

MAPPING THE ROAD TO IDENTITY IN VS. NAIPAUL'S MAGIC SEEDS

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Abstract

By making use of different theories stemming from research studies belonging to social-psychology and diasporic criticism, this article discusses the intricate destiny of the main character in VS. Naipaul's novel Magic Seeds. The paper focuses on the map metaphor seen as symbolic for one's journey to find one's identity. The literary analysis demonstrates that the author's purpose is to emphasize the multiplicity of identities assumed by the hero in search for his authentic self.

Keywords: identity, map, nomadism, diaspora

Motto:

“Whatever course you decide upon, there is always someone to tell you that you are wrong. There are always difficulties arising which tempt you to believe that your critics are right. To map out a course of action and follow it to an end requires courage.”
(attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson)²

Introduction

From ancient times, cartographers have been explorers, people of courage and vision who dare adventure into the unknown and make the unknown accessible and comprehensible. This article does not claim such merits. It solely aims at stressing the importance of maps and mapping in building a literary hero's identity as it is depicted by V.S. Naipaul in his novel *Magic Seeds*.

Krzysztof Czyzewski, a distinguished Polish author and theatre producer who has dedicated his work to rebuilding and supporting the great cultural diversity of Central and Eastern Europe, is fascinated with interpreting his life journeys as dictated by a “primordial map”:

Ever since childhood I have been convinced that my life journeys have been dictated by a primordial map. A map that an inner voice is reading; this voice

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² <http://thinkexist.com/quotes/with/keyword/map/>

makes itself heard in our rare moments of maximum concentration. [...] Only from the perspective of time do we notice the fact that our life has actually been full of signs left for us on our paths. [...] And, to be honest, only once arrived at the destination and meeting there the people who have influenced my life, that I remembered all those signs. (Czyzewski, 2009; translation mine)

In this paper I will use the mapping metaphor in an attempt to interpret Willie's struggles, V.S. Naipaul's main character in *Magic Seeds*, to discover his own identity, his true self.

Diaspora and nomadism

Magic Seeds is a novel constructed on two levels: on the one hand there is the plot itself with its sequence of events and on the other there are the insights into Willie's consciousness as his life unfolds. It is at this latter level of the novel that I want to trace the lines of an identity map, without failing to also acknowledge that everything happening in Willie's mind is a reaction to the reality of events surrounding him.

As the majority of Naipaul's works, this is also a novel about the South-Asian diaspora. Avtar Brah sees the concept of diaspora under the sign of a journey, although not every travel is to be understood as a diasporic experience:

At the heart of the notion of diaspora is the image of a journey. Yet not every journey can be understood as diaspora. Diasporas are clearly not the same as casual travel. Nor do they normatively refer to temporary sojourns. Paradoxically, diasporic journeys are essentially about settling down, about putting roots 'elsewhere'. (Brah, 1996: 179)

In *Magic Seeds* the hero is not an example of the usual diasporic self (i.e. dislocated from the motherland and trying to grow new roots in the hostland), but rather a nomad, a man without a fixed home, a wanderer.

In Willie's case, we do not sense that his nomadism is either a chosen or a preferred way of life. He is a nomad because he happens to become one. Vijay Mishra in his *Literature of the Indian Diaspora* claims that Naipaul's diaspora and nomadism are "primarily traumatic conditions that have the function of compulsion repetition" (Mishra, 2004: 107). I believe this is an accurate description; for Willie the trauma of his life is not determined by economic, political or social difficulties, but by his inability to find his own identity and thus his place in the world.

Being and becoming: the search for identity

In 1986, social theorists Tajfel and Turner described one's identity as having two important divisions: personal identity and social identity. The first was deemed as "the conceptualization of the self in relation to others", while the latter included "aspects of the self-concept derived from the person's membership in salient social groups" (Tajfel and Turner qt. in Malhi et al., 2009: 256). In the following part I will discuss Willie's efforts to discover his personal identity, his true self.

Willie describes his destiny as a succession of unexpected events: "My life has been a series of surprises" (Naipaul, 2004: 172). This statement synthesizes his entire existence. *Magic Seeds* tells the story of how identity is built and changed and rebuilt, how an individual can reconnect with a dormant self, how a person can grow and achieve the wisdom of accepting his own flaws, his own mistakes.

Naipaul constructs the novel without giving the reader clear chronological information about Willie and only late in the pages of the book we find out about the path that led to Willie's decision to join the guerrillas in India (an episode which opens the book).

