The Centre of Transit(ion)

Postcolonial London in V.S. Naipaul's *Half a Life* (2001) and J.M. Coetzee's *Youth* (2002)

Nora A. Plesske

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Abstract

With reference to V.S. Naipaul's *Half a Life* (2001) and J.M. Coetzee's *Youth* (2002) this paper deals with literary experiences of migration to London, deciphers the representations and perceptions of the metropolis, and lays bare the structural and thematic similarities in those two contemporary postcolonial London texts. This paper especially examines the representation of urban space and the connected feelings of alienation, isolation and anonymity of the migrants' experience in the postcolonial metropolis.

While the novels' protagonists try to re-invent themselves in 1950s/60s London, urban life is depicted as being transformed to an immigrant-inflicted cosmopolitan culture before the background of historical happenings with postcolonial relevance. However, in both novels, postcolonial London does not figure as a place to make one's own, but merely as a place of transit, a thoroughfare for the migrant diaspora: the metropolis features as the passage between home and further exile. Moreover, in these novels of development the former home revisits the protagonists as a wound and they are increasingly paralysed by the metropolis. The migrants' constant movement turns into a stasis of repeated displacement and homelessness.

This paper therefore argues that these two "fictions of migration" include as similar imagery of the postcolonial metropolis in transition wherein London has become a central node of a global experience.

Contents

Introduction – Postcolonial London

The dissolution of the Empire and formal decolonialisation, mass migration from former colonised countries to London and the establishment of a new London-born transnational community have shaped of what can be called Postcolonial London. The postcolonial metropolis has not only changed in outlook through new arrivals but has also been re-written by immigrant writers and second-generation immigrants. Postcolonial London writing reorients the narration of the metropolis by recontextualising its culture and society in relation to the former Empire and its legacy. A diverse body of writers with links to the West Indies, Africa, South Asia, Australia, etc. have revisioned post-war London in tales of struggle, hostility, violence but also of vital and creative hybridity.

The postcolonial London novels of the 1950s and 1960s were tales about migration from the dissolving colonies to the former heart of the Empire and featured stories about making London a home. They also document the changing nature of the metropolis to an immigrant-inflicted cosmopolitan culture. Novels from the 1980s by mainly second-generation immigrants figure a search for a place and identity in the culturally multifarious metropolis. Two traits of fiction especially became apparent, firstly revisionist historical fiction, secondly, the postcolonial novel of development. Neo-imperialism and globalisation have altered the immigration to London once again, and in the last years new "fictions of migration", especially concerning Eastern European immigration, have sprung up. Postcolonial city novels revisit the motifs of urban fiction, such as great expectations, alienation and isolation in the context of postcolonial London in a specific imagery of creolization, otherness, belonging, or dispossession, etc. The representation of urban space is therefore re-contextualised. London has been depicted as Golden or Grey City, its centre as conquered from within and from the periphery, as a playground of miscegenation and a pool for crime, as segregated or multicultural happy land.

London literature per se reached a heightened popularity by ways of new postcolonial novels such as Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* or Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. The new Millennium also saw the publication of V.S. Naipaul's *Half a Life* (2001) and J.M. Coetzee's *Youth* (2002). These two novels revisit the era of the Windrush generation. However, in contrast to Andrea Levy's *Small Island*, for example, both authors were part of this first generation of post-war immigrants. And in contrast to Samuel Selvon and George Lamming, whose novels are also set in 1950s/1960s London, Naipaul's and Coetzee's

view is truly retrospective. Moreover, both Nobel laureates have had a huge impact regarding Postcolonial literature in the last half a century and therefore the comparison of their two novels also allows an insight into postcolonial London, its development and writing *per se*.

So, with reference to V.S. Naipaul's *Half a Life* (2001) and J.M. Coetzee's *Youth* (2002) this paper deals with a specific literary experience of migration to London, the representations and perceptions of the metropolis, and lays bare the structural and thematic similarities in those two contemporary Postcolonial London texts. This paper especially examines the representation of urban space and the connected feelings of alienation, isolation and anonymity of the migrants' experience.

