

# A Postcolonial Study of V.S. Naipaul's *Half a Life*

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### Abstract:

*An effort has been made in this research paper to make a post-colonial study of V. S. Naipaul novel Half a Life. In 2001, Naipaul published Half a Life in which he accentuates the issue of the chronically dispossessed, the characteristics of the permanent exile. We see in this novel that Naipaul still feels like an outsider, though the ending leaves a ray of hope for readers. Half a Life is a tour de force and can be regarded as the culmination of Naipaul's career of more than four decades because the novel includes almost all of Naipaul's thematic concerns; simultaneously, it is a melting pot which mixes Naipaul's main concerns with key issues of the colonial and post-colonial worlds, especially the problems of man's loss, placelessness, nationlessness, isolation, and alienation. This masterpiece delineates Willie Somerset Chandran's search for self-development and self-knowledge. Naipaul masterfully manipulates the protagonist Willie Somerset Chandran's colonial predicament, his anxiety and dislocation in this novel.*

**Keywords:** *Postcolonial Stud, V.S. Naipaul, Half a Life, chronically dispossessed, permanent exile*

The central focus of most of the modern writing is in its preservation of society as too remote from or even hostile to the individual for him to feel any sense of belonging. In such a situation where the individual is seen as culturally or sometime linguistically estranged the whole question of social, cultural and individual identity

becomes an unattainable goal or ideal. The strength of the modern literary imagination lies in its evocation of the individual's predicament in terms of the alienation, exile or quest for identity. Literature of the third world is no exception to this general tendency in modern writing in which the theme of individual's predicament in the form of rootlessness, crisis of identity mainly lying behind the desperate affirmation of traditional culture has been explicitly explored. Naipaul's fictional work is concerned with the complex fate of the individual, societies and cultures and the resultant ambiguities in human adjustment, the colonial situation that produces a special kind of human psychosis when man is eager to search a niche for himself at any cost. The problem that he projects in his work is how an individual resists or overcomes the conditions in which he is placed and eventually succeeds or fails to survive and succeed.

Writing from the unique position of being an East Indian in the West Indies, Naipaul has been able to capture the experiences of the colonized in all its psychological depth, by virtue of which he has carved a niche for himself as a novelist of the colonial experience. He employs the novel form as a tool to carry out a social inquiry into the dereliction of post-colonial societies in particular and the post-imperial world in general. He has a deep conviction in the novel form and believes that the novel form by its seeming indirection can make hidden impulses clear.

In *Half a Life* (2001), Naipaul goes back to his favourite theme: the dilemma of

an immigrant. The story of Willy Somerset Chandran involves two sets of father son stories in the tale of three generations of an immigrant Indian Brahmin family. Willie, like Naipaul, intends to search for his self-identity and construct his own subjectivity in the world via travelling. Willie initially departs from his hometown India to England in search of his own world at the adolescent age like Naipaul. After that he goes through Africa and Germany in order to find his own place in the world. Eventually, he can courageously confront his identity loss and open up his new life in the future. Half Brahmin and half Untouchable, Willie was born in India in the 1930s. He is stuck in the conflict between his father from Brahmin family and his mother from untouchable class. He despite his father's ridiculous opinion to fulfill "a life of sacrifice" by getting married with his mother from a low-caste family because his father leads the so called "sacrifice life out of his hypocrisy" (HL 36). He could not accept the Brahmanism and racism. Nevertheless, he falls into the social loss after departing from India to England in order to construct his own subjectivity. The novel begins with the words, "Willie Chandran asks his father one day, 'why is my middle name Somerset. They at school have just found out, and they are mocking me'" (HL 1).

From Willie's father's story, Willie understands his family history culture, heritage and roots. However, he could not accept that his second name is named after the famous English writer Somerset Maugham, who visited Willie's town in the years before Independence since he thinks that he should be named after his family. Willie thus possesses only half a name. The novel seems to reveal Willie's father's intention that his son "mimic" the whites, since he gave him half of a white man's name. Willie can clearly see the gap

between the colonial's mimicry of the colonizer and his desire to construct himself in a chaotic world. He is aware of the paradoxical nature of his mimicry. However, he becomes a "mimic man," the person people expect him to be, just like Ralph Singh in *The Mimic Man*. As a matter of fact, the Western name is hallow because he cannot possess a Western identity simply by possessing a Western name. In contrast, identifying with the western name and dismantling his Indian name symbolizes the loss of his original culture. He is still excluded in and from "Western space" through his father intends to "bleach" him via giving him a half-whitened name.