After a few years of college education in London (where he was sent by his father), he marries a woman from Africa and moves there with her. Eighteen years later he leaves her and joins his sister, Sarojini, in Berlin where he is persuaded to become a member of the underground revolution led by Kandapalli, in India. After seven years with the guerrillas and following a period of imprisonment, he is freed and sent to London, never to return again on Indian soil.

According to the critic Kath Woodward, "constructing the self is made meaningful through mapping practices that select key moments and pivotal points in the narrative of identity" (Woodward, 2002: 67). As previously mentioned, Naipaul's hero is a nomad in search for his place in the world. His only coping technique is to count the beds he has slept in from his childhood to the present. In a way, this list of beds is a map of Willie's life and they are symbols of moments of stability, "key moments" in Woodward's words, that help him "get hold of the thread of his life" (Naipaul, 2004: 99).

For Kath Woodward "identity is closely linked to place, to key places and often to the place that we call home. In this sense the map is a useful metaphor for understanding the formation and representation of identity in relation to location and situation as well as movements and translation" (Woodward, 2002: 65).

In his extensive study, "Mapping Identities: Literature, Nationalism, Colonialism", Timothy J. Reiss also believes a character's "search for personal identity [...] does become caught up in mapping territory" (Reiss, 1992: 669), and the various geographical locations he/ she inhabits along the years.

Tracing Willie's identity map

Having in mind both Woodward's and Reiss's theories on identity formation and if we want to have a glimpse at what Willie's search for his true identity might look like we should try to draw the map of his journeys.

Chronologically, his travels around the world can be schematized as follows:

India → London → Africa → Berlin → India/ guerrillas/
prison → London

It is interesting how his wanderings form a cycle. The author himself stresses this cyclic character of Willie's life: "He had left India with very little money, the gift of his father; and he was going back with very little money, the gift of his sister" (Naipaul, 2004: 28). The irony of this situation resides in the fact that no matter how much Willie had desired to be on his own feet, there was always someone (father, wife, sister, guerrilla, friend/ Roger) who took over the control of his life. The following quote sums up Willie's identity drama: "I have never slept in a room of my own. Never at home in India, when I was a boy. Never here in London. Never in Africa. I lived in somebody else's house always, slept in somebody else's bed. [...] Will I ever sleep in a room of my own?" (Naipaul, 2004: 177).

There is little information about Willie's and his sister's life in the years before they both left India. From the letters they exchange over the years we learn that their mother was a harsh low-caste woman and their father had somehow embarrassed them with opening an ashram, which both Willie and Sarojini considered to be a sham and their father an impostor. We can only assume that the family environment had always lacked coherence which ultimately could have influenced Willie's sense of unbelonging.

His college years in London are also vaguely described in the book. But the feeling the reader gets is again of the lack of fulfillment and direction which characterizes Willie.

A few details about his marriage with an African woman are given in a story Willie shares with one of his guerrilla comrades, Ramachandra:

You must understand I was poor, literally without money, and when I met my wife in London, at the end of my useless college course, I had no idea at all what I might do or where I might go. After fifteen or sixteen years in Africa I began to change. I began to feel that I had thrown away my life, [...]. I began to feel that all I was doing was living my wife's life. Her house, her land, her friends, nothing that was my own. [...] I had to leave her, to face myself. (Naipaul, 2004: 113)

We can draw the conclusion that Willie's nomadism is in fact a search for purpose, a journey at the end of which he hopes to have discovered his true self. Woodward

considers that maps “represent another way of attempting to pin down identity” (Woodward, 2002: 68), but for Willie the map of his travels is a map of troubles, of questions. We can also visualize Willie’s life map as a sort of treasure map, whose clues he has to interpret (such as the biography of Gandhi he reads in Berlin and which fills him with the desire to become a revolutionary). He follows this map’s trajectories with the hope of a great reward in the end: finding his place in the world.

Constantly craving for stability, Willie joins the Indian guerrillas and finds himself in a much worse situation than before. Destiny plays a trick on him and by mistake he gets involved with the radical murderous wing of revolutionaries instead of the ideological liberal one, led by Kandapalli. He acknowledges he is trapped in a group of violent people and instead of finding his authentic self he gradually loses grip of his own incomplete, imperfect self:

[...] I feel lost. I don't know what cause I am serving, and why I am doing what I do.[...] I have lost my freedom for no good reason that I can see. (Naipaul, 2004: 67)

[...] that counting of beds had become harder and harder. [...] He felt his memory slipping. [...] He gave it up; it was like shedding a piece of himself. (Naipaul, 2004: 106-107)

During his activity as a courier for the guerrillas he is made aware of one important quality he has: “not being at home anywhere, but looking at home” (Naipaul, 2004: 74). This chameleonic feature which he manages to put to good use for the guerrillas’ cause is quite ironic. The one thing that triggers his identity crisis and identity search, the unhappiness attached to his lack of belonging, becomes his most appreciated trait.

