

ANNA BYSIECKA

REWRITING PERSONAL STORIES  
IN *BRICK LANE* BY MONICA ALI  
AND *HALF A LIFE* BY V. S. NAIPAUL<sup>1</sup>

“A boundary is not at which something stops,  
but (...) that from which something begins its essential unfolding.”

Martin Heidegger

The experience of migration, exile and displacement present in contemporary world, and mirrored in literature, marks the development of “fissured identities”<sup>2</sup> that are opened up to questioning and rewriting. Formed on the move, identities become fractured since each change of social conditions entails some adjustment to the new surroundings (CHAMBERS, 25). Uprooted from their motherlands, identities are constantly subject to mutation, to crossing boundaries that mark the beginning of a new self. They become a meeting point of different cultures that are continuously interacting with one another. Since subjects experience cultural dislocations, their identities are no longer fixed and stable but complex and fluid. The idea of the written text

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<sup>1</sup> Although the title of this article only mentions the process of rewriting, it must be added that the characters remake themselves also in the process of retelling their stories — for example, William from *Half a Life* is recounting his stay in Africa to his sister and Nazneen from *Brick Lane* wants to alter her fate by changing the story “How You Were Left To Your Fate” and retelling it again as her own.

<sup>2</sup> The term is used by Padmini Mongia with reference to the contemporary notion of migration that becomes emblematic of fractured subjectivities (posited by post-structuralist theory) which are synonymous with fractures experienced by colonized people. It will be proved later that it is quite justified to use this term to describe the characters from the books discussed in this article. P. MONGIA, *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory. A Reader* (London: Arnold, 1996), 7.

as a social situation, proposed by Bill Ashcroft, makes it possible to relate the above issues to some situations depicted in *Brick Lane* and *Half a Life*. Ashcroft makes a connection between fiction and reality, the author and his readers: the writer becomes an observer of reality who comments on it and points to some important processes that take place in real world. For Ashcroft the written text “has its existence in something more than the marks on the page” — it is “communication of a particular kind, [between two social beings, i.e. the writer and the reader], ‘saying’ a certain thing” (298). Ali and Naipaul show how new identities are negotiated in changing circumstances. Their characters are displaced and moved to the unknown countries and, experiencing their subjectivities in new social and cultural contexts, they have to rewrite their lives. This cultural displacement encourages them to reject some permanent identifications and to change. They become more aware of themselves, their needs and desires. Since both of them live on the borders of two worlds and belong to neither of them, they need an alternative space to express themselves. This space is language that becomes a tool for self-definition.

MONICA ALI, *BRICK LANE*

“No one today is purely *one* thing.”

Edward Said

Born silent and supposedly dead, Nazneen seems to be destined to stay mute. From the moment she is born, the girl is left to her fate as if she had to pay the price for staying alive at birth. She is taught to accept her life as it is and never question the logic of the story “How You Were Left To Your Fate,” told by her mother. Since nothing can be changed, as her mother keeps repeating, everything that happens in life has to be endured silently and humbly. There is no use asking questions because “[i]f God wanted [women] to ask questions, he would have made [them] men” (*Brick Lane*, 80). Thus, grateful to fate for letting her stay alive, Nazneen does not fight and, unlike her rebellious sister, Hasina, she agrees to be passive and lets others decide for her. Initially, even moving to a different place, and thus experiencing different culture, does not promise any change in her life. Nazneen is not given voice when she arrives in London with her newly married husband, chosen by her father. Seen as an obedient wife, she is silenced and subjected to male supremacy. Taught to serve men and fulfil her duties silently, Nazneen does not undermine her husband’s authority and refrains

from taking any action. Raised in a patriarchal society, she takes everything for granted and does not dare to question anything.

