

**DISLOCATION AND QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN V.S NAIPAUL'S  
*HALF A LIFE***

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**Abstract**

The present paper is an attempt to analyse how dislocation leads to a loss of identity followed by quest for identity. V.S Naipaul, one of the most significant contemporary novelist of Indian diaspora in his latest novel *Half a Life* (2001) depicts the agony and dilemma of an immigrant through the tale of Willie Somerset Chandran. He is the son of a half rebel brahmin father and a low caste mother. Willie moves from London, Africa, Germany in search of a self identity and becomes a displaced being. Willie Somerset Chandran awakes one day to his realisation that his middle name sounds alien. The query regarding this unleashes a torrent of memories, unfolding before him a complicated picture which relates to his roots. His very name becomes an enigma as half of his name does not belongs to him. He was named after the famous English short story writer Somerset Maugham after his visit to his father's ashram. It is this revelation that breeds contempt in the mind of Willie for his father and subsequently rather consequently for himself. He began to negate his real identity and started to remake his past to his own convenience.

Willie, in order to find a self identity goes to London. There he comes into contact with several other friends who also lead a half life or a life without realisation. There is Percy Cato, who is of mixed Jamaican race, Roger, June and many others who are like Willie trying to run away from the shadow of their past. Quest for identity in an alien land leads to dislocation and thus Willie in his journey loses whatever little was within his reach.

From London, Willie moves to an African colony with his girlfriend Ana to create an image for himself, but then he has got imprisoned in that image and lost his identity completely. In London, at least, he was known by his name, but in Ana's country he was known as 'Ana's London man'. And one day after eighteen years of his stay, he realised that it is high time for him to decide whether to remain a shadow

under the image of someone whom he cannot accept from his heart or to start a new journey towards self realisation. At last he decides to leave Ana and thus his quest for identity continues.

Thus, the aim of the paper will be to show that identity is not fixed and it is always in a flux as some postcolonial critics has proved. Therefore we can say that the novel *Half a Life* depicts the plight of immigrant Willie who in the process of search for a concrete identity faces displacement, rootlessness and alienation.

**Keywords:** dislocation, identity, displacement, postcolonialism, rootlessness, diaspora, alienation.

The postcolonial discourse reflects the condition of the dislocated and dispossessed who cannot find a “home” of their own , which is best reflected in the works of Vidyadhar Surajprasad Naipaul. The writer himself experienced, and repeatedly described in his fiction, this particular urge. Throughout his life, he has desired a place to identify with. From genealogical mining, especially in his homeland (the Caribbean), through the quest for his cultural roots(India), and finally to his place of education(England)- he has to search for his own identity. Being an Indian by ancestry, a Trinidadian by birth, and an Englishman by education, V.S Naipaul never feels an affinity for any place. Naipaul thus tries to locate himself in the world through his writings. Thus his physical journey echoes his mental one, and his writing is a journey to self identification. As shown in *Half a Life (2001)*, the protagonist Willie, just like Naipaul, intends to search for his self-identity and construct his own subjectivity in the world via traveling.

Thus by taking into account prevalent theories on identity, place and home an attempt will be made to prove the changing perspectives on construction of identity most notably reflected in the works of V.S Naipaul, the Caribbean expatriate. In his latest *Half a Life(2001)*, the recurring theme of displacement and search for an identity or belonging finds its reflection. In establishing the notion of interrelation between displacement and a search for identity the paper will be grounded upon the dominant theories of Stuart Hall’s assertion of unfixed identity, Doreen Massey’s concept and definition of place, Homi Bhabha’s theory of “in-betweenness” and “third space” to prove that displacement is accompanied by a search for identity which is an ongoing process and is never fixed. Elleke Boehmer describes the immigrant and diasporic people/authors as:

ex-colonial by birth, “third world” in cultural interest, cosmopolitan in almost every other way, these writers work within the precincts of the western metropolis while at the same time retaining thematic and/or political connections with a national background (Boehmer:233).

But what is significant is that the loss of territory is always accompanied by the gain of new ones. Displacement or dislocation is followed by a re-location or replacement. Even though displacement leads to quest for identity, it does not refer to a singular or a fixed identity but in diasporic writings multiplicity is celebrated and there is no fixed point where we can say that we achieve a concrete identity. In terms of Doreen Massey’s concept of identity “the concept of place is not static but unstable” and “places are processes” (Massey,155). Massey says of the reproduction of place:

Places do not have single, unique “identities”; they are full of internal conflicts [...] [such as] conflict over what its past has been (the nature of its “heritage”), conflict over what its present development, conflict over what could be its future. None of this denies place or the importance of the uniqueness of place. The specificity of place is continually reproduced. (155)

The recurring theme of displacement and quest for identity finds its echo in the Caribbean expatriate V.S Naipaul. Naipaul constructs an entirely new metaphor for dislocation, fragmentation, ruthlessness, alienation and quest for a viable identity.