After many years with the guerrillas, his personal identity seems to be disintegrating too: “I didn’t think of the dead policemen. I’ve forgotten myself. Now I’m truly lost. In every way. I don’t know what lies ahead or behind. My only cause now is to survive, to get out of this” (Naipaul, 2004: 122). Willie’s sense of self, his aspirations, his life direction, all disperse leaving him more confused about his purpose in the world than he had ever been before. This phenomenon has been thoroughly researched by psychologists and social-psychologists (see Roger Brubaker and Frederick Cooper). There is much interest in the field regarding the mechanisms that accompany the building of identity and the different layers people add to a core-identity (called personal identity). According to John Hewitt, personal identity is defined as: “a sense of self built up over time as the person embarks on and pursues projects or goals that are not thought of as those of a community, but as the property of the person. Personal identity thus emphasizes a sense of individual autonomy rather than of communal involvement” (Hewitt qtd. by Hitlin, 2003: 118).

Another layer is added to Willie's perpetual identity reconstruction when he is sentenced to prison (after surrendering to the police). He learns the new "jail routine". Willie does not fight off this new social role (as an imprisoned convict); he adapts to it and tries to perceive it as his "new life" that he unwillingly has to live:

Over the next two or three days he learned the jail routine. And, having put the idea of imminent release out of his mind, he settled into his new life, as he had settled into the many other lives that had claimed him at various times. (Naipaul, 2004: 147-148).

V.S. Naipaul does not build a continuum out of Willie's life story. The character's identity map seems to be a sum of totally different lives, a sum of distinct selves that Willie assumes, constantly searching for that true one self.

Yet, in the final part of his existence, when he is exiled to London, we understand that he had not been entirely aware of his shifting selves. When reading his old college short stories (which actually got him out of the Indian prison on the pretense of having been an innovator of modern Indian writing) he acknowledges his multitude of selves:

Nervously, fearful of encountering his old self, he began to read.[...] He felt himself transported, as if by some kind of time-travelling magic, into the time, twenty-eight years before, when he was writing.[...] He would have said, if he had been asked, that he had always been the same person. But it was another person who looked as from a great distance at his older self. (Naipaul, 2004: 180)

It is in London, his final destination, that he grasps the process of becoming that he had undergone during all his wanderings. Experience, age, wisdom help him see how he has grown as an individual:

[...] gradually there came to Willie an idea of the man he had become, an idea of what Africa and then the guerrilla life in the forest and then the prison and the simple age had made of him. He felt immensely strong; he had never felt like this before. (Naipaul, 2004: 181)

He perceives this strength as his greatest achievement along with the freedom in which he can now rejoice:

What his essence was he still didn't know, though he had lived so long in the world. All that he knew at the moment was that he was a free man- in every way- and had a new strength. [...] 'Now I don't have to join anybody. Now I can only celebrate what I am, or what I have become. (Naipaul, 2004: 187-188)

Conclusions

As we have seen, all Willie's existence had been under the sign of someone else's involvement, of joining someone else's cause. Only towards old age does he understand that what he had been searching all over the world, roaming from one place to another, cannot be found: "[...] understanding as a result with the deepest kind of ache that there was no true place in the world for him" (Naipaul, 2004: 228).

Coming to terms with his life, accepting his becoming, calling off his search for a stable and pinned down identity, he wisely concludes that his mistakes, his failures had all been the result of having an "ideal view of the world" (Naipaul, 2004: 280).

His incessant search for the right place in the world was a search for a chimera. Tracing the lines on Willie's life map is tracing the lines of his being and becoming. The conclusions we reach at the end of his journeys are that the search for one's self should start by assuming responsibility for one's actions and mistakes and not being afraid to move forward.

V.S. Naipaul's novel has an open ending, thus his readers are left imagining different outcomes of the hero. We are once more allowed into his thoughts: "I must try now to be only myself. If such a thing is possible" (Naipaul, 2004: 170). Through these words, the author gives us an indication as to how Willie is going to live the rest of his life and he also sums up the message hidden under the hero's life map: one has to build a life without mirroring others' existence and celebrating one's individuality.

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