In her London flat Nazneen allows herself only to daydream and wish things happen to her. Watching a skater on an ice rink she imagines herself being somebody else. Someone who is free to do whatever she wants and, what is even more important, who finds pleasure in acting freely. For Nazneen the ice rink is a place unmarked by social rules and constraints. The construction of the ice rink itself, being an encircled and closed space, points to some kind of limitation, nevertheless, for Nazneen it is a place where some social norms may be broken; the final scene of the book seems to prove this idea—initially unwilling to do it, Nazneen gets on the ice in sari because “[t]his is England. (...) You can do whatever you like” (*Brick Lane*, 492). In her dreams she can write a new life for herself, she can rewrite herself and become a new Nazneen that is free from “the hopes, random thoughts, petty anxieties and selfish wants” (*Brick Lane*, 41). While in her dreams Nazneen is someone she wants to be, in letters to her sister she creates a second version of her life in England that is compliant with Muslim tradition. Nazneen writes and rewrites her letters till they have no errors, “the grammar [is] satisfactory, [and] all errors expunged along with any vital signs” (*Brick Lane*, 94). She acts as if she wanted her sister to believe that her life, just like these letters, is perfect. Yet, as a consequence, the letters are perfect but devoid of feelings because they only recount some moments in Nazneen’s life. They are just pure facts that also get selected in order to fit the picture of ‘a happy life in England.’ The style of writing mirrors Nazneen’s life and the desire to make it follow some rules and patterns that are expected from her. Contrasted with Hasina’s letters that are full of mistakes but “bursting with life” (*Brick Lane*, 94) they present rather a sad picture. What is more, with time they show a fictional life, an alternative that is far from reality, where the facts are rewritten, distorted and adjusted, and the truth is not revealed.

The arrival of Karim, her future lover, breaks the numbness of Nazneen’s life in London. Soon she realises that she is longing for something that cannot be satisfied, namely the right to decide and speak for herself. Karim, also lost in his hopes and searching a place in the world, helps Nazneen to regain her voice and arouses the desire to oppose her fate and establish own identity. Karim gives her voice and makes her believe that the power to change is in her—it only needs to be discovered and released. Gradually, Nazneen learns that the power of words, both spoken and written, is enormous and

changes are only possible when protests are spoken out—otherwise, the rebellions pass “undetected” (*Brick Lane*, 75). Unlike for her husband, Chanu, whose words are empty and usually not followed by any precise actions, for Nazneen to speak equals to create and change. It seems that only spoken words, and not silent resistance, enable her to rewrite life and take charge of it. Once Nazneen acquires this knowledge and is able to speak up for herself, she fights for her subjectivity.<sup>3</sup> She defines who she is and what she wants from life.

The willingness to change her fate and fight for her own needs evolves through a longer period of time than in the case of her sister, Hasina. Nazneen needs more time to become independent, learn how to think critically and analyse everything she sees and experiences. With time she realises that she wants a different life than Chanu offers or her mother taught her to accept. The new Nazneen does not want life to happen to her, nor to live the scenarios created by her mother and husband. Nazneen finds power to take fate into her hands and escapes passivity she lived in. She gradually moves from the position of the silenced ‘subaltern’<sup>4</sup> to a hybrid identity<sup>5</sup> that may evolve into an independent human being, responsible for her own life. This is possible since Nazneen learns that her identity is not determined by fate but can be developed and rewritten. The love affair, among other factors, makes her want things for herself and gives the courage to express

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<sup>3</sup> In the case of the terms “identity” and “subjectivity” I use the following definitions used by Kathryn Woodward: “subjectivity includes our sense of self. It involves the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions which constitute our sense of ‘who we are’ and the feeling which are brought to different positions within culture. (...) we experience our subjectivity in a social context where language and culture give meaning to our experience of ourselves and where we adopt our identity. (...) The positions which we take up and identify with constitute our identities.” K. WOODWARD, *Identity and Difference* (London: Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1997), 39.

<sup>4</sup> The idea of a subaltern was taken from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who defines the subaltern group as a group “whose identity is its difference” and notes that for the ‘true’ subaltern group “there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself.” G. C. SPIVAK, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in B. ASHCROFT, G. GRIFFITHS and H. TIFFIN, eds., *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, 27.

<sup>5</sup> For Homi Bhabha a hybrid subject is free of any gender, class or race constraints. Such an understanding of hybridity, as Padmini Mongia suggests, enables to avoid the binary oppositions between self and other, between the speaking subject and the silent ‘native’ but it also privileges migrancy and exile. See P. MONGIA, *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory. A Reader*, 7. For more on the concept of hybridity see also H. K. BHABHA, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

some repressed emotions and needs. Nazneen becomes aware of her subjectivity and femininity. She wants to move from the position of the 'subaltern,' that is not given voice, and break free from "the tradition of being silenced."<sup>6</sup> She realises that

[n]o one is purely *one* thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are no more than starting points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. (...) just as human beings make their own history, they also make their cultures and ethnic identities. (SAID, 407)

With time, Nazneen becomes conscious of herself as a human being, a free independent subject that is not categorised as a woman, a wife, a mother, or a Muslim. She finds her identity that is not formed in the opposition to men but is based on her needs and desires. Nazneen starts to see herself and the world around with her own eyes. She also makes others, especially her husband, perceive her the way she does and not the way they want to see her.