In the novel, Naipaul presents characters who are products of a racial and cultural mix and shows how they struggle to find their identity in the multi-cultural society they live in. In general, these characters tend to deny one or more racial characteristics in order to become "more respectable," in their estimation. However, they eventually discover that their identity cannot be fixed because they are the fruits of multiple cultures. All through the novel, Willie is drifting without a solid and fixed identity. His identity is multiple, unified, and changing, fast like the concept of identity expounded upon by Stuart Hall, James Clifford and Homi Bhabha. He cannot try to achieve one fixed identity because of his multi-background. The novel has three settings: first there is post-independence India, then London, and finally pre-independence Africa. All three are places that Naipaul can identify with. However, these locations seem to signify different meanings in the novel. India and Africa are "inexact and vague," while the representation of London with street names and other markers is clearer; thus, Meenakshi Mukherjee contends that "for Naipaul, England is situated different level

of reality, firm and stable, while others regions can be relegated to haziness” (Frontline 1-51). In the narrative Willie’s preconceived nation is proved false. Like Naipaul, Willie initially thinks of London as a “solid” place; however, he senses that he is still in limbo as a marginalized wanderer in the big city. This situation is just like Ralph Singh’s experience in *The Mimic Man*. Such dispossessed people as the colonial, the exile, the immigrant, the marginal, and the uprooted must confront their being in an indefinite state of suspension. Caught up in this limbo, Willie the Indian immigrant loses not only his native cultural heritage but also his sense of place. He identifies neither with his homeland, an old world, nor with the new world he desires. In the 1950s, Willie moves to London and drifts into bohemian circles. Feeling lost, he half-heartedly faces his education at school: “the learning he was being given was like the food he was eating, without savour” (HL 58).

Worst of all, Willie cannot face his real ancestral history, his true genealogy. He employs his imagination to shape a make-believe identity and tries to live behind its mask “he adopted certain things he had read. . . it exited him and began to give him a feeling of power”.

Likewise, Percy Cato, “a Jamaican of mixed parentage who was more brown than black,” (HL 61) falsely fabricates his family history. He is in reality Willie’s shadow. He misleads Willie to believe that his father is a clerk in Panama; in fact, his father went there “as a labourer” (HL 62). Willie’s and Percy’s fictional recreations only seem to end up cheating themselves; they are an escape from an unbearable reality. Their make-believe identities are their performances. The creation of identity here has doubled meanings. Apparently, Willie seems to forsake his Indian tradition

and family history. It is his loss of cultural heritage. Even so, when he looks back on his life, he will understand his loss of cultural heritage at the stage of being in London. On the other hand, his performance of creating identity displays Homi Bhabha’s so-called “the third space.” He constructs his own subjectivity in London by learning to create his identity. The content of the third space is what Bhabha called “hybridity,” through which other, non-Western-centric positions may emerge to articulate and set up “new structures of authority, new political initiatives.” The process of hybridity thus produces “something different, something new, and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representations” (Identity 207-221).

In England, Willie is continually drifting: “he was unanchored, with no idea of what lay ahead. He still has no idea of the scale of things, no idea of historical time or even of distance” (HL 58). He intends to discover his own identity. Finally, he apprehends that the construction of subjectivity can be created freely: “Willie began to understand that he was free to present himself as he wished. He could, as it were, write his own revolution. The possibilities were dizzying. He could, within reason, remake himself and his past and his ancestry” (HL 60). This is just like Stuart Hall’s assertion: “the process of identity making is unstable; it can even be created” (HL 17). Similarly, Willie’s identity is in between, “subject to change.” In terms of Stuart Hall’s theory, identity-formation is not a static “being,” but a dynamic “becoming.” Indeed, to some degree it is true for Willie, in this increasingly complex, culturally diverse and ambiguous world, that his identity has become a condition that is not given but that he must continually negotiate a new, construct or create afresh. Thus, Willie may construct non one

identities and “the identities of place are inevitably unfixed” (Massey 169).