Jonathan Rutherford describes the issues of identity and develops the perspective of difference. He says that identity can be experienced only in terms of difference between individual and things. A concept of identity elaborated by Homi K. Bhabha is ‘hybridity’ and ‘third space’ which means the rejection of a single or unified identity, and a preference for multiple cultural locations and identities. Hybridity as seen in postcolonial theory is the answer to the dangers of binarisms (us/them) and the fundamentalist urge to seek ‘pure’ cultural forms.

Stuart Hall has established the meaning and definitions of cultural identity in the third world. He says that ‘identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. He considers identity as a production which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.

In V.S Naipaul’s *Half a Life*, the theme of displacement and quest for identity looms large. *Half a Life* reflects his fundamental social and cultural values in his psychological reactions to his immediate and extended family. In the novel he presents his protagonist’s encouraging of “half made stories that seem doomed to remain half-made”. In this novel, Naipaul’s protagonist undergoes the ordeal of exile, marked by loneliness, a quest for the self and an effort to grasp the outside world. Willie, in *Half a Life* is reported to be “blind” or to go into hiding. Willie’s delving into his past and his willingness to manipulate it shows his attempt to achieve a new identity.

*Half a Life* (2001) is mainly the story of Willie Somerset Chandran. It is an odd tale, moving from India to England, Africa and lastly to Germany. This novel also revisits his favourite themes of exile, alienation and search for identity. The first part of the novel is a kind of parody of a Somerset Maugham. The novel begins with an omniscient narrator and starts with a question of a son to his father:

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’. His father said without joy, ‘You were named after a great English writer. I am sure you have seen his books about the house’. ‘But I haven’t read them. Did you admire him so much?’ ‘I am not sure. Listen, and make up your own mind’. And this was the story Willie Chandran’s father began to tell. It took a long time. The story changed as Willie grew up. Things were added, and by the time Willie left India to go to England this was the story he had heard. (1)

The novel begins with a question on identity of the protagonist thus suggesting the theme of unbelongingness. Naipaul’s policy of naming his protagonist in a half and half manner reflects the theme of displacement and mixed identity of the author himself. The protagonist name William Somerset Chandran is out together taking up fragments. The name neither totally resembles a Hindu name or an English name. The very opening line of the novel reflects the

question of one's existence as doubtful. Willie's name highlights on the novel's main theme which are displacement and a constant attempt to create a self image.

Willie's negation of past and remaking it according to his convenience starts not from London, but from his childhood in India. Willie's degraded childhood and family joylessness compelled him to create a background or past for himself. Willie writes several compositions which are praised at the mission school. And one day, when he was asked to write an English composition about his holidays he pretended he was a Canadian with parents who were called 'Mom' and 'Pop'. And that was how, when he was twenty, Willie Chandran who had not completed his education, with no idea what he wanted to do, except to get away from what he knew and yet with very little idea what lay outside, goes to London so that he discovers himself, 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:

The learning he was being given was like the food he was eating, without savour. The two were inseparable in his mind. And just as he ate without pleasure, so, with a kind of blindness, 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. (58)

He begins to recreate himself by hiding his real identity. He remake his past with some personal, some traditionally novelistic and some materials; part fact, part fiction.

Willie's sense of displacement, nowhere and in-betweenness compels him to search for a self identity in an alien land. He comes into contact with Percy Cato from Jamaica in London and is initiated into the city's Bohemian underground. Percy Cato, Roger, June and Perdita are the characters that he meets in London, who lead a half realized and unfulfilled life. One is Percy Cato, who is a mixed Jamaican who also like Willie recreates a past of his convenience. He tells that his father went to Trinidad as clerk during the British regime, but in fact, his father went there as a labourer. Like Willie, he negates his past in order to create a self identity. Willie strives to find but not to yield in the nature of his inward journey into the half-and half world and is confused through the suffering and alienation. The exiles in the novel lead a half life or look for a life or hope to borrow a life, and never to live a life to the full. Willie desires to discourse some purpose in life, though temporarily, through his sensual associations his shift from one place to the other.

Willie begins another "half life" in colonial Mozambique with Ana, a mixed race girl from Africa. For the first time he feels to be in the presence of someone who accepts him completely. He considers his love for his mother as pure but his experience of love with Ana would bring him the fulfillment which he searches for desperately. Willie's experience and realization of halfness in life is reflected in his inability to adjust with circumstances.

Willie's half life goes on as he moved to colonial Mozambique with Ana where he soon get fed up with the domestic and sexual tedium of plantation life mournfully reflecting that "I have been hiding for too long". He was drifting away from the shore and he is displaced in this Ana's country more than in London. In London, although, he leads a half life but there he was called by his name. He had an identity as an emerging writer, he was known as the "subversive new voice from the subcontinent". In African colony Willie lost even the half life that was within his reach. Here he loses his name, his identity and he was termed as 'Ana's London man'.

