THE LIFE ALTERED AND THE SELF DISAPPEARED IN V.S.NAIPUL’S
HALF A LIFE

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ABSTRACT

The predominant theme of diasporic literature is dislocation of an individual and eventual alienation. Alienation drives individual to sense of rootlessness which is the central theme of V S Naipaul. His novels are profoundly autobiographical. Naipaul, in an interview with Ronald Bryden, says, “All my work is really one. I am really writing one big book. I come to the conclusion that, considering the nature of the society I came from, considering the nature of the world I have stepped into and the world I have to look at I could not be professional novelist in the old sense…” V S Naipaul spits himself into his characters through whom his subtle shades of his emotions and minute aspects of his characters are manifested. His leading theme of rootlessness, alienating effects of colonial past on present postcolonial people are transparent in his characters.

KEYWORDS: Alienation, V S Naipaul, Postcolonial, Colonial.

“Society everywhere have been fractured by all kinds of change: technological, social, political and it was no longer possible to regard the action of a novel as covering a little crisis, a little curve on the graph which will then revert to the nice, flat, straight, ordered life” says Mohit k. Ray in V S Naipaul Critical Essays. As V S Naipaul decided to take up writing as his vocation he had to look for an authentic voice, so he preferred to draw on his personal experience of an uprootness adrift in the two worlds to neither of them he could belong. Rootlessness is the predominant theme of the novel Half a Life, a masterpiece of V S Naipaul.

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 is the story of race in search of 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. Ray, (ed) V S Naipaul Critical Essays). Naipaul presents the ironical existence of Diaspora through the main character William Somerset Chandran. Generally Naipaul’s protagonists grow away from their native culture and their growing up depends on their growing away. Half a Life is a record of William Chandran’s quest for identity and the feeling of rootlessness.

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.” (Half a Life p.1) .These are the opening lines of the novel. Right at the very beginning there is an implication of perspective which reflects the search for
identity and roots as his middle name sounds alien. Willie Chandran feels rootless as the students make fun of him at school. The name Somerset is borrowed one. It indicates half of his name is not his own. It implies that people are half-lived and half realized. Wille story is set in post-independent India and it goes to London from there to Africa. As Willie questions his father why his name was after a famous English writer, his father tells him a story and it takes first thirty five pages and remaining pages are about his struggle for life in London and Africa.

During the journey of his life Willie meets different sorts of people who are with half life living in exile. The awareness of his mother’s low caste and the resultant low status of his father brings him a kind of shame. The truth about him was ugly hence he presents his projected image before the world and starts living in the image. As a child when Willie is asked to write English composition he acts as if he was Canadian and writes an invented stories based on the bits of life he has known from American comic books. All these invented stories are based on half existence. Willie hates his parents especially his father. It makes his father realize his own state of disappearance.

He read the composition, he was ashamed. He thought lies…. lies
where did he get these lines from? Then he thought, but it is worse
than Shelly and W and the rest of them? All of that was lies too.
He read the composition again and grieved at his disappearance and
thought, Little Willie, what have I done to you? (Half a Life p. 40).

In creation of his story Willie negates his history and his father who reflects that in order to avert more harm the bird must be allowed to scale the skies. One of the stories written by Willie in his composition books is something about altered life of a beggar-maid. During the famine and general distress a beggar-maid, braving every kind of danger went to the court of the king to ask for alms, getting admittance to the king. The king asked her to uncover her face. She was of a surpassing beauty. The king fell in love with her and swore a royal oath there and then, and beggar-maid became queen.

But his queens’ happiness didn’t last. No one treated her like areal
queen; everyone knew she was a beggar. She lost touch with her
family. Sometimes they appeared at the outside the palace gate and
called, but she wasn’t allowed to go to them. (Half a Life p.42)

The life of the queen is an attachment in detachment and it is the beginning of the discovery of self-disappearance of the beggar-maid. Her life has been altered; she was openly insulted by king’s family and was ashamed of herself to be the queen. She could be happier being the beggar leading her full life instead of altered life. As everybody treated her like a beggar she lost her life of being queen. The ‘self” as queen disappeared. She could neither get back to her past life nor lead the life as queen. Her
life has been altered and the self has been disappeared. Another composition of Willie Chandran is about Brahmin, starving and all skin and bones, willing to die unknown. Based on condition to make sacrifices to the spirit he becomes rich, but his life is entirely tragic. Making sacrifices is against human values. Ultimately the Brahmin happens to sacrifice his own children. After going through these composition books of Willie his father reflects:

His mind is diseased. He hates me and he hates his mother, and now he is turned against himself. This is what the missionaries have done to him with mom and pop and, Dick Tracy and Justice society of American comic magazines………. (p. 47)

Willie Chandran and his sister Sarojini grow up despising parents especially their father. Willie Chandran was bitterly unhappy to stay in India. He managed to get scholarship in a second grade college in London and went there so that he could discover himself in London but ironically in his search for completeness he comes aware of his inadequacies. He even loses half of his life that was within his reach. Thousands of miles from homes, he begins to sense the condescension and indifference with which the British treated his father, and disdain gradually metamorphosis into empathy.

