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Multi-facets of Identity quest in V.S. Naipaul's Half a Life

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ABSTRACT

V. S. Naipaul is revered as a colossal of literature across the world. Most of his works revolve around the themes of displacement and exile, based on his personal life experience. Being a Diaspora writer, his works are preoccupied with the themes of isolation, alienation, dispossession, homelessness, sense of rootlessness, fragmentations of memories, and a persistent quest for identity. *Half a Life* (2001) depicts the agony and dilemma of an immigrant, his constant struggle for identity in the places he visits. The themes are woven into the story of three generations of an Indian Brahmin family. The novel presents two sets of father-son stories. Compared to the other protagonist's in literature, *Half a life's* hero faces discrimination and his struggle for identity begins from birth

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V. S. Naipaul is a British writer of Indian descent known for his pessimistic novels set in developing countries focusing on the life and culture that he learnt from his extensive travel experience. During his literary career, he has written more than 30 books both of fiction and non-fiction. Among his nonfiction works, he has recorded his observations on India in his three books: *An Area of Darkness* (1965), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977),

and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990). In 1990, V.S. Naipaul received a knighthood for service to literature. He was the first recipient of the David Cohen British Literature Prize (1993). He was also awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 2001. Due to his projection of third-world countries he was often compared to Conrad, Dickens and Tolstoy in his lifetime. He is a beacon of criticism, particularly for those who read his portrayals of third-world disarray as apologies for colonialism.

The novel *Half A Life* was published in 2001, the same year he got Nobel Prize for his literary accomplishments. If compared to the life of Naipal, the novel records Naipaul's exiled life in a multicultural society and his feeling of identity crisis. As Naipaul admitted in an interview with Rahul Singh:

“I was born in Trinidad. I have lived most of my life in England and India is the land of my ancestors. That says at all. I am not English not Indian, Not Trinidadian. I am my own person.” (Times of India Feb. 19, 2002)

The novel *Half a Life* is the story of Willie Chandran. The protagonist Willie has a constantly exiled life from India, England, Africa, and Germany. He keeps moving from one place to another in search of identity but nowhere has he found his identity.

The protagonist Willie Somerset Chandran's search for identity begins at an early age. He was born to an educated father heeding the call of Mahatma Gandhi, rejected materialism and ambition married a poor woman of lower caste, his mother. His first ray of searching his identity begins with the novel where he questions his father about his middle name, Somerset. For, he has a name of ambiguous nature. Willie eventually realizes that his middle name came from a famous British writer, Somerset Maugham, who once visited his father. While his first name is of a Christian nature, his last name reveals his ancestral roots.

Willie, as a grown up, knowing his mother's social and financial status feels uncomfortable. Subsequently, with his survival instinct he starts pretending to be someone he is not, someone he does not need to be embarrassed of. His hatred for his partial existence

between his father and mother's identity eventually drives him to leave the nest in search of himself. He first travels to London, hoping to find himself there. He studies literature and working on to become a writer, hoping to establish his identity. Instead, during his time in London he finds himself being trapped in uncertainty. He fails to make effective progress neither in his studies nor in himself.

Meanwhile, his sister came and stayed in a small hotel near the college. She visited Willie everyday to prepare a little meal for him. She would ask him a number of questions about his degree, and how he would further take his life. At this juncture, Willie would think of giving thousand terrible experiences but would stay quiet not to talk about his life in London and the impact of colonialism:

“I don't know where I am going. I am just letting the days go by. I don't like the place that is waiting for me at home for the past two and a half years I have lived like a freeman. I don't like the idea of marrying someone like Sarojini. The trouble is I don't know how to go out and get a girl on my own. No one trained me in that. I am like my poor father. All men should train their sons in the art of seduction. Nobody talked about sex and seduction at home, but I discover now that it is a fundamental skill all men should be trained in...” (Half a Life, 117-118).

The humiliation he had to undergo sexual humiliation is another thing that made him out of place. When he saw a prostitute whom he had given half a week's allowance going with someone, he thinking of leaving London for he feels “Humiliation like this waits me here. I must follow Percy. I must leave” (121).

