

## Quest for Identity in V.S. Naipaul's Novel, *Half a Life*

D.S. KAINтура  
H.N.B. Garhwal University  
Tehri Garhwal

Vidiadhar Swarajprasad Naipaul in his lecture on 7 December 2001, said, 'The world is always in movement. People have everywhere at sometime been dispossessed. I suppose I was shocked by discovery in 1967 about my birth place because I had never had any idea about it.'<sup>1</sup> In fact, this statement of Naipaul shows that in almost all of his works, the persistent theme of identity finds a direct reflection. *Half a Life* (2001), the latest novel, which is based on the theme of identity of an Indian, who goes to England, for higher education, his trial of adoption of western culture and indulges in sexual activities, visits different African countries make it an interesting piece of work by Naipaul.

The story of *Half a Life* begins with a question of a son to his father, who is an offspring of a brahmin and low caste woman:

Willie Chandran asked his father one day, 'why is my middle Name Somerset? The boys at school just found out and, and they Are mocking me. His father said with a great joy, 'you were named after a great English writer. I am sure that you have seen his books about the house.'... 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 (p. 1).

In fact this is the vital question by which the novel starts and the central character is haunted by these sorts of questions for his name which was answered by his father but he was unknown about those all things which had happened in the past.

The departure of Willie Chandran from his village to England for higher education on scholarship begins a search for solace. His experiences in London and the attempts for literary vocation, the sexual adventure, the decisive shift to the Portuguese – African

colony with Ana, for eighteen long years living with fabricated hallucination for an unknown destination marks the story of this novel. The plot of the novel is a blending of that plight of immigrants of imperial colonies and displacement of the migratory people. Willie Chandran's visit to England, his meeting with Percy Cato a Jamaican, June, a girl friend of Percy, and after then with Petrida and Roger who are also searching an identity. Willie's creative quality attracts Ana, a mixed racial girl who lives with him for fifteen years, and at the last he thinks to come back India, because he is afraid of that he may be thrown out from the college and till the time he is living the life of Ana. His story is much similar to that of Mr. Biswas in the novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*, who longs for a house, but couldn't get it. His crisis of identity is similar that of Willie, when the former looks his own reflection and couldn't recognise him as one and comments, 'I don't look like anything at all shopkeeper, lawyer, doctor, labourer, overseer I don't look like any of them' (p. 159).

Being a writer of diaspora, Naipaul presents the characters of all his novel struggling for their identities for which they had been suffering throughout, and want to achieve it through the different modes:

Since diaspora writing emanates from identity formations leading to further and more sophisticated articulations of identity, or manifest in community, nationalhood, 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.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, the migration of people from India to Caribbean Islands as an indentured labourer for sugarcane estates, is a story of longing and suffering which cannot be seen only in *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), and, in *A Way in the World* (1994), but this theme continued in *Half a Life* (2001), which is apparently a record of Willie Somerset Chandran's quest for identity. However, this theme of search and unrest towards the end of life remains a persistent subject matter of V.S. Naipaul's work, because the environment of native land reflects in his art. His views on the Caribbean society of Trinidad; its multi-lingual and multi-cultural shape can be seen on his lecture at Stockholm during the Nobel Award Ceremony:

This was my very small community. The bulk of this migration from India occurred after 1880. The deal was like this. People indentured

themselves for five years to serve on the estates. At the end of this time they were given a small piece of land, perhaps five acres, or a passage back to India.<sup>3</sup>

This was the condition of people, most of whom settled in that country, but they never adopted it as their own, therefore, the sense of belongings remains throughout in the literature of Caribbean Islands, of which Naipaul is the spokesperson.

Naipaul has presented a background of Indian setting in the novel, the traditional belief of caste and starvation of emotions of the false social taboos, which Willie has to face. His birth in itself is a question mark as his mother was a low caste woman, which Willie realised when he was in the school. This realisation haunts his mind and here begins the search for an identity in the society:

And that was how, when he was twenty, Willie Chandran, the mission school student who had not yet completed his education, with no idea of what he wanted to be, expect to get away from what he knew.... Went to London (p. 51).

Like all other works of Naipaul, the crisis of identity continues till Willie went to England and lives there a life of an immigrant. His education is a compulsion and not something voluntarily accepted action. He is unanchored without a proper mission. His meeting with Percy Cato, a Jamaican, who has similar background like Willie, but both of them live in a fabricated hallucination without revealing the reality to each other. Naipaul presents in the novel, 'both exotic, both on scholarship, had been wary of one another in the beginning, but now they met easily and began to exchange stories or their antecedents' (p. 61).

Percy Cato, a friend of Willie too hides himself and tells a lie that his father was a clerk at Panama Canal, but Willie understands and reacts, 'He's lying. That's foolish story. His father went there as a labourer' (p. 62).

With the help of Percy Cato, Willie Chandran meets June, a prostitute and a friend of Percy, with whom he gratifies his sexual desire. This sexual indulgence is one of the factors of western culture, which is an attraction for immigrants. Willie's experience with June had a deep impression in his mind and he took it in a different way from the strict moral taboos of his native country. It made him to understand the sexual behaviour of the people of Notting Hill that is presented by the novelist as:

No one he met, in the college or outside it, knew the rules of Willie's own place, and 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, re-make himself and his past and his ancestry (p. 62).

