Indian indentured labourers in Trinidad, he also faced harsh rejection in London as a West Indian immigrant. French delineates the inherent pathos of Naipaul’s position in London in this manner, “He was an East Indian West Indian who had been pulled out of his own society by a superior British education, leaving him a double exile . . .” (138). Naipaul himself discusses about the absolute lack of opportunities for him in London in his letter to Patricia Hale: “Go out & get a clerical job, you write, adding, there are heaps of those. I hate to spring a surprise on you . . . but the people in authority feel my qualifications fit me only for jobs as porters in kitchens, and with the road gangs” (French 139). Such personal exposure of the author to the sufferings of the immigrants enabled him to explore their ambivalent condition in his works and thereby he developed a penetrating insight about

them. In our paper we will look at Naipaul's portrayal of the immigrants and migrants in the context of global cities in his novels *The Mimic Men* (1967) and *Half a Life* (2001). Our analysis would ultimately show that in alienating London; the life of Naipaul's protagonists of the previously mentioned two novels becomes similar to the existence in an absurd universe.

Ralph Singh, the central character of V. S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* finds his first experience in the great city of London to be disillusioning. He had attempted to escape into the grandeur of a great city from his place of birth which he considered to be an "obscure New World transplantation, second-hand and barbarous . . ." (Naipaul, *The* 127). In this regard he is very much like his creator V. S. Naipaul who says about Trinidad, "I didn't like the climate. I didn't like the quality of the light. I didn't like the heat. . . . I didn't like a lot of the racial tensions around me. . . . I just felt I was in the wrong place" (Jussawalla 93). However, Singh soon discovers that the great "god of the city" is beyond his reach and what comes within his grasp is the sense of terrible loneliness of each individual in the city. He says, "Here was the city, the world. I waited for the flowering to come to me. . . . But the god of the city was elusive" (Naipaul, *The* 18).

Naipaul shows that in this city of lonely individuals there can be no fulfillment for a migrant like Ralph Singh. The novel delineates the city's apathy towards the migrants or immigrants through the antagonistic relationship that exists between Singh and the different spaces of the city which are either inhabited by him or are frequently visited by him. The boarding-house in the Kensington High Street area is one such space where Singh stays for some days during his first visit to London. One of the primary parts of the boarding-house which Singh comes in touch with is the attic room that is meant for the private use of Mr. Shylock, the owner of the boarding-house. When Singh visits the attic after the death of Mr. Shylock, the latter's few essential possessions in the room reveal to Singh the utter incapacity of the relics to properly preserve the memories of the departed. The "mattress on dusty sheets of newspapers" and the "rickety writing-table" that are left behind by Mr. Shylock completely nullify the existence of the man who dared to look "distinguished" in his fine suits during the turbulent times in post-war England (Naipaul, *The* 5, 3). Thus, instead of imparting a sort of permanence to life by keeping alive the dead through commemorating him, these remains strongly underline the inconsequentiality of life. The "cold" and "exposed" room with its empty boards and an abandoned photograph of a girl fills Singh with a sense of desolation (Naipaul, *The* 4). This kind of revelation about existence in the very beginning of his life in London is disturbing for Singh who hopes to firmly lay anchors in the foreign land with the belief of finding order that had eluded him in his own country. His experience in the attic room leads him to say that his journey "scarcely begun, had ended in the shipwreck which all my life I had sought to avoid" (Naipaul, *The* 6). Thus, the attic room of the boarding-house seems not at all welcoming to Singh whose misgivings about finding a foothold in the big city further increase after visiting the attic room as can be seen from the above quote.

Apart from the attic, the Maltese housekeeper Lieni's chaotic basement room at the boarding house also emphasizes for Singh the confusion of the lives of immigrants like Lieni. This confusion is a grim reminder that immigrants have no place to belong to. Singh defines the condition of Lieni's room at the day of her child's christening ceremony in these words, "It was in a greater mess than usual: assorted haberdashery on the mantelpiece together with bills and calenders and empty cigarette packets; clothes on the bed and the lino and the baby's crib; old newspapers; a sewing machine dusty with shredded cloth" (Naipaul, *The* 9). Such details are meant to symbolize the incoherent world of Lieni who with her illegitimate child and her unreliable job in the boarding house lives a disorderly life in London that is full of uncertainties. This disorganized existence is shown to be the lot of immigrants in general in the novel such as the Maltese boarder Duminicu who always thinks of escaping from his situation and releases the frustrations of his life through kleptomania. Thus, just like the attic, the basement of the boarding-house also brings into the focus of Singh the difficulty of belonging to London.