Gaining voice does not mark the end of Nazneen's quest for identity. Though she frees herself from some constraints imposed on her by the culture she was brought up, Nazneen's identity is a kind of a hybrid. This 'hybridity' seems to stem from being positioned in-between two worlds and cultures — the eastern and the western, and the attempt to reconcile tradition with modernity, the new with the old, the familiar with the unknown. The Nazneen we see in a small Indian village is not the same as the Nazneen living in a big metropolis. These two women differ to such an extent that there is little likelihood that the new Nazneen will change again into the old one. For Chilla Bulberg the process of hybridisation seems to be a natural consequence of living and being raised in both English and Indian cultures, it is "the fate and contribution of subalterns" (53). Nazneen finds herself in a position between two cultures that retain their distinct characteristics and, at the same time, form something new (SARUP, 163). At this point her identity is fractured since she belongs to both cultures and, at the same time, to none

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<sup>6</sup> Janice Stout, citing Simone de Beauvoir, a French writer and a feminist, underlines the idea of being silenced and speaking through silence as the only ways of female expression, she writes: "a woman speaks of and through silence out of a tradition of being silenced." See J. P. STOUT, *Strategies of Reticence: Silence and Meaning In the Works of Jane Austen, Willa Carter, Katherine Ann Porter and Joan Didion* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1990); for more on Simone de Beauvoir's thesis on femininity see the treatise *Le Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second Sex*), 2 vol., first published in 1949.

of them completely. For Nazneen to become an independent human being means not only to complete rewriting the story “How You Were Left To Your Fate” but also to have a possibility to speak for herself, to take part in a dialogue with her fate, to question things that happen in her life and interact with others and the world. It seems that interacting with others and placing herself in the opposition to them plays a very important role in identity formation. Nazneen establishes her identity in the process of “a mediated relation,” that is, as Peter Caws defines it, a relation to “myself through my interaction with others and with the world” (378).

It seems that Nazneen’s desire to rewrite her life story is whetted by her up-rooting and moving from the familiar Pakistan to the unknown England. The character finds herself in a different country and culture and faces reality that is not comparable with anything she knows or was brought up in. The West offers her opportunities she did not have while being at home or was too afraid to use. This does not mean that Nazneen rejects everything she earlier believed in, but living in the new surroundings helps her to find herself, her true self. Even in her motherland she was likely to object and perform actions that would be considered as “improper” or against the rules. But, unlike in Pakistan, in London she not only thinks about objecting but she actually does it. Unlike Hasina who has the power to object and take her fate in her hands, Nazneen needs some help on her way to gain personal freedom. The people she meets in London, the new surroundings and Hasina’s choices stimulate her mind, make her think for herself and, what is even more important, make Nazneen act. Acting and asking questions are necessary to understand herself as, to cite Anna Yeatman’s words, “[w]e cannot know who we are until we act, and our actions always take place in a particular context of relationship to and dialogue with particular others” (55). The moment Nazneen becomes active and independent in her acting and thinking her development starts and the process of rewriting becomes authentic. Nazneen rewrites her life and moves from the position of the silenced ‘subaltern,’ a subjected individual that is able to define own identity only in the opposition to male’s one. She becomes more aware of her needs and desires and finds strength to reconcile tradition (represented by her mother) with modernity (represented by her daughters), her dreams with other people’s expectations. Brought up in a patriarchal society and taught to be dependant on men, at the end of the book the character is left on her own, supported only by a female friend and young daughters. Although her future is not certain, it seems that she has already won because she became true to herself and gained voice.

V.S. NAIPAUL, *HALF A LIFE*

“the social condition of *Homo sapiens* is prevailingly migratory.  
(...) the human condition is the condition of going and resting.”

David Theo Goldberg

In the preface to the Polish edition of *Half a Life*, Jerzy Jarniewicz, a literary critic, described Naipaul's fiction as a constant journey. Since writing and travelling seems to be inseparable, Naipaul travels both in time and space, in the real and fictional world; the writer moves not only between continents but also between cultures, languages and religions (JARNIEWICZ, 14-15). Similarly, Naipaul's characters travel around the world to find their identity and a place of belonging. The writer makes them move places and change continents so that they can experience more and in this way know themselves better. The characters change both realities and their personalities, thus adjusting to the new surroundings. They are on the move because they have a feeling of living only a “half-life.”

