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## **Diasporic Sensibility: A Reading of V.S. Naipaul's *Half a Life* and J.M. Coetzee's *Youth***

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**Abstract:** The present paper deals with the diasporic sensibilities in V.S. Naipaul's novel *Half a Life* and J.M. Coetzee's novel *Youth*. Diaspora basically refers to dispersion or going away from one place to another place. Both V.S. Naipaul and J.M. Coetzee are the champions of diaspora. Naipaul's *Half a Life* and Coetzee's *Youth* deal with young men newly arrived in the England of the 1960s to make their way in the world. They form a convenient basis for comparison of these two writers who are so different in many ways and yet who share a detached, frosty and pessimistic outlook and prose of the greatest elegance, precision and power.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, dispersion, memories of homeland, alienation, homelessness.

Diaspora means "Scattering" or "dispersion". It is the movement, migration, or scattering of people away from an established homeland or people dispersed by whatever cause to more than one location or people settled far from their ancestral homelands. The main features of diaspora include a history of dispersal, myths, memories of the homeland, alienation in the host county, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship.

The present paper deals with the diasporic sensibilities in V.S. Naipaul's novel *Half a Life* and J.M. Coetzee's novel *Youth*.

V.S. Naipaul was a great diasporic writer. Twice displaced from his ancestral homeland of India, V.S. Naipaul seems to epitomise the diasporic writer. His grandparents were part of the huge dispersal of Indians to provide indentured labour for the British Empire after the abolition of slavery, and he himself is in self-imposed exile from his Trinidad birthplace, living in England but claiming never to feel at home anywhere. His consciousness of homelessness is at the root of his whole oeuvre and he is always one of the first writers-mentioned in any general discussion of the Indian diaspora.

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J. M. Coetzee's status as a diasporic writer is more contentious. Born in South Africa in 1940 he could perhaps be considered a member of diaspora of Europe during the period of imperial expansion in Africa.

Naipaul's *Half a Life* and Coetzee's *Youth* deal with young men newly arrived in the England of the 1960s to make their way in the world. They form a convenient basis for comparison of these two writers who are so different in many ways and yet who share a detached, frosty and pessimistic outlook and prose of the greatest elegance, precision and power.

One of the most striking similarities between Naipaul's main character Willie Chandran in *Half a Life* and John, the autobiographical figure in Coetzee's *Youth*, is that they are in a constant state of alienation from their feelings. In London, Willie has to

re-learn everything that he knew. He had to learn how to eat in public. He had to learn how to greet people and how having greeted them, not to greet them all over again in a public place ten or fifteen minutes later. He had to learn to close doors behind him. He had to learn how to ask for things without being peremptory. (Naipaul 58-59).

He passively allows his sister Sarojini to tell him, in her bossy way, what he should think. He is easily and thoroughly disheartened by the reviews of his book of stories: 'Willie thought, "Let the book die. Let it fade away. Let me not be reminded of it. I will write no more"' (123). Similarly, in *Youth*, after John's girlfriend in Cape Town has an abortion, he does not know how he should feel: "He is out of his depth. ... Is Sarah still due to enter a period of mourning? And what of him? Is he too going to mourn? How long does one mourn, if one mourns? Does the mourning come to an end, and is one the same after the mourning as before? (Coetzee 36)

Later, in London, he is puzzled by an affair with an old girlfriend from South Africa, which drags on but appears to be going nowhere:

He believes in passionate love and its transfiguring power. His experience, however, is that amatory relations devour his time, exhaust him, and cripple his work. Is it possible that he was not made to love women, that in truth he is homosexual? If he were homosexual, that would explain his woes from beginning to end. Yet ever since he mined sixteen he has been fascinated by the beauty of women, by their air of mysterious unattainability ... (78-79).

He tries homosexuality and finds it unsatisfactory too. Only for a moment, after he has been in England for some years, lying on the grass on Hampstead Heath on a spring day, does he feel 'blessed with a hint that he belongs on this earth'(117) —a revelation unexpectedly unconnected with sex, love or poetry.

Sexual misbehaviour of the dreariest kind is a feature of the lives of both these young men. The physical needs of their twenty-year-old bodies drive them to actions they find unfulfilling

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and contemptible. In London, Willie can find no way of forming relationships on his own initiative, finding a limited but ultimately frustrating success with the lovers of his friends. He blames his problem on his upbringing:

If I stay here I would always be trying to make love to my friends' girlfriends. I have discovered that It is quite an easy thing to do. But I know it is wrong and it would get me into trouble one day. The trouble is I don't know how to go out and get a girl on my own. No one trained me in that .All men should train their sons in the art of seduction. But in our culture there is no seduction. Our marriages are arranged ( Naipaul 117-118).