The other areas that are visited by Singh in London are the School, the halls of the British Council and the art galleries. The School where Singh goes to achieve a degree does not enlighten his life through the medium of education. Rather, it merely turns out to be the stage on which Singh acts out the role of the dandy, the rich man from the colonies. While such kind of playacting enables Singh to gain influence over other students, it is nothing more than a vain attempt of "mimicking the condition of manhood" on the part of Singh (Naipaul, "Two"). It does not allow him to be a man in true sense. Similarly, the British Council and the art galleries do not make a positive impact upon Singh's life. These places along with "the excursion trains to provincial centres of culture" become the hunting grounds for Singh where he looks for suitable prey among foreign women with whom he can become physically intimate (Naipaul, *The* 21). However, interactions with these women neither give emotional nor sexual fulfillment to Singh. He flirts with these women and also brings them to his room to get physically close to them but then fears of knowing the private details of their lives or getting intimate in sexual terms with them who are also lost in a foreign land like him. In fact, the word "intimacy" becomes sickening for him as he says, "Intimacy: it was violation and self-violation. These scenes in the book-shaped room didn't always end well; they could end in tears, sometimes in anger, a breast grown useless being buttoned up, a door closed on a room that seemed to require instant purification" (Naipaul, *The* 24). Singh's futile flirtations with women that lead to only inane experiences are useless efforts on the part of the protagonist with which he hopelessly tries to fill his empty life in London. But neither his role of the "rich colonial" (Naipaul, *The* 20) in the School nor his dealings with foreign women fail to wipe away within him the feeling of being shipwrecked as a migrant in London.

The hotel in one of the suburbs of London where Singh comes to stay after being exiled from his native land also forms a major aspect of his life. Initially Singh finds the monotonous

life of the hotel that is ruled by “order” and “regularity” frustrating which he considers as “the life of the maimed” (Naipaul, *The* 269). However, this very life allows him to constructively engage in the act of writing. The hotel provides the space to Singh to deeply introspect and write about the events of his life and thereby develop a lucid understanding with respect to his existence. While such an undertaking imparts a consistency to Singh’s disjointed life, it can also not be denied that Singh’s existence as a writer is a life of withdrawal where he has withdrawn from the city which he inhabits to his own self. In other words, it is not by actively engaging with London but by becoming a recluse in it that Singh finds illumination and peace as he says about people like him, “We are people who for one reason or another have withdrawn, from our respective countries, from the city where we find ourselves, from our families. We have withdrawn from unnecessary responsibility and attachment. We have simplified our lives” (Naipaul, *The* 269-70). Thus, through his protagonist, the writer shows that for immigrants or migrants there is no possibility of developing healthy attachments in the foreign cities of receiving countries that can lead to fulfillment.

Just like Singh, London proves to be an alienating experience to Willie Chandran of Naipaul’s *Half a Life*. Willie was born into a family where his father was emotionally distant both from him and his mother as Willie’s mother belonged to a low caste. It is in order to escape from such barren family life in India; Willie takes refuge in London with the hope of finding a place for himself there. But nothing comes in his hand other than disappointment. The very first encounter with the big city fills Willie with disenchantment when the London of his fantasies which is nothing less than a fairy land is completely shattered before the reality of the city. He realizes that neither does he have any actual idea of London nor about world history and politics. His ignorance is very much like V. S. Naipaul when the author first arrived in London in 1950s. The author says in this regard:

When I came to England in 1950 I was a thorough colonial. Now, to be a colonial is, in a way, to know a total kind of security. It is to have all decisions about major issues taken out of one’s hand. It is to feel that one’s political status has been settled so finally that there is very little one can do in the world. . . . But I remain quite astonished at my political indifference. Things like Mau Mau in Kenya in 1952 passed over me completely. . . . Vietnam: at the beginning, people asked me to sign a petition in 1965. I didn’t know what they were talking about, I really didn’t know. (Jussawalla 14)

