

Negotiating Identity, Dislocation and Cultural Displacement in *Half a Life*: A Postcolonial Perspective

Saurav Megh

Assistant Professor
P.G. Dept. of English
Khalsa College, Amritsar
mgsaurav@gmail.com

Abstract

Post colonial literature persistently addresses issues pertaining to identity crisis, dislocation, alienation and social marginalization. In the novel '*Half a Life*', V.S. Naipaul delineates the predicaments of the protagonist Willie Somerset Chandran, who constantly grapples with the agony associated with negotiating identity. Since birth, the protagonist Willie finds himself trapped into a complex social structure of colonial India. In order to build his coherent identity, he takes journey from his homeland to London, later to Africa, which depicts the suffering associated with negotiating identity and displacement. The Prime purpose of this paper is to examine how protagonist negotiates his fabricated identity, while confronting western realities of alienation, uprootedness and cultural displacement. This paper explores how postcolonial identities always remain fluid, unstable, fragmented and persistently negotiated.

Keywords: Identity Negotiation, Identity crisis, Dislocation, Cultural Displacement, Uprootedness and alienation.

INTRODUCTION

Post colonial literature analyzes the complexities of identity, dislocation, displacement and alienation that appeared in people during colonial time. During the reign of colonial masters, the subjugated people not only experienced economic and political upheavals but also endured the agony of sudden changes in psychological and cultural identities. There are numerous authors from colonized nations, who frequently investigate how colonized individuals struggled to construct a sense of stability, solidity and the meaning of their lives. Among them V.S. Naipaul holds a remarkable place. Naipaul's literary works are significantly associated with the predicament both colonial and post colonial societies. In his writings he portrays the cunning roles of western dictators who constantly deliver aching strikes to colonized people, whom wounds will never be incurable neither physically nor mentally. Most of his characters experienced the torments of rootlessness, homelessness, alienation and a perpetual search for unified identity instead of negotiating identification.

The sense of search for identity was in the ancestry of Naipaul. His grandfather, Capildo Maharaj migrated from India to Trinidad during 1880 and since then Naipaul is subjected to diasporic and dual identity. Hence this the establishment of diasporic descent constructed Naipaul's sense of belongingness. As a result, Naipaul himself experienced double consciousness through different cultural connections. In an early time period of his life, Naipaul wanted to get higher education from England and later on England became his abode. But the places like India, the origination of his ancestors and Trinidad his native place aftermath England became his home and professional place. As a consequence, the convergence of multiple culture practices remarkably affected V.S. Naipaul's perception pertaining to displacement, homelessness, identity and uprootedness in his works. Naipaul is of the view that, "The World is what it is; men who are nothing, who allows themselves to become nothing, have no place in it" (Naipaul, p1). He took such themes in his works like *Miguel Street* (1959), *A House of Mr. Biswas* (1961), *Half a Life* (2001), and *Magic seeds* (2004).

In the beginning of the novel *Half a Life*, Naipaul depicts the formation of Willie's identity and his roots in colonial background. The agony of Identity crisis can be discovered in his early life, that how colonial Indian society shaped his identity. Willie grows up in a rigid milieu of caste hierarchies, which was the commencement of his struggle to develop a unified identity.

One day when he comes from his school, Willie asked his father, "Why is my middle name Somerset? The boys at school just found out, and they are mocking me. His father said with a great joy, you were named after a great writer, I am sure that you have seen his books about the house" (Naipaul, p1). His father also informs Willie about the incident how he met famous English writer William Somerset Maugham in a temple. His father's answer does not alleviate his rage of being called as mixed identity in school. Aftermath, sense of displacement emerges in Protagonist mind when his father reveals his uncustomary marriage with a lower caste woman. Willie's father also delineates his negotiating identity under the influence of Mahatama Gandhi. As Gandhi cites,

"I do not believe in caste in the modern sense. It is an excrescence and a handicap on progress. Nor do I believe in inequalities between human beings. We are all absolutely equal. Caste has nothing to do with religion. It is a custom whose origin i do not know and do not need to know for the satisfaction of my spiritual hunger. But i do know that it is harmful both to spiritual and national growth. It is therefore my firm conviction that it must go if both Hinduism and India are to survive."(Gandhi p.129).