Willie was lost in London for a while. The education that he was getting was absolutely devoid of perspectives. He pursues everything half-heartedly. He feels like a fish out of water as he could not break away from conventional barriers such as culture and tradition:

And just as he ate without pleasure, so, with a kind of blindness, he did what the lecturers and tutors asked of him, read the books and articles and did the essays. He was unanchored, with no idea of what lay ahead. (p.58)

This situation unfolds before him a complicated picture which relates to his roots. Culture alienation seems to be in Willies blood. Then his restless soul yearns for an anchor. Half-ness of his personality, the incompleteness of his life for all of which moves with despise for his father and blames for the half-status that he has been accorded. Willie fails to see the dilemma of his father as a youth and also does not realize that his father has become victim to the circumstances. His father tried to create an image but lost his identity. Oscar Handler says that the history of immigration is the history of alienation and its consequences….. For every freedom won, tradition lost. For every second generation assimilated a first generation in a way or the other spurned. For the gains of goods and services, an identity lost, and uncertainly found.

For a while Willie seems to have found his ground when all of a sudden he comes to realize that he could not rebel that distance from his roots which gave him freedom without asking. For his identity in a different world Willie projects a borrowed, make-believe identity and venture to survive:
He spoke of his mother as belonging to ancient Christian community
of the sub-continent, a community almost as old as Christianity itself.
He kept his father as Brahmin. He made his father’s father a courtier.
So playing with words he began to re-make himself. (p. 61)

Willie meets different kinds of people in the process settling down in London. All those people
are leading a half-life in their own way. One of such people is Percy Cato from Jamaica of a mixed
parentage and he was more brown than black. Percy also in the same bottomless sea of multiculturalism
and he is ashamed of his background. Instead of presenting facts he makes fiction and says to Willie that
his father went to Panama as a Clerk:

He was a Clerk. You know those people over there. They can’t read
and write at all. Willie thought, He is lying. That is a foolish story. His
father went there as a Laborer. He would have been in one of the gangs
holding his pickaxe before him on the ground like others. (p. 62)

Percy Cato is a fashion-loving guy. He loves clothes. He always wears a suit and tie. His shirt
collar is always clean and starched and stiff, and his shoes always polished, with new looking insteps and
heels. They are very nice and solid. This excessive alertness about fashion seems to take its origin from
the need to hide his not so ambitious background. Their fictional recreation of these lives as well the
sense of dressing up provides these exiles a shelter from realities. Willie Chandran is a man doomed to
live under a shadow. His cultural background and his awareness of his incompleteness has brought
inhibition.

In his bid to survive Willie Chandran adopts Notting Hill Culture. The Bohemian Culture of
Notting Hill is alien to Willie even then he adopts it. The freedom he wants to enjoy in London is
unsatisfactory to him. The girls with whom he sleeps are not his friends but lovers of his friends. Willie
keeps planning to declare his love before Percy and the world, when June marries her childhood friend
leaving both Percy and Willie in the lurch, Perdate who happens to be Richard’s friend leaves Willies
side after frustrated experience of one night.

Existence is meaningless unless it is experienced appropriately and language is the tool and the
power of expression. Displacement brings dispossession of this power which aggravates the sense of
alienation. The immigrant is always at a disadvantage in a foreign land and his escape depends on the
degree of his adaptability to that which is essentially alien. Immigration threatens with the loss of
heritage to preserve, which an emigrant tries desperately to stick to his heritage, food and language.

Loss of proper language becomes even more ironical in view of the fact that Willie is an
emerging writer and writer very existence is dependent on his language. With his remigration to Africa
Willie’s voice itself becomes a prey to despotic forces. While travelling to Ana’s African country from Southampton Willies mind is occupied by confusion as such brings about:

He wondered whether he would be able to hold onto his own Language. He wondered whether he would forget his English
Willie was trying to deal with knowledge that had come to him on the ship that his home language had almost gone. (p.132).

The very reason of Willies attraction towards Ana is due to his want of wholeness. Willie discovers a kind of reciprocity in Ana. It is her halfness that strikes a bond with Willie. The halfness of Ana makes him forget his own lack. Her company gives him room to breath, to drive out the shadow of inadequacy which otherwise looms large on his life. What was intoxicating to Willie was that for the first time in his life he felt himself in the presence of someone else.

His life in Africa becomes even worse that is where he expected to belong? He decides that he shall not make any abiding stay in Africa. Willie reflects, “I don’t know where I am. I don’t think I can pick my way back. I don’t want ever want this view to become familiar. I must not unpack. I must never behave as though I am staying” (p.135). Walking in the streets in this town he feels his walking as if in the wilderness (p.134). Finally Willie becomes Ana’s London man (p.145).

Loss of identity is then, an inevitable evil of colonization which afflicts both sides: Colonizers and as well as Colonized. For years he has allowed himself to become easy victim to slippery substance but on a rainy day when he slips down having spent eighteen years in Africa, he comes to realize that at forty one, it is hightime to stop making a fool of himself. He wants to come out of the shadow of the image ‘Ana’s London man’. He is resolved that there are not going to be anymore slips for him. He tells Ana, “I mean I have given you eighteen years. I can not give you any more. I can’t live your life anymore. I want to live my own” (p.123).

Ana also is sailing in the same boat and she knows the pain. She says, “It wasn’t my life either” (p.128).

Naipaul used straight linear narrative in his fictions, but in Half a Life he has adopted a curious narrative form. Bruce King (in V S Naipaul, second Edition) says, “Half a Life consists of oral tales within oral tales”. In which Willie is telling the reader of some story others told him or which he told others and which at times have other stories embedded within them like those Russian dolls which opened reveal smaller dolls enclosing still smaller dolls. Half a Life is as much series of tales within tales. Naipaul has broken conventional narrative pattern and provided justification. His novels are open to multiple interpretations. The hallmark of all his fictions is his wry humor which is present in Half a Life. There are a number of writers whose theme goes around the agony and pain of Diaspora but what makes Naipaul great is his sensibility.
REFERENCES