1 *Half a Life* and *Youth*

In *Half a Life* (2001) V.S. Naipaul revisits London for the fourth time in his oeuvre since his most famous London novel *The Mimic Men* (1967). The story takes the protagonist from post-independence India to postcolonial London, thereafter to a pre-independence African country modelled after Mozambique, and finally to the separated city of Berlin. It covers the first half of Willie Somerset Chandran's life, the sections being equivalent to his childhood, youth, marriage and divorce. The novel opens with Willi's father, filling in his mix caste family background, his schooldays and escape to England. Willie arrives in London in 1956 aged 20 and is determined to remake himself through the study of literature. However, his experience as a colonial in the metropolis is a chain of disappointments (cf. Cowley 2001). He can't take advantage of opportunity and of moments of promise in London and allows his ambitions to be thwarted. Willie writes a book, he fumbles for friendship, sex, and acceptance and fails in all. Being haunted by inauthenticities he find it increasingly difficulty in building a coherent self. After three years of estrangement his only hope is further exile in Mozambique where he stays to the age of 41 before. Leaving his wife Ana and taking refuge at his sister's in Berlin. Whereas, Willie's story of displacement and exile finds a sequel in Naipaul's *Magic Seeds* (2004), Coetzee's novel *Youth*, is the second volume after *Boyhood* (1997). The first volume covers the boy's life aged 10-12 in the South African countryside of the 1950s "with its eternal conflicts between the Boers and the English and between white and black" (Press Release 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature 2003). *Youth* picks up when the boy is 19 and captures the years 1959-1964. The story opens in Cape

Town and subsequently follows John's decampment to England shortly after the Sharpeville massacre. He sets out to London to become a poet and find true love. But the metropolis of alleged romance and art dwarfs him to a position as a computer programmer with IBM. After two years in London, he acknowledges his failure as lover and writer retreats to the English periphery of Berkshire. There, the youth's journey of misery ends in a final creative and psychological impasse.

The titles of Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Youth* call to mind many well-known autobiographies, for example Tolstoi's *Childhood*, *Boyhood*, *Youth*. And indeed, John seems like an autobiographical alter ego of Coetzee. The author himself, calls this kind of fictionalised autobiography, an "*Autre*biography" (Doubling), where the boy and the youth appear as others but still haunt the present. "W.S. Chandran" in *Half a Life* "is and is not V.S. Naipaul" (Coetzee The New York Review of Books 2001), but especially, the London section mirrors Naipaul's own experiences in the metropolis. So, both texts stand in the tradition of the autobiographical informed novels of development, which mirrors their author's own displacement and diasporic identity. The two protagonists in the novels, Willie and John, change their perception through the experience of migration, and come-of-age by ways of experiences in a postcolonial urban setting. The process of identity formation is strongly influenced by them trying to cut loose from their home.

1.1 Migration

Willie and John both flee their colonial home with the age of twenty not only to steer free of their families but also as consequence of displacement in culture of origin. So, Willie in *Half a Life* migrates to cut loose from his family's and especially his father's failings. Moreover, due to his "shame" of being a half-caste, he experiences an identity crisis already in the colonial setting. The consequences of imperial power structures such disorder and corruption as well as his own fragmentation enforce the "voluntary" exile. John seeks independence from the emotional pressures of his family (Y: 18) and wants to free himself of childhood anxieties of his father failings, too (Y: 47, 122). The initial reason, that drives him away though, is the racism and political unrest in South Africa (Y: 17). He experiences a deep sense of guilt, feeling as "his feet is soaked with the blood and the vast backward depth of history rings out with shouts of anger" (Y: 17). John is stifled by shame being a white South African which initially makes him cut lose the connection to land, history and family (Y: 104). The pull factors of migration to

London can be seen the protagonists quest for knowledge. John is drawn to England by its literature and culture which in his view stands in opposition to South Africa's philistinism. For him "Civilization since the eighteenth century has been an Anglo-French affair." (Y: 25) and that without art "he might as well be a barbarian" (Y: 26). As Naipaul stressed in his Nobel Prize Lecture, for him as a colonial "The world outside existed in a kind of darkness; and we inquired about nothing." (Nobel Lecture "Two Worlds" 2001). Similarly, Willie feels how he has neither knowledge of history nor geography and thinks that before coming to England "he was swimming in ignorance, and without a knowledge of time."(HL 55). Thus, both colonials become migrants by various experiences of difference and marginalization in their "half-made" postcolonial home countries. However, their experience of displacement is only to increase upon their arrival in the heart of the former Empire, London.

