



## IDENTITY CRISIS IN *HALF A LIFE*

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### Abstract

Imperialism brought in a sense of alienation, disorder and identity crisis to the colonized. The present work deals with identity crisis of the protagonist in the novel *Half a Life*. Through the story of the protagonist William Somerset Chandran Naipaul presents the ironical existence of diaspora. The theme of dislocation and consequent loss of identity have been a recurring one in the literature of diaspora. Naipaul seems to be a champion of this issue. Ganesh Ramasumair's (*The Mystique Masseur*) search for roots takes him to various stages of transformation and finally the face that he could discover was that of G. Rarnsay Muir. Mohan Biswas's (*A House for Mr. Biswas*) search for a house is a metaphor for his search for his own place/face in the mirror. *Half a Life* is apparently a record of Willie Somerset Chandran's quest for identity.

**Key Words:** Half A Life, Identity crisis.

*Half a Life* demonstrates that Naipaul is a master of precision, depth, subtlety and complexity. Writing for Naipaul is basically an ordering of experience. To him a writer's imagination ceaselessly processes and is engaged in ordering of experiences. Landeg White writes, "Naipaul's is a shaping rather than an inventive imagination. Fact is shaped into fiction, and fiction itself is seen as an understanding of the factual world." (*V S Naipaul: A Critical Introduction*, p. 24). Naipaul is the product of a distinct combination of circumstances. In the article *The Man and His World* Sharada Iyer says, about Naipaul, "A Brahmin Hindu born in Trinidad, he is an Indian by ancestry, a Trinidadian by nativity and British by residence, as well as intellectual training." (Mohit (2005). p. 230). He found the squalor of Trinidad stifling to his spirit. In the Hindu family he seemed irrelevant and meaningless, within the family he was closest to his father, the pain of whose frustrated life he felt and shared acutely. All this had generated a passionate desire to escape all that had doomed his father to defeat. He says, "When I get to your age, I don't want to be like you." (*A House for Mr Biswas*, p. 465).





Expatriates generally come from various part of the world but the main source of writing was India. Most of the expatriate writers come from the provinces of Bihar and East Uttar Pradesh (then known as Oudh). The indentured scheme is still remembered with bitterness. Trinidad Indians are convinced that they occupy their particular spot on the earth's surface because their forefathers were deputed by planters and agents. Conditions were misrepresented, return was made impossible. These indentured labourers did the work the slaves had done and lived in the slave barracks. Governor Histop wrote of Trinidad: "In the last six years I have seen more of the infamy and, turpitude of mankind than I have seen in the rest of my life." (*The Loss of El Dorado*, p. 283).

The novel *Half a Life* is a book of failures, as its title suggests, half-lives, those who have risked nothing and done little. It is about those who live in limbo. It is about those who never build a house of their own. That is one way to read this subtly complex novel. Willie always speaks of his lack of will and his failures and always suffers from his identity crisis. V S Naipaul attracted his fair share of criticism for his unflattering depiction of the diasporic reality in the Caribbeans. *Half a Life* has some political connection. Willie's father spoils his future by absurdly applying Gandhi's principles in a place where they are useless. Percy Cato comes to realize that Che Guevara and his supporters are more Spaniards trying to rule people of colour in Central and South America. The revolutionaries begin to call Percy 'the *negrito*.' Willie thinks:

The Spaniards had raped and looted the continent in the most savage way, and no good could come out of the place until all the Spaniards or part-Spaniards were killed...It is a difficult idea, but actually it's interesting, and the liberation movements will have to take it on board someday. (*Half a Life*, p. 139).

*Half a Life* is both an imitation of reality and art, no matter how much the latter is disguised. Just like *A House for Biswas*, the novel *Half a Life* is a version of a multigenerational family story within a colonial setting and tells of a foolish father, his bad marriage, and his relationship to his son who will eventually go to England for further education, become a writer and tell the reader the story which comprises the novel. As in *Biswas* the father foolishly stumbles into a marriage he does not want and does not have the strength of character to avoid.

Conquest, colonialism, its establishment by force, its history, its nature, the social and racial orders it produces, and the problems of what replaces it and identity crisis are all the major concern of *Half a Life*. It is several times told that the Muslim conquest of India destroyed an older social order and as a result of it Brahmin priests were impoverished and died of famine when their patronage ended. Then there is the British conquest of parts of India and the





independence movement led by Gandhi. The princely state where Willie lived was not under British control and had little to do with the nationalist movement which when it gained power would rapidly take over such independent territories. Looking at elaborately carved wooden colonial furniture brought to Africa from Portuguese Goa Willie shudders thinking of the labour extracted to produce such work. There is always an unfair social hierarchy which is in the process of changing (not necessarily for the better) as people and peoples compete for space, comfort, sex, security.

There is always domination, power and the need identity; those who lack the means, will and energy to advance and protect themselves will become victims of others or they will continue the long human process of flight and migration in search of survival and a better life. People need others as protectors and as guides, especially in new lands. *Half a Life* suggests that life has always been a series of diasporas, of translations from one place to another, and what seems settled is undergoing a process of change. It shows that although stories are to give order to and to make sense of lives, history repeats itself in cycles of themes and variations. In her article *A Critique of Naipaul's Half a Life: Searching for Identity in Limbo*, Asha Chouby says,

“In a room full of strange faces even a mirror comes as a-relief because therein one can see a familiar face. Half a Life the story of a race in search of a familiar face in the mirror; the irony however lies in the fact that even the mirror reflects a face which is not recognizable.” (Mohit, K. (2005) p. 227).