Whatever actions Willie's father had done were intended to challenge and break the stereotypes of Indian social structure. As it is written by B.R. Ambedkar that "Turn in any direction you like, caste is the monster that crosses your path"(Ambedkar p.30)

Willie finds himself in the dilemma of dual identity, because his father married to a woman who is untouchable and his father belongs to Brahmin background. During the pre colonial time Brahmin community refrained from drinking a glass of water from lower caste due to strict caste norms associated with purity. So the Willie is half Brahmin and half Untouchable. This creates a sense of fragmented identity in his mind. Which promotes the feelings of isolation, exile, expatriatness and uprootedness in Willie's life? V.S. Naipaul employs Willie's experience to demonstrate how Indian rigid social principles and colonial structures lead the formation of unstable, sketchy and defective identities.

Willie has a strong desire to change his fixed identity in India, Subsequently he decides to travel journey to England to get settled in new culture and pursue higher education. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall quotes that "identity should not be understood and as a fixed or stable concept but rather as an ongoing process shaped by historical and cultural forces". (Hall p.225). Willie's arrival to London initiates a prolonged and disturbing experience of alienation, displacement, dislocation and identity negotiation. He has fragmented notions to construct a unified identity, which will be non negotiable and a dream of becoming a renowned author in London. The narrator writes:

"And that was now, when he was twenty, Willie Chandran the mission school student who had not completed his education, with no idea of what he wanted to do, except to get away from what he knew, and yet with very little idea of what lay outside what he knew, only with the fantasies of the Hollywood films of the thirties and forties that has seen at mission school, went to London" .(Naipaul, p. 51)

In London the dream city for Willie, attempts to build his unfiltered identity by detaching himself from his past life. He perpetually endeavors to assimilate into London culture, while concealing his background of Indianess. Willie, in college be friends with Roger, Perdita, Percy Cato and June. Protagonist strives his best to adapt the new culture with new individuals in an alien society. However his encounters with his new friends fail to eradicate his feeling of homelessness and uprootedness in London. He consistently feels isolation from the new World of western culture, where he had dreamed to live. It can be deciphered from the text as it cites,

"He had no idea who he was. His life had been built on stories that were not his own"(Naipaul, p. 40-45)

Abiding in an unfamiliar land of London, Willie carries within himself the sufferings of displacement, homelessness and a sense of exile. He is living a dual identity in London as he is called as London man of June. On the other hand, Willie is grappling to develop an identity which will be free from any negotiation. The sense of negotiation can be conveniently traced when Naipaul says:

"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, remake himself and his past and his ancestry." (Naipaul, p.57)

In London, he is unable to integrate himself with others. Instead of constructing a unified identity, western culture gives him the trauma of homelessness. This takes him to the predicament of diasporic feeling. As Stuart Hall mentions, "Cultural identity is not fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continues 'play' of history, culture and power" (Hall, p.225)

Thus, Willie endures the pain of cultural shock. He is neither able to assimilate into new culture of London not able to protect his Indian culture. He is standing between the two cultures, unable to fully belong to one. "He felt himself to be a man from nowhere"(Naipaul,p.61.) In a metropolitan city, a sense of exile and alienation besieged him entirely when he finds himself a failure, unable to write a book. Roger, Willie's friend frequently encourages him to write a book. Roger says, " I know your great namesake and family friend says that a story should have a neat beginning, middle and an end. But actually, if you think about it, life isn't like that. Life doesn't have a neat beginning and a tidy end. Life is always going on. You should begin in the middle and it should all be there.(Naipaul, p.83). The dream which he carried from India of becoming an excellent writer has been distorted completely. At this moment Willie losses the hope of becoming a writer in London. He says, "Let the book die. Let it fade away. Let me not remind of it. I will write no more. This book was not something I should have done. It was artificial and false." (Naipaul, p.123) Sarojini, Willie's sister visits him in his 'City of Dreamland' which actually turned out be a city of identity crisis for her brother. She finds the predicaments of homelessness, dislocation and exile in the eyes of Willie. Willie says to Sarojini, "I don't know where I am going. I am just letting the days go by. I don't like the place that's waiting for me at home."(Naipaul, p.117) In the terms of negotiating identity Post colonial theorist Homi k. Bhabha narrates that Hybridity as an "in -between" cultural domain where subjects develop new forms of identity comes through the encounters with different cultures and traditions without losing 'the self'. As Bhabha says, "Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity."(Bhabha, p.112). Unfortunately, Willie is unable to wear the mask of hybridized character, he utterly becomes a break- down character through the series of cultural shocks he experiences in London. Willie's identity remains fluctuating, fragile and ambivalent as he is inadequate to accommodate various dominant forces his life in alien land.