1.2 The Postcolonial Metropolis

"He knew London was a great city. His idea of a great city was one of a fairyland of splendour and dazzle, and when he got to London and began walking about its streets he felt let down." (HL 52) The glamorous land of imagination is unmasked as make-belief. Buckingham Palace seems to Willie like the home of impostors. Only Debenhams with its "setting of glass and glitter and artificial light" (HL 67) fulfils his expectations and ideals. For John, London is the worldwide hub for writers to be, one of the "places in the world where life can be lived at its fullest intensity" (Y: 41) It might appear "stony, labyrinthine, and cold" (Y: 41) but it is enshrined by art and romance (Y: 44). But his aspirations to become a writer and find a passionate muse are soon to be thwarted by city life.

John finds himself a job with IBM in the heart of the West End but office life soon shows its depressing monotony and repression which lead to attacks of panic in him (Y:47). Routine is mirrored by his unvarying diet of "apples, oat porridge, bread, cheese, chipolatas" (Y: 51-52) and the bleakness of his solitary flat in the north of London. He is caught in a his state of miserable limbo (Y: 52, Y:47), hardly to be countered by his weekend visits to book shops, galleries, museums, cinemas and the heath. In *Half a Life*, "Willie [is] living in the college as in a daze." (HL 58) Learning at college and the food he is eating do not nourish him and he becomes deluded. Therefore, the great metropolis leaves the two protagonists without any plan or direction (Y: 59). As Coetzee puts it in *Youth* "He has not mastered London. If there is any mastering going on, it

is London mastering him." (Y: 63) London is neither the "great chastener" for their guilt and shame nor the safe harbour from dispossession (Y:57). Instead, the metropolitan centre reveals itself to be derelict land of disorder and frailty, Willie had hoped to have left behind. He walks through the decay (HL 68) of poor streets (HL 70) which seem altogether apart from London, like another city (HL 69). For John the city and its people reveal themselves as icy (Y: 102) and hard as stone (Y: 113); he feels coldly evaded (Y: 112).

Alienation and isolation mark long passages of their in the metropolis. A loveless beginning in *Half a Life* leads to a solitary end for Willie as John sis alone in the end of *Youth*. London's wet weather and the sodium lit streets appear as an apt image for urban loneliness (Y: 52). John encounters other "lonely wanderers" (Y: 55) of the metropolis in the British museum, but most of them are migrants like himself. As both novels suggest, the loneliness Willie and John experience is not simply part of the urban *conditio humana*, but strongly connected to their social alienation and cultural marginality. Thus, in the postcolonial metropoliss, the dispossessed exiles become marginalized once again. John internalises his peripheral decent by calling himself a "graceless colonial" (Y: 86) and "provincial ignoramus." (Y: 92). Willie's life instead is marked, as the title of the novel, suggests, by incompleteness. He comes from a half-caste background, has a half English half Indian name coming from "a half-made society".

The incompatibility between the two exiles and their urban surroundings, their isolation and marginal status is mirrored by their failure to establish love relationships in the metropolis. Both protagonists re-enact struggles they left their home for in their love affairs. In *Youth* it says about John: "Again and again he was being noted, found wanting, turned down." Although London is full of beautiful girls from all over the world (Y:72), he feels ignored by English girls and immigrants alike (Y: 71). In his unfulfilling affairs he only perceives his own coldness, callousness, caddishness, and heartlessness. In *Half a Life* Willie does not know more about sex than about history or geography in the beginning. He is ashamed and frightened, retreating to affairs which eventually leave him sexually frustrated. The epitome of Willie's shame is reached is when he retreats to seek out a prostitute at Piccadilly Circus. When she demands him to "Fuck like and Englishman" (HL 121). Willie's want of wholeness is however momentarily fulfilled when Ana, an African-Portuguese language student with her mixed background makeshim feel complete (HL 126). Having gone to London to discover himself, he ironically looses this completeness in the same moment of acquirering it. He follows the girl to further

exile in Africa, simply becoming her "London Man". Willi's half-and-half status not only stands for the constant and repetitious experiences of difference (HL: 125) and marginalisation but also for his disjunctive identities.