William Chandran from *Half a Life* is a good example of a person who changes identities as a consequence of his willingness to adapt and alter reality. Being a product of a mixed-caste marriage, he lives in-between two worlds: the ‘untouchable’ and the ‘touchable’. William does not identify with either of them as his father is no authority for him and his initial respect for the mother changes into condemn. Since his parents' heritage is a burden, in stories the boy creates his own reality that is far from the one he knows. Though the boy disowns any resemblance with his father, William's escapism reminds of his father's unwillingness to face reality. The father chooses a role of a Brahman<sup>7</sup> to free himself from the consequences of his rebel against the caste system and the chaos that followed it. His escape into silence makes him famous and his role becomes too convenient to abandon it. A worldwide recognition also changes the attitude of his compatriots — they pretend to see him as a respectable man from a higher caste that has made a sacrifice. Similarly, William also wants to change his life and rebels against his background and his father's wishes. Since it is not possible to become a member of a higher caste or gain respect by other means, he chooses to invent stories and create an alternative self. In this way he can move into another world that is not only better but also under his control. Mixing fiction with reality and constructing alternative worlds in his essays written in a

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<sup>7</sup> A brahman- in the Hindu tradition, a priest, a man of learning that belongs to a spiritual elite in Hindu India. *Encyclopedia Britannica Deluxe Edition 2005*, CD-ROM.

missionary school give him a relief. In his stories he can be somebody else, he can adopt reality to his needs, he can alter it as he wishes and create other self. His ability to write and rewrite stories makes him powerful— words give him confidence which he lacks in the real world. He uses the power that was as if given to him after being named after an English writer, William Somerset Maugham. While in England, William becomes a writer of radio programmes and he gets his book published. Here the process of rewriting is also present as William bases his stories on those from books and films; thus this process of writing, just as the action of remaking himself, is not creative but highly imitative. Yet, with time, such playing with words is not enough for William. He wants to escape his ‘mixed-caste’ heritage and to leave India in order to create himself not only at the level of the fictional world but to make it ‘real’ in the real world. He wants to get to know a different world where he will not be defined by his background or language.

At the age of 20 William leaves India and moves to London to start his life again. The beginnings are quite hard as he has to learn everything anew and adjust to the new surroundings. At first William feels uprooted and “unanchored” (*Half a Life*, 58), he tries to reconcile the old rules with the new ones. However, after some time he realizes that the old rules do not apply to him anymore:

one day ... he saw with great clarity that the old rules no longer bound him ... he was free to present himself as he wished. He could, as it were, write his own revolution.... He could, within reason, re-make himself and his past and his ancestry. (*Half a Life*, 60)

William grabs the opportunity of rebirth and rewrites not only his history but even the past of his country and ancestors. He distorts the facts about the family as he is not proud of it. He feels that only this ‘adjusted’ version of his life will gain other people’s acceptance. Faced with innumerable possibilities, William invents colourful stories about himself, his parents and grandparents. He plays with words that both give him the power to change, to “re-make himself” (*Half a Life*, 61) and earn other people’s respect. Writing and rewriting his life becomes important to accept himself and, in his opinion, to be accepted by others.

Analogically to his school essays based on other stories and adapted facts, his new life is not free from imitation. William observes people, their habits and customs and shapes himself to resemble them. He makes friends with Percy Cato, a boy of Caribbean and African descent, and tries to be the person he is. Yet, it is worth mentioning that William sees Percy the way he



wants and rather interprets facts than accepts them. This enables him to have a better opinion about himself and to position himself higher on the social ladder. His acquaintance with Roger, a young lawyer and an amateur writer opens yet another chapter in his life. The new William enters the world of London bohemia, a small independent world of immigrants from many parts of the world. He learns some new things about England and enters the world that not so long ago was closed for him. This change of surroundings entails changes in his behaviour and writing another story of himself. William rewrites his life again so it is adjusted to the world he is now. Once more his actions are not free from imitating and he “fumbles his way through bohemian immigrant London, more acted upon than acting” (HAJARI, 64).

With time William creates his own world, adjusted to his needs and fantasies. The success as the author of radio programmes boosts his confidence and self-esteem. He is a new man, the man he likes, accepts and respects. The balance of his world is shattered by the arrival of his sister. The visit marks the first moment when William realises that he has no particular aim in life. So far he has only imitated, “lived other people’s lives” (*Half a Life*, 136) and followed only these rules that were convenient. Once his education in college finishes, he is left with nothing but a faint hope to publish the book. He does not know what to do with his life — he has just let days pass by without any ready scenario for future. This realisation of aimlessness and emptiness is even more vivid during William’s stay in Africa. William finally realises that so far his actions have not been free and he has been adjusting his life to other people’s wishes. He openly admits that he was constantly running away from himself, from his real “I”. Overpowered with the feeling of a loss, he says: “I have been hiding from myself. I have risked nothing. And now the best part of my life is over” (*Half a Life*, 138). William realises he has led a ‘half-life’, a partial life where there was no place for free choices and actions as he has only imitated others. During his long stay in Africa he learns how to live and take responsibility for his life. Now he does not want to hide from life but decides to face and re-write it so that it is truly his. One more time William is given a chance to create his new self and, though his future is not clear, it seems that this time he will truly use this opportunity. While England seems to be just a ‘waiting room’ on his way to develop self-awareness, eighteen years in Africa seem to give William a new understanding of himself. Surrounded by second-class Portuguese, half-and-half people because of their African roots, he finds a favourable environment to gain full acceptance and be “in his own eyes complete” (*Half a*