This indicates the quest of a protagonist which Naipaul presents its contrasts, socio-cultural history and its relationship with modernity. His discard of June and the culture of Notting Hill is strange for Willie, even Petrida who is Richard's friend leaves Willie aside after the frustrated experience of the night. Different other persons who had come to London from the different places of India and Africa and other countries are continuously searching for something and other in the culture of the west, where they had to live but can't discard the psychology and heritage they stored in their minds:

It was a little world of its own. The immigrants from the Caribbean, and then the white colonies of Africa, and then Asia, had just arrived. They were still new and exotic; and there were English people—both high and low, with a taste of social adventure, a wish from time to time to break out of England, and people with colonial connections who wished in London to invert the social code of the colonies—there were English people who were ready to seek out the more stylish and approachable of the new arrivals (p. 72).

In fact this was the world different altogether for those people among whom Willie Chandran an Indian tries to locate himself, and goes such a long search for that identity of himself which is the most common pursuit of writings of Naipaul. The western world is not at all favourable for him as Rostan Murray comments:

The sense of liberation many experienced a first encountering the theories it offered, a freedom from guilt where fear and anxieties were now defined as treatable symptoms of childhood traumas, began to be replaced by a bewildering doubt concerning the nature of identity of the individual undergoing these experiences—a doubt different from that implicit in evolutionary theory but equally disturbing, posing once again a problem never faced in earlier generations and hence specific to this century.<sup>4</sup>

For maintaining his identity Willie starts writing scripts for radio which are accepted by Roger with great enthusiasm, who himself is 'like a man happy to sink his own identity in the grander identity of his corporation' (p. 78).

Willie gets solace in writing stories and perhaps in this matter Naipaul is personal about his own ambitions and adherence. Willie's stories about Indian background in London are accepted popularly. The writing becomes a sort of emancipation of his exiled self, whereas the thoughts always remain in those places of his arrival.

Percy's departure from London to his birth place and Willie's creative endeavor attracts Ana, who is an admirer of his writing. She finds in his stories something similar related to her life and background, therefore, she writes a letter to Willie about her feelings: 'I feel I had to write to you because in your stories for the first time I find moments that are like moments in my life, though the background and material are so different. It does my heart a lot of good to think that out there all these years there was someone thinking and feeling like me' (p. 124).

Because she herself belonged to a mixed community and was again in a half position of life. Willie desires to visit her African nation where they go together. Ana herself narrates the past of her dynasty and also suggests a plot for his story.

Visiting the different parts of Africa, Willie is continuously in search of identity of the other self inside him, which always worries him. Ana reveals the past and her parentage of a mixed heritage. Ana's grandfather, living in Africa, 'had himself become half-African with an African family' (p. 150). She has a different impression of Willie and was unknown about the background of his origin, while the latter was with her in Africa he was known as 'Ana's 'London-man.'

Besides Willie, all other characters have the quest for their identity in the novel. Percy Cato, Roger, Ana, Graca and Sarojini, Julio, Carla, Ricardo and Alvaro all are in the search of their lost past and they are living in hallucination. 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. As this has been put by Manjit Inder Singh:

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 collisions that signal the uncertainties of post-war world of movement and drift.<sup>5</sup>

This is the story of the divided world not only of Willie, but almost of all the characters including Percy Cato, Marcus, Ana and his

sister Sarojini. Willie initiates himself into all that is incomplete in him—the ‘art of seduction’, which he tries for perfection in the suburbs of London. It is the novelist’s quest of identity that makes a character to learn English there but not forgetting those haunting scenes from the native land. This indicates his trial for the adoption of that culture and discard of his own which at a time becomes impossible for Willie like the other characters of the novel:

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 valueness of persons forming this unanchored community.<sup>6</sup>

The metaphor of half is about the plight of those migrants who neither completely mixed up with the immigrant countries, nor could they follow the traditions and beliefs of their original heritage. Therefore, it is an expanded and divided world that shapes the story ‘which emerges as a sign as a marker of the convulsion of the post-colonial world.’<sup>7</sup> And Willie is still continuing that search which perhaps may not come to him as it has already been half lost. He says this to Ana, ‘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 a float’ (p. 227). And he laments, ‘But now the best part of my life has gone, and I’ve done nothing’ (p. 228). This crisis continues in his mind and perhaps he realizes as there is no destination for him. V.S. Naipaul’s characters quest for identity remains in all his classics, and an autobiographical interpretation of the novelist can be seen through the descriptions of events in the novel as Bruce King rightly said: ‘Naipaul’s fiction often has subtexts: the novel can be understood as autobiographical in the sense that they are projections of his own life and anxieties of homelessness, of living in more than one culture, of needing to find a narrative order for experience, of needing to achieve, of needing to create, of having to build a monument to his own existence through his writing.’<sup>8</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Riggan William, ed., *World Literature Today*, vol. 76, no. 2, Spring 2002, p. 7.
2. Makarand Pranjape, ed., *In Diaspora: Theories, Histories, Texts*, Indian Publication, New Delhi, 2001, p. 159.

3. *World Literature Today*, p. 6.
4. Rostan, Murray, *The Search of Selfhood in Modern Literature*, Hampshire, New York, 1988, p. 33.
5. Manjit Inder, Singh, *V.S. Naipaul*, Rawat Publications, New Delhi, 2002, p. 244.
6. Avtar, Singh, 'Problem of Rootlessness and Alienation in V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*', *Punjab Journal of English Studies*, vol. 15, 2000, p. 30.
7. Manjit Inder, Singh, *op. cit.*, p. 248.
8. Bruce King, *V.S. Naipaul*, Macmillan Press, London, 1993, p. 3.