In London, Willie meets other people who are themselves exiles leading half-lives. They all inhabit some kind of immigrant twilight zone in the city (cf. Burnett 2001) while around them the metropolis becomes more metropolitan and diverse. Being taken to the "gay and bright" parties of Notting Hill, Willie becomes "part of the special, passing bohemian-immigrant life of London of the late 1950s." (HL: 72) including new arrivals from the West Indies and South Africa as well as Londoners "with a taste for social adventure" or the "wish to invert the social code of the colonies" (HL 72). In 1956 London is "bursting at the seams with immigrants from the Caribbeans" and for a time Willie floats "in the bottomless sea of multiculturalism" (Choubey nd.). Later, through his work at the BBC, he advances to the real bohemian dinner parties assembling a cosmopolitan and multicultural group of international exiles and migrants. His experience of migration seems for once to be a shared one. But the Notting Hill Riots of 1958 drive Willie into hiding again feeling threatened as well as ashamed (HL 109). The "madness in the life of great cities" (HL 110) as his friend Roger calls it, is a reminder of postcolonial disorder Willie originally escaped from India. In *Youth* John perceives that there is happier and diverse urban life going on than experienced by him. (Y: 97) Other immigrants seem to have friends, burst of vitality and have romances. London is cosmopolitan and multicultural including temporal workers from the settler colonies, European language students and East Bloc refugees and West Indians. However, he feels no part of either group. And with the beginning of the 1960s he cannot fail to notice the cities growing inhospitality to foreigners brandished by paroles reading "Nigger go Home, No Coloured" (Y: 104). The only protection, not to make him feel as unwelcome, he thinks is the protective colouring of his skin (Y: 104). He re-experiences racism of South Africa as a worldwide phenomenon coming from the former centre of imperialism and colonialism. And in the end even he has to bow down to the new immigration regulations.

John nor Willie make the city their own or become New Londoners. Willie migrates to Africa having failed to see a future in London and fearing ongoing humiliation in the metropolis (Hl 121). John manifests his outsider life in the English periphery but considers time and time again to migrate to neutral Sweden or to take up postgraduate studies in the USA.

2 London in Transit(ion)

The depiction of London through original displacement, to the limbo of arrival, failed settlement, renewed exile and initial homelessness is marked by incompleteness and forlornness. But the novels are also stories of mentally revisited "imaginary homelands" and ongoing "histor[ies] of migrations and cultural adjustments" (Gupta 1999: 2)

1.

London figures as the centre of post-colonial/neo-colonial transitions taking place all over the world in the middle of the 20th century. As Naipaul aptly puts it in 1950, he was a "thorough colonial", but at the time of the interview 1971 "one has ceased to be colonial" (Naipaul 1971: 897). In the two novels, London is the central node of post-colonial transformations connecting the Suez Crisis and the Cuban Missile Crisis, Sharpeville and Vietnam, Indian independence, and African decolonisation.

2.

As a consequence of colonial or postcolonial dispossessions, people are exiled. Metropolitan centres grow more diverse. I quote from Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival* here, "In 1950 in London I was at the beginning of that great movement of peoples that was tot take place ion the second half of the twentieth century – a movement and a cultural mixing greater than the peopling of the United States." (Naipaul The Enigma of Arrival cit in Coetzee 2001). Thus, London starts transforming itself, one the one hand by establishing a new multicultural urban life, on the other hand by internalising segregation formerly mainly explicit in imperial periphery. To quote Nasta (2002: 31) "cultural transformations [are] effected by [the] presence of colonial or postcolonial immigrant" The centre is re-set and becomes decentred through, rather, borrowing from Mary Pratt, a contact zone. The metropolis itself become displaced through various cross-cultural encounters interconnections. London society is inconstant flux.

3.

But London also becomes the central place of a whole generation experience. Coming-of-age. Like the title *Youth* suggest, it is a phase and situation in life already wrought by identity crisis and formation. There is either the possibility of re-assessment, the freedom of building an own hybrid or diasporic identity, or in the re-experience of marginalisation home revisits the protagonist as a wound or even trauma. However, postcolonial urban identity is depicted in transformation and constant flux.

4.

For people who are perpetually between cultures place London might just be one stage in their life-long journey. It they do not achieve to make London their home, they are likely to return or move on to further exile. People in flux render London to a place of mere transit. The metropolis is therefore re-located to a throughway. It has become a post-colonial frontier itself. The postcolonial urban imagery of the two novels under analysis figures London in becoming a central node of a global experience. Transition is becoming centred.

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