Staying behind in India, he would perhaps have had a marriage arranged for him. At least he would have known the sexual ways of his culture, whereas he is at a loss in London. But he cannot go back 'to the other thing', having lived 'like a free man' for two and a half years: "I don't like the idea of marrying someone like Sarojini and that's what will happen if I go home"(117). It seems to be a great stroke of luck when he meets Ana, another 'half-and-half from a Portuguese East African country. But although he lives more or less happily with her for many years, sexual satisfaction is elusive. Naipaul feels that the sexual difficulties of his characters in this novel are essential to the barrenness of their lives. Willie's problems are inextricably linked with his cultural displacement, not only that caused by his move away from India, but also by the ill-conceived mixed-caste marriage of which he is the product. It is not that he cannot love. He falls in love several times throughout the novel, but his feeling of alienation leads to an inability to feel that he belongs anywhere and thus with anyone. When he leaves Ana, he says, "I can't live your life any more. I want to live my own" (136).

John's problems in *Youth* are equally perplexing. Like Willie, he manages to find sexual partners but no lasting satisfaction, and he treats the women coldly and insincerely, finding none of them measure up to his hopes of being initiated in the 'elemental forces of the universe'. Near the end of the novel, he begins to wonder whether

all the time he has been overestimating his worth on the market, fooling himself into believing he belongs with the sculptresses and actresses when he really belongs with the kindergarten teacher on the housing estate or the apprentice manageress of the shoe store? ( Coetzee 150).

Unlike Willie, however. John does not have a ready explanation for his problems. He does not come from a highly structured culture where marriages are arranged. His family background is peculiar without having the straightforward stigma of the Chandran's mixed-caste marriage, made solely for reasons of defiance. In his case, his South African parents, mismatched by character and personality rather than class or caste, are Afrikaners who behave like English people. Although he despises the Afrikaners and longs to be English, he fits in

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with neither culture. His difficulties finding love or even friendship seem to stem from a coldness of personality and tendency to over-intellectualise bred from a dysfunctional family background and an uncongenial social milieu. He emulated The English with their immunity to hurt, their straight blond hair and golden skins, their clothes that are never too smaller or too large, their quiet confidence, and their sisters, so golden-blonde, so beautiful, that he cannot believe they are of this earth.

The one place where he felt he belonged was the farm of his father's family, although he was conscious that he was not fully accepted there. But at least he had a home against which his condition of exile could be assessed. Willie does not have even this tenuous link to any place: he really belonged nowhere at all. Both felt that their immediate family was in some way abnormal.

In *Youth*, the nineteen-year-old John in Cape Town "is proving something ... that you don't need parents" (3). When he was in London, his mother wrote to him every week, letters which he received with exasperation:

What does she hope to achieve by her letters, this obstinate, graceless woman? Can she not recognize that proofs of her fidelity, no matter how dogged, will never make him relent and come back? Can she not accept that he is not normal? But If he were to cut all ties, if he were not to while at all, she would draw the worst conclusion, the worst possible; and the very thought of the grief that would pierce her at that moment makes him want to block his ears and eyes. As long as she is alive he dare not die. As long as she is alive, therefore, his his life is not his own (99).

Willie's relationship with his mother was a little less tortured. At first he loved his mother and took her side against his high-caste father who had married her only in order to make a political point. However, he realizes that her family and group knew nothing about anything. They didn't know about the religion of the people of caste or the Muslims or the Christians. They had lived in ignorance, cut off from the world, for centuries. Gradually, as he grew up he began to look at his mother from more and more of a distance. The more successful he became at school the greater the distance grew. He was more successful than John at cutting ties with his parents: his father was relieved to get rid of him when he left for England, and his mother was barely mentioned in the later parts of the novel.

There are some elements of autobiography in both these novels. *Youth* followed closely the known history of Coetzee's life: date of birth, education and so on. *Half a Life*, on the other hand, had a protagonist who was several years younger than Naipaul and who was born in India of mixed-caste parents. It deals with the themes of alienation and migration, of cross-cultural drifting he had always been concerned with. One of the most remarkable differences between Willie Chandran and Naipaul is that Willie allowed his writing career to fail. He perhaps lacked the talent of Naipaul but more importantly he lacked the motivation and the

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burning desire to be a writer. At the end of the novel, neither Willie nor the reader, nor, one felt, the author, knew what will happen to him next. There is no feeling of closure.

*Youth* ends in a similar mood of drifting, alienated hopelessness. John is “a twenty-four-year-old computer programmer in a world in which there are no thirty-year-old computer programmers” (168). He compared himself with his Indian friend Ganapathy:

He and Ganapathy are two sides of the same coin: Ganapathy starving not because he is cut off from Mother India but because he doesn't eat properly and he locked into an attenuating endgame, playing himself, with each move, further into a corner and into defeat. One of these days the ambulance men will call at Ganapathy's flat and bring him out on a stretcher with a sheet over his face. When they have fetched Ganapathy they might as well come and fetch him too (168-169).