Right at the beginning of the novel there is quest of Chandran's for roots. Willie asks his father, 'Why is my middle, name Somerset?' This question forms the very essence of a person's identity. The answer to this question brings into light the irony of Willie's existence and at the same time prepares the background of his half-life in half-made societies with people who are themselves leading a life which is half-discovered, half-realized and half-lived. For Willie Somerset Chandran his name is his destiny. Half of his name does not belong to him, it is borrowed from the famous writer Somerset Maugham; his first name proclaims him as a Christian whereas his surname signifies his mixed ancestry. A probing look reveals that the man is as much an amalgam of drastically different traits as is his name an admixture of different and even antagonistic streams.

Willie's search for the completeness takes him backward because his roots are entwined with those of his father's. His story is set in post-independence India, then in London and then he travels to a pre-independence African country which is closely modelled on Mozambique and then for a brief period in Berlin. The first thirty-five pages constitute Willie's father's story, the





next hundred and two pages are a record of Willie's struggle for existence in London and the remaining pages (apart from a brief tarriance in Berlin) record his life in Africa which may be appropriately described in Naipaul's term as the bush. Willie's travels bring him to many characters who are leading a half-life as exiles.

He feels at home with people who are faceless because of the affinity he has with them. But these are all his chance acquaintances on whom he cannot depend whereas his incompleteness begins at home. The son of a half-rebel Brahmin father and a low caste woman who is only a shadow of a person, Willie's identity crisis begins in his childhood itself. His awareness of his mother's low caste and the resultant low status of his father instil a sense of shame in the boy but at the same time his resolve to survive forces him into a world of falsehood, a make-believe world.

The truth about him was ugly hence he takes to falsehood with impunity and once he presents his projected image before the world, Willie starts living the image. Years ago Willie's father had also projected an image inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's call for sacrifice. He paid dearly when he was forced into marriage with a low caste woman whose very sight breeds repulsion in him. Because of his misplaced ideals he had to marry in haste only to repent it at leisure. Willie does not learn from his father's mistakes and allows history to repeat and even re-repeat itself Negating history is a sin which brings its own punishment. Willie's father negated history and had to bear the punishment. Even as a child when Willie is asked to write an English composition he pretends he is a Canadian and writes an invented story which is based on the bits of life he has known through American comic books. Instead of narrating his life he recreates it with such imaginative skill that it becomes unrecognizable even to an insider. In the recreation of his story Willie negates his history.

Willie, however, goes on inventing newer lies because of his hatred for his half existence. In attempting to free himself from this half-ness, Willie goes on creating worlds of falsehood and gets more stuck up in these creations of his own. Willie hates his parents - more particularly his father, and this sense of identity crisis makes him 'a sojourner.' His father soon discovers his identity crisis and realizes that in order to avert more harm the bird must be allowed to scale the skies. He reflects:

I used to think that you were me and I was worried at what I had done to you. But now I know that you are not me. What is in my head is not in yours. You are somebody else, somebody I don't know, and I worry for you because you are launched on a journey I know nothing of (p. 49).





To discover himself Willie goes to London so that he finds out his face but ironically in his search for completeness he loses even the half-life that was within his reach. In London for a while Willie is lost, as if in a limbo again. The education that he was getting was absolutely devoid of perspectives. He pursues everything half-heartedly:

Willie was living in the college as if in a daze. The learning he was being given was like the food he was eating, without savour...he did what the lectures and tutors asked of him, read the books and articles and did the essays. He was unanchored, with no idea of what lay ahead. He still had no idea of the scale of things, no idea of historical time or even of distance...he continued to live within that idea of make-believe." (p. 58).

Oscar Handlin says that the history of immigration is the history of alienation and its consequences.... For every freedom won, a tradition lost. For every second generation assimilated, a first generation in one way or another spurned. For the gains of goods and services, an identity lost, and uncertainty found. Going through multiculturalism, for a while Willie seems to have found his ground when all of a sudden he comes to a realization that he did not need to rebel for the simple reason that distance from his roots has given him freedom without asking. In search of his identity in a strange world Willie again projects a borrowed, make-believe identity and goes to live the image once more:

He began to speak of her as a full Christian; but then, to get rid of the mission-school taint and the idea of laughing barefoot...he adapted certain things he had read, and 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 as a Brahmin...So playing with words, he began to re-make himself. It excited him and began to give him a feeling of power. (p. 61).

The immigrant is always at a disadvantage in a foreign land and his or her escape depends on the degree of his/her adaptability to that which is essentially alien. In the process of initiation language becomes the most potent instrument to come to the immigrant's help. But an inability to forget the native language casts a shadow on the immigrant's prospects in his/her adopted country. None but Naipaul could understand the agony of losing one's language in his Nobel lecture *Two Worlds* he revealed candidly the trauma of migration and consequent loss in these words:





The world outside existed in a kind of darkness; and we inquired about nothing. I was just old enough to have some idea of the Indian epics, the *Ramayana* in particular...No one taught us Hindi. Sometimes someone wrote out the alphabet for us to learn, and that was that; we were expected to do the rest ourselves. So, as English penetrated, we began to lose our language. (*V S Naipaul: Critical Essays*. p. 8).

After marrying Ana and while going to Ana's African country from Southampton as there was no other go Willie's mind was occupied by the confusion. Despite his marriage to Ana and flight to Portuguese Africa, he failed to strike roots there and after eighteen years' stay leaves that country telling Ann, "I am forty-one, I am tired of living' your life." But Ana's situation is no better. She does not have a place in the colonial Africa, and being a half-caste, nor in Portugal either. In search of identity, at the end of the novel he goes to Berlin Where his sister Sarojini lives.

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