



A Critical Study of V.S Naipaul's *Half A Life*

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ABSTRACT: The present paper is an attempt to study V.S Naipaul's *Half a Life* in the light of Diasporic issues of exile and identity crisis. V.S Naipaul is the spokesperson of the Indian diaspora and their problems. *Half a Life* represents Willie Chandran's journey in search of identity and his permanent status as an exile. Being the son of a Brahmin father and a low caste mother, Willie's very identity is under question. He feels exiled in his own land and leaves India to find his new identity in the multilingual and multicultural society of London and later in Africa and Germany. Willie as a Diaspora travels frequently, but fails to find a fixed identity and a sense of belongingness. He realizes that his exile is permanent. The plight of Willie seems to signify the plight of the entire Indian Diaspora and of Naipaul himself.

Keywords: Exile, Post-colonial, Identity Crisis, Diaspora, Ambivalence.

The literature of the Diaspora primarily deals with issues of cultural conflict, hybridity, ambivalence, exile, identity crisis, rootlessness and an eternal search for home. Diasporic Writers portray real accounts of the diaspora displaced from their homeland either voluntarily or under compulsive forces. Their writings often mirror their own experiences of alienation, assimilation, dispossession, exile etc. Nostalgia plays a crucial role in the lives of the diaspora. Their fervent desire to achieve their past is realized through the fabrication of the past in their memories. The diaspora thus belongs to both culture of past as well as that of present.

Post colonial societies are marked by feelings of displacement, dislocation, meaninglessness and rootlessness. The colonized subject suffers from the trauma of the hypocrisy behind the civilizing mission of the colonizers. The British carried out imperialism in India, Africa and the Caribbean islands in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in the name of civilization. The colonized is made to believe that they are barbarians, savages, uncivilized, living in darkness and it is the white man's burden (as Rudyard Kipling calls it) to civilize the dark or the savage. Thus, the colonized is made to devalue his religion and his knowledge, culture, language which is all inferior and seek to follow what the colonizer has

to offer. As Said calls it the Eurocentric notion (in *Orientalism*) of the west to take everything that belongs to the east as inferior and that which belongs to the west as superior.

Under the British rule, Indians began to look down upon their own culture and favored the culture of the west. Once the colonial rule was established the people faced alienation in their own land. They felt culturally dispossessed wherein their ancestral culture, traditions, language and their past was undermined for the new culture of the west. Even before leaving the country, Indians were thrown into a state of conflict, hybridity & in-betweenness. The colonized thus left India to pursue better future in the west for it was believed to provide that or they were forcefully sent to Britain as indentured laborers to work in fields. Writer like Kamala Markandaya, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Vikram Seth etc found west as a better place to express themselves. The indigenous culture was already tainted with the culture of the west and Britain offered a place where their dreams and their potential could be realized.

According to Homi Bhabha, hybridity is the necessary condition of Postcoloniality. It is the site where assimilation of two cultures takes place. In a post-colonial society, identity is marked with this hybrid status thus bridging the gap between the east and the west. This hybridity of the colonized subject leads to the emergence of Diasporic ambivalence. The diaspora when displaced from their native land oscillate between the culture of past and the present culture of the west resulting in the creation of the third or hybrid identity. For Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, the hybridity of the colonized is both enabling as well as oppressive. Once displaced the Diaspora are chronically dispossessed, living in exile and suffering from identity crises. The Diaspora loses his past culture, language, ethnicity, race which can never be deleted permanently from his conscious. Post-colonial situation typically invokes feelings meaninglessness, an endeavor to relocate, rootlessness, exile and nostalgia.

The exile faces an eternal trauma of losing the past, to relocate and remake his identity, find his roots, home etc. The existentialism of the



diaspora drives him to different geographical locations where he can find his home again. As Mohan Biswas in *A House for Mr. Biswas* constantly looks for his "portion of the earth". Stuart Hall sums up migration as: "Migration is only way trip. There is no 'home' to go back to" (Baker et al, 1996:115)

V.S Naipaul is a third generation diasporic writer whose grandfather left India as an Indentured laborer. His father though poor, somehow managed to become a journalist. The exilic status of Naipaul's ancestry made him ambivalent towards his own identity and roots since birth. Born in Trinidad and educated in England, Naipaul accepts his existence as an exilic and that he can never belong to any one place or country. He has travelled to India, Africa, the Caribbean islands and has failed to assimilate completely and settle in any one nation. He asserts his feelings of alienation wherever he goes as:

"I had dreamed of coming to England but my life in England had been savourless and much of it mean... And just as once at home I had dreamed of being in England, so for years in England, I had dreamed of leaving England" (EOA, 1987:220)

Throughout his life Naipaul has led a half life or that of a wanderer in search of solace, home, identity and sense of belonging. Paul Theroux highlights the importance of travel for the diaspora or the immigrant:

They travel because they belong nowhere, they are constantly moving- in a sense they never arrive- and much of their travel is flight. Rootlessness is their condition; it is opposite of those for whom being metropolitan is a condition. The homeless are not calm; their homelessness is a source of particular pain, for as with all travelers, they are asked, "Where are you from?" and no simple answer is possible: all landscapes are alien (1972:76).

Naipaul has decolonized himself through his writings in which he creates his past, his agony and paints his existential life:

I've decolonized myself through the practice of writing, through what I've learned from writing, looking at the world, but let me also add to this I feel an enormous pain about the situation (Naipaul,1973: 18).