This ending is of a piece with John's slightly comic self-dramatisation, which is viewed with frosty, detached irony by the third-person narrator throughout *Youth*, the older self looking back on the pretensions and vanities of his youth. The reader who is even casually acquainted with Coetzee's life story also realises that this young man is not going to be carted away to the morgue and will go on to be the great writer J.M. Coetzee. Indeed, before the novel ends he develops the idea of writing a novel whose ‘horizon of knowledge’ was that of South Africa in the 1820s. As an expression of a mood of despair and alienation, the last pages of *Youth* certainly have considerable impact. *Youth* is in many ways a comic novel. The most humorous passages meticulously describe his groping self-questioning. He observes West Indians in London, wondering:

what draws them from Jamaica and Trinidad to this heartless city where the cold seeps up from the very stones of the streets, where the hours of daylight are spent in drudgery and the evenings huddled over a gas fire in a hired room with peeling walls and sagging furniture? Surely they are not all here to find fame as poets (104).

*Half a Life* is superficially not a comic novel. The element of ironic mockery is virtually absent, possibly because Willie does not stand in the same autobiographical relationship to Naipaul as John does to Coetzee. The younger self viewed by the older and wiser is almost always the object of some irony, if not sarcasm, while a purely fictional character might carry with it an extra freight of emotions inspired by imaginative identification. The lives this novel describes are mostly joyless, but even so the novel is not without its moments of rather grim humour. Sarojini visits a reluctant Willy at his college in London, and insists on cooking for him in his room:

she lay the heater on its back and she set the pots on the metal guards above the glowing electric coils. Sarojini had never been a good cook, and the food she cooked in the college room was awful. The smell stayed in the room. Willie was worried about breaking the

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college rules, and he was just as worried about people seeing the dark little cook—clumsily dressed: with a cardigan over her sari and socks on her feet- who was his sister. In her new assertive way, but still not knowing too much about anything, in five minutes she would have babbled away all Willie's careful little stories about their family and background ( Naipaul 116).

In *Half a Life*, Naipaul has come back to pure fiction for the first time in more than 20 years. In this desolate tale of unfulfilled lives, however, he has used only fictional characters, perhaps to distance himself from its frank (although not explicit) treatment of sexual matters. Much of this novel is related in the first person. The first part is, after a very short introduction, narrated by Willie's father to Willie, giving the history which has made his family so strange and 'half-and-half.' The second part and the first section of the third, Willie's experiences in London and his arrival in Africa, are in the third person, but the last ninety pages or so are once again in the first person, narrated by Willie to his sister Sarojini in Germany. This alternation of narrative voices brings the importance of subjective experience to the reader's attention, but there is surprisingly little difference in the tone of the different sections of the novel, perhaps suggesting a similarity in sensibility after all between Willie and his despised father. Coetzee in *Youth* maintains the same present-tense, third-person ironic detachment throughout, suiting his material perfectly.

Part of the foreboding in both these novels concerns racial tensions. *Half a Life* ends as Willie escapes Ana's East African country before the coming civil war. He was deeply disturbed by the humiliation suffered by an illegitimate mulatto tiler whom he saw being abused by his employer: "Whenever I remembered the big sweating man with the abused light eyes, carrying the shame of his birth on his face like a brand. I would think, 'Who will rescue that man? Who will avenge him?'"(166).

Willie, however, had no solution to offer, and left Ana because he didn't think he could live through another war. Despite Sarojini's lectures, he does not see himself as a champion of the oppressed.

John, similarly, saw the violence inherent in his society, and escaped it. In another novel of Coetzee named *Boyhood*, Coetzee portrayed that a young coloured boy of his own age lived with his family as a servant for a short time. The name of the coloured boy was Eddie. Eddie disgraced himself by running away, was punished and sent back to his family. However, in *Youth*, it is the fear of being called up in the wake of Sharpeville which propels him to leave Cape Town for London:

In a week he could find himself behind barbed wire in Voortrekkerhoogte, sharing a tent with thuggish Afrikaners, eating bully-beef out of cans, listening to Johnnie Ray on Springbok Radio. He would not be able to endure it; he would slash his wrists. There is only one course open: to flee ( Coetzee 40).

Thus, neither book suggests any solutions to political or racial problems, offering only flight.

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But this is a part of the condition of both these young men. They have no allegiance to a group, a race, a class, or a nation. They are both in a way 'half-and-half', belonging nowhere, diasporic in sensibility and consciousness if not in literal fact. The traditions of a culture or a society are absent for both, even though both grew up with their families in countries where they had lived for some generations. In *Half a Life* this absence is explained by the mixed-caste marriage: in *Youth* it is a matter of puzzlement: John does not understand why his parents, who are really Afrikaners, seem to behave like English people and are, apparently, not proper South Africans. If being part of a diaspora has any significance, both these young men surely have all the hallmarks. In their own ways, they are each as alien and adrift- as displaced ambivalent- as any member of a diasporic population.

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