At this moment Sarojini and Roger both are stimulate Willie to commence a new life in Africa, that would definitely assist him in generate an error- free identity. Africa is a homeland of

Willie's girlfriend, Ana. However, the sense of negotiation again falls on the protagonist before travelling to Africa. As Homi K. Bhabha says, "The border becomes the place from which something begins its presencing. It is the in-between space that carries the burden of meaning. Cultural identity emerges in moments of transition and translation. The movement between cultures produces new signs of identity. These spaces of displacement create the possibility of hybridity," (The Location of culture, p.5) Eventually Willie decides to abandon London, as there no optimistic destiny here. Willie embarks his expedition to Ana's Africa with assurance as uncompromised identity. He has an unshakable faith in a more favorable time ahead. As V.S. Naipaul says,

"I had come to a place where I felt I might begin again,

Where the past might be set aside and a different self

Could slowly be made." (The Enigma of Arrival, p.141)

On the contrary, fate had written something diverse for Willie. In Africa, again, his adversity with individual consciousness proceeds. Willie identifies the dilemmas of marginalization and alienation. He accepts himself as a dislocated man hanging between two cultures. As Salman Rushdie says, "The migrant is perhaps the central figure of the modern world. Rooted in one place and moving toward another, he carries fragments of many cultures, and out of this displacement new identities are born." (Rushdie, p.15) It is an intricate task for Willie to develop a new culture of Africa, especially the language. He begins to question himself, "Whether he would forget his English." (Naipaul, p.132) The protagonist has almost lost his native language of India, struggling to maintain his second language of London and third language is incomprehensible for him to understand or speak. As Ngugi wa Thiongo says, "Language carries culture, and culture carries the entire body of values." (Thiongo, p.11) Thus, with the lost of his native language Willie has estranged himself from his culture as well in Africa. Multiple identities become the dilemma of a sense of uprootedness, which paves the way for Willie's negotiating and fragmented identity. He lives in a culture which is unable to accept his authentic identity. From his birth in India to Africa, he lives a borrowed life with the absence of a true identity, culture, and language. It gives the impression that he belongs to nowhere that he can truly call of his own. As Naipaul says,

"We lived in a borrowed culture.

The words we used were not our own,

they came from elsewhere.

We tried to imitate what we saw,

yet the imitation only reminded us

of how far we were from belonging."(Naipaul, p.27)

Willie's attempt to assimilate into Ana's African culture to articulate his 'self identity' appears to be a deteriorating. Except for the negotiating identity, he has become something like uprooted one, dislocated, and marginalized individual. Instead of fragmented identity, Willie has nothing in his life: no unified identity, no authentic culture, no language and no place that belongs to him. Another terrible thing for Willie is that he has lost his name too. In Africa, everyone calls Willie as "Ana's London man". Willie says, "I don't know where I am. I don't think I can pick my way back, I must never behave as though I am staying."(Naipaul, p.135). Being a marginalized and dislocated person, Willie aspires to eradicate the identity of "Ana's London Man" which can give him permission to articulate freely in non-native land. Willie determinedly proclaims, "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."(Half a life, p.136) Willie desires to break the shackles of negotiating identity, which has suppressed him for ages. Through this fragmented identity, the protagonist endures psychological anguish and a sense of inner dispute. As Naipaul says, "We pretended to be real, to possess a history and a culture. yet beneath the imitation there remained a profound uncertainty, a sense that we were merely shadows of something we could never become."(Naipaul, p.148)

In the novel, V.S. Naipaul represents Willie's struggles at every stage of life whether he is in India, London or in Africa. His endeavor in the quest for a crystal clear identity brings only limitations in the domains of social status, nationality, professionally and culturally. This demonstrate that the concept of identity during the reign of colonial to post colonial era can never be comprehended as stable or fixed. When someone loses his or her identity, it becomes intricate to regain it. Naipaul portrays a character that travels persistently to the alien lands to construct a fixed identity. However, in this journey he suffers from the predicaments of loneliness, displacement, homelessness and uprootedness. Through Willie's life, it is depicted that identity is not something which he acquires from his ancestors, although it is negotiated over the course of cultural encounters and personal experience. Homi K Bhabha says, " That the experience if identity is negotiated."(Bhabha, p.56). In this juncture, Willie decides to live in Berlin with his sister, Sarojini. He says to himself that, "But now the best part of my life has gone, and I've done nothing." (Naipaul, p.211) With this sketchy and negotiated identity, once again he undergoes a journey in the quest of a cohesive identity.

To conclude, Willie Somerset Chandran's expedition begins from his homeland India, takes him to London and Africa to cultivate his harmonized identity, he ultimately finds himself in Berlin with divided identity. Everywhere he dwells, he carries the sufferings of half identity, culture, language and fragmented dreams. The predicaments of negotiating identity, migration, cultural displacement and uprootedness travel with him while he tussles to obtain a full life.

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