Thus, Willie, a member of erstwhile colony, behaves like a colonial and fails to relate to the real London which is disorienting for him. There are some major areas of Willie’s experience in London in the novel that highlight the estranged relationship of the migrants and immigrants with the city in which they come to take shelter away from their countries of origin. The first area is the fragile immigrant community with which Willie gets acquainted through his college friend Percy Cato. Apparently the immigrants seem to be happy in their gay social gatherings but

behind the surface ebullience exists the terrible sense of uncertainty about their lives, “They [immigrants] met in Notting Hill . . . and they were gay and bright together. But 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” (Naipaul, Half 72). The odd jobs that are done by Willie’s friend Percy Cato in order to survive in London vividly illustrate the aforementioned insecurity of the immigrants. From working in a club to renting rooms to the West Indians, he tries his hands in various things for remaining afloat in the city. Thus, Naipaul depicts that the inhospitable society of London does not provide the right opportunities to people like Cato for building a stable world of their own in the foreign land. Instead they need to get by through whatever resources that come within their reach. Willie himself also experiences the rejection of the city in the poor reception of his book which shows to him that Londoners are ready to accept works from Indian writers like Willie only when they produce the typical stuffs like those of John Masters and Rumer Godden. The deep racial intolerance of the people of the city towards the migrants or immigrants is also vehemently portrayed in the novel through the incident of the Notting Hill race riots and the brutal murder of the West Indian Kelso. The event shakes Willie so much that he decides to hide in the college during this time. Also when Willie begins to seriously contemplate about what he is going to do with his life after he gets his teaching diploma in London, he realizes that the city is not the place where he can settle for ever. He rightly comprehends that in London he would always remain under the dread of meeting the same end as that of Kelso. Thus, Willie’s thoughts underline the jittery position of people like him in foreign cities. The same has also been depicted in the novel through the poor condition of African immigrants in Berlin whose utter lack of belonging to the foreign city is acutely felt by Willie when he goes to stay there with his sister after his difficult experience in Africa. Willie identifies with the situation of African immigrants and thinks, “How many of us there now are! How many like me! Can there be room for us all?” (Naipaul, Half 138). Such reflection calls attention to the terrible sense of homelessness of migrants and immigrants abroad.

Thus, in the above-discussed novels, global cities like London emerge to be extremely alienating for migrants like Ralph Singh and Willie who are agonizingly made to realize that they don’t fit into the world of these cities. Through his protagonists Naipaul shows that irrespective of the migrants’ strong urge to get accommodated, global cities fail to positively respond to their expectations. Ralph Singh’s and Willie’s London is equivalent to the absurd universe of Albert Camus where “suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger” (Camus 4). In such an unintelligible world human mind wishes for clarity and Camus says what defines absurd is “the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart” (20). It is this “irrational” that Willie faces in his college in London where he goes through his studies “with a kind of blindness” (Naipaul, Half 58) or in the room where he is taken by Percy Cato’s girlfriend June for having sex. It is this same “irrational” that is encountered by Singh during his first stay in London when his disjointed experiences make him feel the fragmentation of his very self and makes him wonder, “How, in

the city, could largeness come to me? How could I fashion order out of all these unrelated adventures and encounters, myself never the same, never even the thread on which these things were hung?" (Naipaul, *The* 27). Thus, Naipaul's depiction of the existence of migrants and immigrants in his novel makes a telling comment about their condition in the global cities of the world.

### **Works Cited:**

- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Trans. Justin o' Brien. London: Penguin, 2005. Print.
- "Forced Labour." *The National Archives*. UK Government, n.d. Web. 4 Feb. 2017.
- French, Patrick. *The World Is What It Is: The Authorized Biography of V. S. Naipaul*. London: Picador, 2008. Print.
- Jussawalla, Feroza, ed. *Conversations with V. S. Naipaul*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1997. Print.
- "Migrant/Migration." *Learning to Live Together*. UNESCO, 2016. Web. 3 Feb. 2017.
- "Migration." Def. 1.1. *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*. Oxford UP, 2017. Web. 3 Feb. 2017.
- Naipaul, V. S. *Half a Life*. London: Picador, 2011. Print.
- . *The Mimic Men*. London: Picador, 2002. Print.
- . "Two Worlds." *Swedish Academy, Stockholm*. 7 Dec. 2001. Nobel Lecture.