Willie attempt to give a colour to his life in such a way that he fabricates a different India and a different family background: his mother hails from an ancient Christian community: his father was the son of a courtier. This re- fabrication of his past gives a sense of power.

As the title of the novel goes, there is ‘half’ in the present, which they are leading, but the other ‘half part is always haunting them. It is very difficult for the characters in the novel to combine these two lives to make one perfect and complete self. 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.

Willie describes his disorientation after living for eighteen years he realized that the life that he was living does not belong to him. He realized even though he feels an affinity with Ana he feels himself as a stranger in many ways. Willie was progressing into a world that is entirely fragmentary. *Willie says confidently to Ana:*

*I am going to leave you. The world is full of slippery substances. You’ve had eighteen years of me. You really mean that you are tired of me. 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 (136). Ana replied:*

*‘perhaps it wasn’t my life either’. (227)*

Half a Life is the story of the divided world not only of the protagonist, but almost of all characters including Percy Cato, Ana, Marcus and so on. Naipaul is emphasizing on dilemma that the exiles face in their adoption of other’s culture in an alien land. Willie although tries his best to adjust in an adopted land, everything goes out of his hand. Willie will continue to search for his identity and his place of his own in the world. In the process of constructing subjectivity, Willie confronts the sense of placelessness and discovers that he can’t create a fixed identity. He therefore comprehends that identity is not stable but created in the process making just like the assertion of the postcolonial discourse. He learns to accept the cultural significance of “unhomely” asserted by Homi Bhabha:

*...To be unhomed is not be homeless, nor can the “unhomely” be easily accommodated in the familiar division of social life into private and the public spheres.... In the stirrings of the unhomely, another world becomes visible. It has less to do with forcible eviction and more to do with the uncanny literary and social effects of enforced social accommodation, or historical migrations and cultural relocations. The home does not remain the domain of domestic life, nor does the world simply become its social or historical counterpart. The unhomely is the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world. (Bhabha:110)*

Displacement and complexities of life is prevalent in the whole of Half a Life. Willie Somerset Chandran like the novelist has been placed as a rootless nomad in the cultural world, always on a voyage to find his identity. Willie after his disappointment in Africa decides to run away again to Germany to his sister Sarojini who is also an embodiment of displacement.

Thus, the novel Half a Life clearly demonstrates Willie’s half life as the narrative of the novel has been divided in such manner that it depicts Willie’s state of mind in thematic as well as well as structural level. The novel’s narration starts abruptly and ends in the middle when the protagonist is aged forty-one and is still in the middle of his career. Lamenting on his behavior up to now, Willie admits,

*I have been hiding from myself. I have risked nothing. And now the best part of my life has gone, and I’ve done nothing. (227).*

The pathos of exile and futility of the search for identity appear as irreconcilable existential problems of the modern world. Through the story of William Somerset Chandran, Naipaul presents the ironical existence of diaspora. The author leaves us abruptly in the middle of Willie's story, and without indication of what direction his life might take. In the novel *Half a Life* Willie's identity changes from place to place. And with the change of places he loses his identity. Willie's continuing journey and his last move to Germany reveals that quest for identity is never complete and it will go on. The novel's ending hints at a new beginning of Willie's search for an identity.

Diaspora theorists such as Avtar Brah(1997) and Robin Cohen(2001) propose that the idea of 'home' is a mythic one, a place of desire and longing that sits oddly with the present chosen location of the immigrant. Thus for them home is an imaginary place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of "origin".(1997:192).

Thus Willie, the immigrant occupies multiple places and identities. And invariably demonstrates this nostalgia and longing for the mythic and distant homeland. We make and remake ourselves to suit our circumstances. Naipaul's *Half a Life* raises interesting questions about what life is all about. Willie himself has no idea of what he wanted he wanted to do, except to get away from what he knew.

Naipaul thus in his novel focuses on the idea of multiple identities by giving his emphasis on how the exiles gets displaced in an distant land and in order to adjust in the new environment engage themselves in the process of searching for multiple identities. Therefore, it is an expanded and divided world that shapes the story which emerges as a sign or a marker of the convulsion of the post-colonial world. And Willie is still continuing that search which perhaps may not come to him V.S Naipaul throughout his life has desired a place to identify himself. The novel ends nowhere. Everything is left incomplete by Naipaul in order to depict the in- between and ambivalent situation of Willie.

Thus in the postcolonial diasporic writing, a new space has been discovered which is in opposition to the western idea of having a centre. The writers subvert the Eurocentric idea of having a centre or a fixed identity. Naipaul in his novel *Half a Life* discard the idea of finding a definite identity and gives his protagonist Willie a new place which is called the 'in-between' position or the 'third space'. Thus, the title of the novel is appropriate as half has been discovered and another half is still left undiscovered. It narrates the incomplete, half realized life of Willie Somerset Chandran, a displaced individual who continues his search for completeness in life till the end of the novel.

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