

Quest for Identity in 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. V.S Naipaul's characters are dispossessed immigrants eternally searching for roots and belongingness in a world of multiple cultures where in their very identity is threatened. His immigrants such as Mr. Biswas in A House for Mr. Biswas, Willie in Half a Life, Salim in A Bend in the River are chronically dispossessed expatriates. Their attempts to look for a fixed identity and home fall flat every time. V.S Naipaul's world is a bleak one where there is no hope for any stability. He represents his own displacement from Trinidad to England, however, his ancestral roots lie in India.*

KEYWORDS--*Identity Crisis, Exile, Diaspora, Alienation, Displacement.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Willie Somerset Chandran in *Half a Life* is an immigrant who throughout the life continues to move from one place to another in search of fulfillment, happiness and a sense of belonging. He is a dispossessed immigrant who experiences alienation, uprootedness, lack of belongingness, displacement and an identity crisis. Travel for Willie as for Naipaul is important for it is via a series of travel and unsuccessful journeys that they realize the futility of their endeavors to search for a "home" and an identity. Since diaspora writing emanates from identity formations leading to further and more sophisticated articulations of identity, or manifest incommunitas, nationhood, and also larger global contexts, it is important to remember to perceive diaspora space as at all times exploratory, fluid and dynamic so that intersections within histories, pasts and futures, do not congeal into rigid boundary-laden states. (Pranjape 159)

Willie is unable to belong to any culture. Edward Said in his essay 'The Mind of Winter' explains the position of an exile as: "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (49). He further emphasizes that they are: "cut off from their roots, their land, and their past" (51). Naipaul's characters depict his own vision of world and his status as an expatriate:

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

Willie at the very beginning of the novel asks his father a question regarding his name: "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). Since childhood Willie's very name and identity is under question and doubt. Being the son of a Brahmin father and a low caste mother, Willie doesn't seem to understand to which culture and strata of the society he belongs to: "At home his life had been ruled by his mixed inheritance. It spoilt everything. Even the love he felt for his mother, which should have been pure, was full of the pain he felt for their circumstances" (125). Living in postcolonial India—still divided because of the evil caste system—Willie is ashamed of his mother's background.

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This shame overpowers him and he wants to run away from this shame and disgrace. He feels alienated to his surroundings even before migrating to London:

He loved his mother, and when he was very young he used such money as came his way to buy pretty things for her . . . gradually as he grew up . . . he began to look at his mother from more and more of a distance. (39)

The shame that he feels in his childhood regarding his mother's social background remains dominant in the rest of his life making him unstable in any country and any culture. His search for permanent roots becomes his eternal search: The expatriate individual, living in permanent exile is cut off from tradition. Uprooted in time and place he gets fragmented and twisted as a person. Naipaul explores the failure, futility, isolation, dispossession, rootlessness and valuelessness of persons forming this unanchored community. (Singh, *Naipaul* 248) Willie leaves India on scholarship to England to pursue higher education. His displacement from India to Notting Hill poses new challenges to him: "He walked without seeing, thinking of the hopelessness of home and of his own nebulous present" (53).

And that was how, when he was twenty, Willie Chandran, the mission-school student who had not completed his education, with no idea of what he wanted to do, except to get away from what he knew, and yet very little idea of what lay outside what he knew, only with the fantasies of the Hollywood films of the thirties and forties that he had seen at the mission school, went to London. (51)

Immigration to a new country involves new shocks and challenges for the immigrant. The expatriate is lost in a confusing state as he doesn't understand what the alien land has in store for him. Willie's arrival in London is accompanied with a certain amount of hope and optimism that came out from the unhappy past and his ambiguous identity that he had in his native country, India: "At first this feeling of difference had been like a liberation from the cruelties and rules of home" (125). Willie's hope, however, is short lived as he is soon thrown into a state of alienation.

Identity is one of the most common themes in their literature, and in many cases the search for self-identity is portrayed as confusing, painful and only occasionally rewarding. Some write semi-autobiographical novels, delving into personal pasts in order to either discover or re-examine their motivations and affinities. Others use fictional characters and situations to question traditional norms, testing, trying and occasionally reinforcing (whether internally or otherwise) notions of race and cultures. (Lau 252)

The race riots begin in Notting Hill making Willie once again desperate and anxious. He feels isolated and lamentation fills his heart. He assumes himself a probable victim in the riots. Willie is afraid, shattered and again prompted to hide himself from his surrounding reality. Racial discrimination is a curse for the diaspora. Dislocated from the native country, the immigrant becomes the most vulnerable target of racism when he realises that he is only on the periphery of the new culture and society. The diasporas are threatened by such violence and are thus victims of identity crisis and alienation. They long for a stable and comfortable environment where they might feel a possibility of setting down.

The houses that had seemed tenanted only by the very old and passive now let out any number of young men in mock-Edwardian clothes who roamed the streets looking for blacks. (109)

'Those blacks are going to be a menace.' It was a casual remark, not at all reflecting what was in the papers, and Willie felt at once threatened and ashamed. He felt people were looking at him. He felt the newspapers were about

him. After this he stayed in the college and didn't go out. This kind of hiding wasn't new to him. It was what they used to do at home, when there was serious religious or caste trouble. (109)

Willie's reaction to the riots is of shock. He is in constant trouble. He must hide, he must act safe, he must limit his movement in order to survive. His fear is the fear of entire diaspora. He is suspicious of any possible threat to him.