V.S Naipaul in his novel, *Half a life* creates a hero who like him is an exilic, constantly

looking for roots, meaning, identity and sense of belonging in a chaotic world where he can never be at rest. An autobiographical novel, it epitomizes the bleak side of immigration where the immigrants are chronically displaced, for them assimilation in any one culture is a sure no. Son of a Brahmin father and a low caste mother, born and brought up in post-colonial India, educated in a missionary school, the protagonist, Willie Somerset Chandran is alienated to his ancestral culture since birth. His father Brahmin's culture is tainted by his mother's low caste culture. His ancestral culture is again different from the culture and education with which he is brought up.

Willie's very name has the middle 'Somerset' after the renowned author Somerset Maugham which is a sheer mimicry of the white. This mimicry calls forth Bhabha's notion of mimicry where the colonized mimics the white in order to become completely "English" but rather it is the mockery of the colonized subject's attempt to copy the Englishmen:

"Willie Chandran asked his father one day, why is my middle name Somerset? The boys at school have just found out, and they are mocking me." (1)

Willie, since his childhood, learns to hide his mother's identity, his own identity and his very name. It is something that he must run away from, that he must avoid. Willie, like Naipaul takes on a journey of a voluntary exilic and leaves for England to pursue his higher education. Like other colonized people, the west is a land of promises and fulfillment:

All that he has now was an idea- and it was like a belief in magic- that one day something would happen, an illumination would come to him, and he would be taken by a set of events to place he should go. (121)

Willie's several sexual encounters throw light upon the sexual liberties that the western culture allows. Willie in England comes to the realization that he can express himself, enjoy himself, remake his whole identity whichever way he likes:

No one he met, in the college or outside it, knew the rules of Willie's own place, and Willie began to understand that he was free to present himself as he wished. (60)

In India sex outside marriage is considered blasphemous. Nobody talks of sex and sexual desires or their fulfillment in public. The western culture on the other land provides enough liberty to individuals to enjoy their sexuality. Willie receives



a cultural shock when encountered with such freedom and expression. His failure in the sexual act either with Juno or with Petrida places him outside the mainstream western culture. He must assimilate into that culture to indulge himself completely. Willie's situation exposes the plight of the diasporic conscience who past culture taught something very different from that of his present culture.

All men should train their sons in the art of seduction. Our marriages are arranged. There is no art of sex. Some of the boys here talk to me about the Kama Sutra. Nobody talked about that at home. It was an upper-caste text, but I don't believe my poor father, Brahmin though he is, ever looked at a copy...Nobody talked about sex and seduction at home, but I discover now that it is the fundamental skill all men should be trained in. (118)

Other characters in the novel such as Percy Cato, Juno, Roger, Petrida, Ana, Sarojini, Julio, Richardo, Alvaro, Graca are all displaced immigrants of multiple ethnic background, color, gender, race etc. These immigrants are colonized people constantly searching for meaning, roots, identity, home and a stable identity.

Identity crisis and constant urge to reform that identity is an incessant feature of the Diasporic ambivalence. Willie must endeavour to remake his identity again and again only to lose it. Willie in England fabricates his own stories of his family background. He feels urged to hide his identity just as he felt in India. Past identity must be defaced to make space for the new one:

He spoke of his mother as belonging to an ancient Christian community of the subcontinent, a community almost as old as Christianity itself. He kept his father a Brahmin. He made his father's father a 'courtier'. So, playing with words, he began to remake himself. It excited him, and began to give him a feeling of power.(61)

Willie marries Ana and leaves for Africa only to make himself all the more alienated in the world. His diasporic ambivalence makes his travels essential. He must undertake endless journeys to find his place in the world. Like Naipaul, Willie must not also end his travels.

Language plays a crucial role in defining one's identity. Once displaced, the immigrant loses his language rendering him alienated to the culture, society and people of the new land. Post-colonial

countries are marked by a hybrid language in which the mother tongue is displaced by the language of the colonizers. Willie's mother tongue was Hindi but he received an English education in the missionary school. His language is tainted with the coloniser's language even before leaving India. Going to England he manages to learn enough English enabling him to become a writer. His displacement to Africa poses a new challenge to encounter a new language and forget the English language for which he worked so hard to learn:

Willie was trying to deal with the knowledge that had come to him on the ship that home his home language has almost gone, that his English was going, that he had no proper language left, no gift of expression. (132)

Willie's eighteen years long stay in Africa proves futile when he again decides to leave for Germany to meet his sister, Sarojini. His immigrant status compels him to continue his exilic living and his search for identity.

Willie's sister Sarojini, too is an immigrant who has left India and is culturally displaced in the new land. Likewise, Percy Cato, Ana are culturally as well as geographically displaced and are off springs of a mixed parentage. All the characters in *Half a Life* are living only half lives and suffer from an identity crisis. They are fragmented souls looking for completeness, meaning, happiness, solace, tranquility in life.

Keith Garebian rightly observes:

Naipaul explores landscapes in order to provide characters with a real home, a true place of belonging so that they will not continue to be homeless, wonders, unsure of themselves and their fates. But the mythology of the land is tinged with embarrassment, nervousness, hysteria and pessimism all products in some way of Naipaul's own history as a colonial with an ambiguous identity (1975:23).

The trauma of the immigrant like Willie and other characters, highlights the particular position of the diaspora in the post-colonial situation.

Bruce King observes:

While the novels and short stories have seldom been about himself, they have reflected the various stages of his disillusionment with Trinidad, his despair with India and his concern with being a homeless ex-colonial (1995:108)



To conclude, Naipaul brings out the pain and agony of the Diaspora in his writings. His characters are individuals who have lost or have little hope of settlement at any one particular place. Like Naipaul, they are nomads looking for a home

and belongingness. Willie in *Half a Life* leads his life in exile and suffers from identity crisis wherein his geographical location as well his identity keeps changing. His realization of his existential and meaningless life marks the very void in the lives of the diaspora.

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