While he was worrying about not having secured an identity in London, he was waiting for a reply concerning a book written by him. With his publication of the book, he gets to meet Ana. After the completion of his education, he realizes that he has no possibility of finding a future in London. Therefore, Willie and Ana decide to leave England to Africa.

In Africa, Willie faces another challenge of learning a new language. Thinking of the language to learn, he wonders if he would be able to hold on to his own language, or to English. When he was in the capital, in the house of one of Ana's friends, he keeps telling

himself that “I am not staying here. I am leaving I will spend a few nights here and then I will find some way of going away” (133).

The loss of proper language takes its toll on the culture of the Diaspora life. In this context, when in London, Ana makes an effort to overcome the sense of alienation and enrolls herself at a language school in England. Willie, being an emerging writer, the language plays a crucial role, for a writer’s very existence is dependent on his language. The explanation she gives to her family shows the significance of the language issue in the culture of diaspora:

“I wanted to break out of the Portuguese language; I feel it was that had made my grandfather such a limited man. He had no true idea of the world And I didn’t want to learn South African English, which is what people learn here. I wanted to learn English, English.” (154-155).

Naipaul could understand the agony of losing one’s language. Immigration threatens with the loss of heritage to preserve. An immigrant tries desperately to stick to his heritage, food and language. Attrition of heritage, language finds an important place in the colonised, immigrant mindscape.

“Existence is meaningless unless it is expressed appropriately and language is the tool and power of expression, displacement brings dispossession of this power which aggravates the sense of alienation.” (Asha Choubey, 232).

In South Africa, Willie is known and called as Ana’s London man. Sooner he meets Correia who had started different business, Correia invited Willie to take up books business. Willie admits,

“I found myself amazed at how little I knew of the modern world and amazed at the same time at the ease with which Correia was picking his way through it.” (171).

Having settled in Africa, Willie comes to know the fact that loss of identity is an inevitable part of colonization which afflicts both the colonizer as well as the colonized. After having spent eighteen years in Africa, on a rainy day, he decides to stop making a fool

himself. He wants to emerge out of the shadow of 'Ana's London man' which was thrust on him without his knowledge. He is resolved that there are not going to be any more slips for him. Resolutely he tells Ana:

“I mean I've given you eighteen years. I can't give you any more. I can't live your life any more. I want to live my own.” (Half a Life, 136).

Ana also in the same situation therefore she easily give way for him to move out of marriage as he wishes. In her words, she tells Willie, “Perhaps, it wasn't really my life either.” (128).

In Africa, after staying for about two decades, Willie feels no sense of belonging. Ironically, he feels himself and a “nobody” and he is “nowhere.” In London, at least, he had an identity of being a writer known as Willie Chandran, but in Africa he becomes merely “Ana's London Man” (HL 145). His only consolation is that he ironically discovers an affinity with “half-and-half friends” (HL 169) in this “half-and-half world” (HL160). The exiled people share Willie's sense of loss, disorientation, and dereliction. Through their images of reflection, he gets epiphany to understand that, by employing the perspective of the “other,” he becomes even more trapped. Furthermore, immigrants develop a sense of not-belonging in a new and alien world on account of the loss of their native language. In his Nobel Lecture, Naipaul recalls what it felt like to lose his original language due to migration: “as English penetrated, we began to lose our languages” (Two Worlds 483). Language articulates a man's identity. Losing one's original language entails the loss of one's original culture and indigenous identity. From India through London to Africa, Willie is constantly drifting from one place to another, and losing his native language.

Towards the end of the novel, he decides to face the future courageously. So, he leaves Africa to Germany where his sister lives. While in Germany he sees some Tamil boys raising funds for the great Tamil war on the street. By seeing them Willie realizes “they have proclaimed who they are and they are risking everything for it. I have been hiding from myself. I have risked nothing. And now the best part of my life is over” (HL 138).

To conclude, all throughout the novel, it is evident that Willie is in search of identity. He moves from one place to other, hoping find a place where he belongs. Ironically nowhere he finds himself settled. Moreover, while searching for an identity, he tries to bury his true identity or who he really is. After spending half of his life he realizes that he couldn't find himself fit in anywhere.

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