He learnt English in India in his English school and then in London. He attains a kind of mastery over it. He continues his education in college and starts his career as a writer of short stories. He encounters other characters like Percy Cato, Marcus, Graca, Ana, Surojini, Richard, Carla and Alvaro who are also displaced immigrants looking for an identity like him.

II. DISCUSSION

Willie undergoes various sexual encounters only to throw him in further disillusionment. His sexual acts with June, Percy's girlfriend and later with Patrida remain unsuccessful and show his incompetency in sexual matter:

A friend of mine says it happens with Indians. It's because of the arranged marriages. They don't feel they have to try hard. My father said his father used to tell him, 'satisfy the women first. Then think of yourself.' I don't suppose you had anybody telling you anything like that. Willie thought of his father with compassion for the first time. (69) Willie realizes that his upbringing in India where sex is considered as a social taboo and a matter of shame has left a deep impression upon his conscience. He doesn't know how to express his sexual feelings and the very act of sex becomes a difficult task: "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). It leads to frustration as Willie's past still haunts his present making him feel all the more alienated.

Willie's questioning of Percy Cato about his achieved mastery over sex confirms Willie's alienation in the new culture of London: "When I asked Percy how he had learned he said he started small, fingering and then raping little girls. I was shocked by that. I am not so shocked now" (118). Percy Cato, too belongs to a mixed parentage. He fabricates a false story to Willie to hide his shame, "a Jamaican of mixed parentage who was more brown than black" (61). Manjitinder Singh puts:

If this is the pattern of unmasked route that Willie's life takes, it brings him headlong into confrontation with other lives, lives half-lived and half wasted, a version of mixed, amorphous quality of cultural collision that signal the uncertainties of post-war world of movement and drift. (Naipaul 244)

Shame, as it was there since childhood, becomes dominant again as Willie realizes his incompetency in the sexual act. It becomes a matter of shame to his manhood in the liberated culture of London. Willie's meaningless life attains a certain degree of meaning after his meeting with Portuguese-African Ana. She appreciates his writing capabilities and is polite and soft towards Willie. Willie discovers himself and feels somewhat complete in an otherwise incomplete world: "for the first time in his life he felt himself complete in the presence of someone who accepted him completely" (125).

Willie decides to leave London when his scholarship is about to end and to move to Pre-independence Africa with Ana. His diasporic status consistently haunts him in settling at a fixed place. He suffers from a constant need to move and search for an identity.

After spending eighteen long years with Ana as “Ana’s London man”, Willie suddenly comes to term that he must leave Ana and Africa as he must travel, he mustn’t stop, his quest for an identity must not end:

When I asked you in London I was frightened. I had nowhere to go. They were going to throw me out of the college at the end of the term and I didn't know what I could do to keep afloat. (227)

Naipaul’s characters are fragmented souls as they never find fulfillment even in a somewhat complete world. In Africa, Willie finds that he is losing his language. Linguistic identity is an important feature of one’s identity and culture. When in India, Willie becomes distanced from his mother tongue Hindi as he is given an English education, while in London he somewhat becomes well versed in English enabling him to write. Now in Africa, he is completely displaced to a place where people speak another language altogether. His very identity is crushed as he becomes alienated in the new land.

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)

Again encountering with the harsh realities of a new cultural land Willie finds it safe to hide himself of this “shame” of being an outside. The novel ends with Willie leaving Africa and going to Germany to live with his sister, Sarojini. She is again a displaced immigrant who has left India and now living in Germany. The novel doesn’t seem to give a happy reward or fulfillment to any of the characters such as Willie, Surojini, Percy, June, Petrida and Roger. Their identities seem to stay unstable forever, leaving them on the periphery of the mainstream culture of the host country. Not only Willie who claims, “I have been hiding for too long”(227), but Ana too reveals her fragmented life when she replies to Willie saying, “Perhaps it wasn’t really my life either” (227). Ana too is an alienated human being whose immigrant state has made her life unstable. Naipaul in *The Middle Passage* states:

Everyone was an individual, fighting for his place in the community. Yet there was no community. We were of various races, religions, set and cliques; and we had somehow found ourselves on the same small island. Nothing bound us together except this common residence. (43)

Naipaul seems to be the spokesperson of the diaspora when he represents the dilemma of Willie in relation of the various journeys and displacements he goes through in his life. Willie’s dilemma highlights the eternal dilemma of the immigrants.

III. CONCLUSION

The confusion of belonging or unbelonging, home or exile, and of identity formation or its destruction remain dominant in the life of the diaspora:

Willie thought, ‘I don’t know where I am. I don’t think I can pick my way back. I don’t ever want this view to become familiar. I must not unpack. I must never behave as though I am staying. (135)

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. (Garebian 23)

Willie's travels reveal his fragmented soul and the half life he is leading. He realizes his situation and that he can never belong to any one particular place. Rather he must continue his travels to confirm his position as a wanderer. His unstable life is a precondition to his feeling of alienation and identity crisis.

Towards the end of the novel Willie confesses: "But now the best part of my life has gone, and I've done nothing" (227). Willie's statement is crucial in the sense that it stresses the inherent futility in the life of the diaspora. Willie's life was and is and will remain bleak, meaningless and futile. His existential life is a series of pursuits to carve out meaning in the world. Despite of all his attempts to begin a new life, to look for happiness, stability and completeness in his life, Willie remains a shattered and a torn human being.

Thus, Willie Chandran is an immigrant who is forced by his circumstances to leave his place of origin, India and settle in some other country. His displacement results in utter alienation, identity crisis and rootlessness, typical to the diaspora. Willie of *Half a Life*, remains alienated to his surroundings throughout the novel. His assimilation in the foreign culture seems very difficult.

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