*Life*, 126). Though he never becomes one of the locals, the landowners do not ask any questions or undermine William's position. What is even more, William enters the world of colonial divisions and becomes a member of the ruling class. He has power that can be exercised in real world as this time it is his social status, and not words used for fictionalizing his life, that gives it.

Unlike Nazneen who needed words to get her desires and needs voiced, William uses them not only to create but also to express himself. Living in-between two worlds—the 'touchable' and 'untouchable', the English and the Indian, and belonging to neither of them, William needs an alternative space. This space, or "a third geography" as Azade Seyhan defines it (5), is language. In the case of William language marks important moments in his life. Being in India he uses his mother tongue that defines where he belongs, then he learns English and moves into the alternative world of his fictional stories. When he arrives in London, he uses English not only as a means of communication but also because of the desire to adjust, imitate and become one of the locals, to get rid of his 'otherness'. Crossing the Mediterranean Sea on his way to Africa, William tries to deal with an eerie feeling of a loss, that is the loss of a proper way to express himself (*Half a Life*, 132). The journey into the unknown entails learning a new language and this may result in abandoning the other—his mother tongue and the language of his stories. Nevertheless, it gives him an opportunity to give voice to "another self inside him, in a silent space where all his external life was muffled" (*Half a Life*, 133) and to create a new self in the new surroundings. This time it seems that it is a truer self.

Both characters experience a sense of total cultural dislocation that marks an important moment in their lives. Once they find themselves in the new surroundings and decide to rewrite their lives, Nazneen and William have to respond and take part in a dialogue. They move from the safe positions of their motherlands to live on the border of two worlds. This marginal position, though usually associated with social exclusion, has a positive value as it offers "the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create" (HOOKS, 341). The lack of belonging to either of the two worlds they live in makes them look for an alternative space to define themselves. And it is language that proves to be, as Chambers puts it, "a means of cultural construction in which [their] very selves and sense are constituted" (22). The process of remaking their lives, boosted by the move, is possible because they get their needs voiced and try to express themselves. They rewrite their lives and remake themselves to make their fractured identities complete.

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(PRZE)PISYWANIE ŻYCIA NA NOWO –  
*BRICK LANE* M. ALI ORAZ *PÓŁ ŻYCIA* V. S. NAIPAULA

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest ukazanie procesu kształtowania się tożsamości bohaterów *Brick Lane* i *Pół życia* w wyniku przemieszczenia kulturowego i interakcji z nowym otoczeniem. Prezentowany artykuł to także próba analizy sposobów kształtowania własnego losu, będącego wynikiem zmieniającego się postrzegania własnej osoby i ucieczki od tożsamości narzuconej. Elementem kluczowym w analizie literackiej powieści jest zastosowanie teorii postkolonialnych, ukazujących jednostkę jako złożoną, dynamiczną i interakcyjną strukturę. Sposób, w jaki bohaterowie tworzą swoje życie na nowym miejscu, odzwierciedla ich relacje z otoczeniem. Bohaterowie przepisują swoje losy dosłownie i w przenośni: albo dostosowując je do wymogów własnej kultury i tradycji, albo ukazując się innym takimi, jakimi chcą ich widzieć. Żyjąc na granicy dwóch światów – Zachodniego i Wschodniego bohaterowie muszą odnaleźć własne miejsce, które pozwoli im na zachowanie autonomii, przejęcie kontroli nad swoim losem i stworzenie własnej wyjątkowej tożsamości.

*Stręciła Anna Bysiecka*

**Słowa kluczowe:** postkolonializm, fragmentaryczne tożsamości, hybrydy, przemieszczenie kulturowe, V. S. Naipaul, M. Ali.

**Key words:** post-colonialism, fragmented identities, hybrids, cultural transplation, V. S. Naipaul, M. Ali.