Failing to obtain a concrete place of his own in London, Willie does not know where he is going. He can “only go back to India, and he does not want that” (*HL* 21). The cultural identities focus on searching for a new route and creating new meaning in the flow. Just like James Clifford assertion on travel, Willie must undergo the journey of travelling towards his self identity. Willie decides to go to Africa with Ana, the first woman who has admired his writing. Later, he marries Ana, who is of mixed Portuguese-African descent. Willie follows her to her inherited estate in an attempt to make a new beginning. In his wife’s home country the colonial system is gradually breaking down. Willie remains a stranger and outsider in this country, just as in India and London; indeed, now he suffers an even greater sense of alienation. He does not want to stay here long:

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. (*HL* 135)

In Africa, then, Willie does not have a sense of belongingness. He feels he is “nowhere.” Ironically, he stays here for eighteen years. In London, at least, he was 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” (*HL*160). These friends regard themselves as “the second rank” (*HL* 160). 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. Educated in London, he handles English very well. He becomes a writer in London and achieves a certain public status. Yet in Africa he is forced to communicate in another language. He is confused about this linguistic shift during his journey from Southampton to Ana’s African country: “. . . that his home language had almost gone, that his English was going, that he had no proper language left, no gift of expression” (*HL* 132).

It is quite ironic that English, the language Willie loses, is his “proper language” as a writer in London, since he once was seen there as “a subversive new voice from the subcontinent” (*HL* 122). When a writer loses the language he is used to writing in, he is truly silenced and deprived of his power. Here we see the significance of English as a universal language since this means it is also the language of the diaspora; this imperial language, as lingua franca, is we might say necessary evil. Identifying with the imperial language, as in a sense he is forced to do, means man’s assimilation to the empire. The preservation of one’s original language, one’s mother tongue while learning the imperial language is the most

important task for immigrants, migrants, colonial subjects. At his adolescence, Willie intends to master English fabricating his ancestral and cultural history with the power of English usage, Willie can write back to the imperial power and create his own position of place in the future, just like Bhabha's theory of mimicry. After staying in Africa for one year, Willie witnesses his "half-and-half friends" who intend to bleach their identities "that the world I had entered was only a half-and-half world, that many of the people who were our friends considered themselves, deep down, people of the second rank. They were not fully Portuguese, and that was where their own ambition lay (HL 160-161).

Through his objective observation, he consciously understands that he shares the homogenous cultural heritage and loss with them. Originally, he intended to bleach his family history and cultural roots; however, Willie discovers his loss of his precious cultural background when he looks back on his journey from India, England and then to Africa. Thus, he finds his cultural heritage and desires to construct his subjectivity. Finally, he decides to end his wandering.

Having lived half a life in Africa for eighteen years, there, Willie consciously senses his "loss" in this new land, especially after slipping "on the front steps of the estate house" (HL 135). At this moment he has an epiphany living with Ana in Africa only mirrors for him the intrinsic limitations of his half life. This self-realization forces him to get back the time he has wasted. Therefore, he decides to leave Ana in the hope of discovering his own true identity:

. . . I cannot live your life any more. I want to live my own. I must stop living your life here.

He makes a decision to courageously face any possible challenge in the future. After leaving away from Africa, Willie goes to Germany where his sister lives. He sees Tamil boys who raise funds for the great Tamil war on the street: "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).

Willie deeply realizes that he must seize the time to construct his subjectivity because he has spent too much time leading a life of escapism. Willie is looking forward to start a new life with the future half of his life. The rest of his story is left open: Naipaul leaves an imaginative space for his readers. Willie will continue to search for his identity and a place of his own in the world. In the process of constructing subjectivity, Willie confronts the sense of placelessness and discovers that he cannot create a fixed identity. He therefore comprehends that identity is not stable but created in the process just like the assertion of the post-colonial discourse. Willie will obtain broaden and more multiple perspectives to examine his life. His identity making will continue in process. Finally, Willie will recreate a new sense of place, thus of self, through a profound acceptance and "working through" his own position as a permanent exile.

The autobiographical writing, *Half a Life* presents a more optimistic attitude towards the future than the previous ones: when a man can candidly face the dilemma of his own situation in life, he will fear nothing. Significantly, Naipaul empowers himself through his writing. Naipaul constructs his own subjectivity via the powerful writing. Willie in *Half a Life* decides to start a new life, no longer desiring

to live under Ana's protection. He rethinks his life and decides to face challenges of the future without attempting to escape or withdraw. Willie remarkably rebuilds his identity and finds the placelessness as a kind of placeness. He is caught in in-betweenness. Also, he must enjoy the third space. V. S. Naipaul plays a significant role in the post-colonial writings. For him, identity is not given, but constructed and contingent. Thus, in the terms of post-colonial perspective, Willie in *Half a Life* just like Naipaul himself, has the unfixed identity, in the construction of subjectivity though he must experience the ruptures among subjectivity, geography, and language toward multicultural and fluid identity.

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