

An Analysis into the Travels of the Translated Self in V.S Naipaul's *Half A Life*

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V.S.Naipaul expertly exhibited a great craftsmanship in literary pieces like fiction, travel and journalistic writing. His fictional world reveals a critical look on the world and also utilizes its traditions, customs and cultures. Naipaul's writing express the ambivalence of the exile, a feature of his own experience as an Indian in the West Indies, a West Indies in England, and a nomadic intellectual in a post colonial world. Naipaul adhered to the form of the traditional narrative, and by doing away with the technical devices of the stream of consciousness; he exhibits his power of writing by making his readers share the inevitable irony and paradox of modern life form by its quintessential self-division and inner conflict. The protagonist of Naipaul's fiction may be different persons but there may be sensed a thread of continuity in their fate and there "limbotic" status. He has described the theme of a quest for identity, a sense of displacement, alienation, exile of an individual in the backdrop of colonial and postcolonial period. The act of displacement, his trying efforts to organize his experience, and his gazing back to know about his roots and his continuing search for the desirable self can be clearly stated in his novel *Half A Life* (2001). In the novel *Half A Life*, Willie Chandran is a

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migrant from one place to another and then to another. And he keeps on doing that through both *Half A Life*, and its sequel *Magic Seeds* (2004).

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V.S.Naipaul's fictional writing is based on his extensive travels all through Africa, Asia, America and the Caribbean. It deals with the first hand experiences of postcolonial oppression and discrimination. Naipaul is a fine example of how a writer, carrying within him a whole burden of race, history, language and a personal ambition, with a knowledge that he is an ex-colonial individual at a point in history. Naipaul infact does not as much question the involuntary forces of history that shaped him and his ancestry, as he seems to intellectually retrace what happened to a whole gamut of nationalities, cultures, races and people. This of course triggers from his views on indenture system and the helpless negligence that it symbolizes the indentured man's existential plight, one such being his fathers, a second generation East Indian in Trinidad.

Naipaul's own predicament of the colonial world seems to be highlighted in his novels. He looks upon himself as a man without roots; he never felt at home in Trinidad, the land of his birth; and he has been repelled by India, the land of his origin. Naipaul's protagonist restlessness, desire to have their own permanent identity, travelling from one land to another in the hope of understanding their true selves, all these seems to be drawn out of Naipaul's own experience. His themes center on varieties of dislocations, migrations, exile, the idea of being unanchored and displaced, in the unstable and perplexing realities of the post-colonial world.

Though Mohun Biswas in *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), Ganesh Ramsumair in *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), Ralph Singh in *The Mimic Man* (1967) and Willie Chandran in *Half A Life* and *Magic Seeds* are different characters, essentially they are all one as they present

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different aspects of the same cultural mindset. And it seems to be true about Naipaul's remarks about his own works. As Naipaul once said, "all my work is really one, I'm really working, one big book". All his major protagonists suffer from the tragedy of displacement and separation from their land. Separation from land leads to disorder and the forlorn spirits search for land is associated with its search for order.

Among the various writers of his times Naipaul was perhaps the only writer with a past of entirely new description. The political and the economic necessities within the nineteenth century colonial history that accounted for the East Indian indenture in the West Indies made a complex literary material. It resulted in these displaced people suffering trauma related to alienation in as much as these were illiterate folks thrown into an entirely new land. It was further exacerbated by a hostile racial mix, coupled with their inability to either adjust or to go back to the now memorized India. Naipaul, after an initial period of anonymity, built an enormous reputation for himself with the publication of *A House for Mr. Biswas*. He builds an entirely new metaphor of dislocation, fragmentation, rootlessness and the quest for a viable identity.

Homi K. Bhabha argues how the mid-nineteenth century was one of the most sustained periods of mass migrations within the West and Colonial expansion in the East. He says that the nations fills the void left in that uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss into the "language of metaphor", transferring the meaning of home and belonging, across the middle passage', across those distances and cultural differences. Bhabha draws up a map of a particular type of experience, so crucial to the question of identity formation in the latter half of the twentieth century, with the paradigmatic experience of exile, emigration and expatriation reflecting the unaccommodated man's predicament. In the post-colonial text the problem of identity returns as a persistent questioning of the frame, space of representation,

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where the image-missing person, invisible eye, oriental stereotype is confronted with its difference, its other.

One of the culturally significant events in the history of the Caribbean is the import of Indian and the Chinese indentured labor around the 1880s; something seminal to Naipaul's literary and individual development. The abolishing of slavery in 1833 led to the search for new slaves from elsewhere to counter the threats of the blacks who were aggressive and prone to challenging the plantation masters. India became the obvious choice because it was cheap and was a British colony. The history and the geographical location of the indentured Indians in the Caribbean was that they were somewhere between slaves and workers. Their dereliction, isolation, physical rootlessness in alien locales and poverty, imaginatively rendered by Naipaul is now part of his own inseparable destiny and place in the Caribbean literature.

Talking about "hybridity", is now considered as central to the discourse of diasporic writing, especially in regions like the Caribbean and from where the experience of multi-racial societies expresses itself. Racial and cultural hybridity is related to and is defined by incongruous combinations of relationships, mentalities, genders, classes, nationalities and ethnicities, drawn up from the far off peripheries into the centre. In diaspora, what is of greater significance is the hybridity that has been 'politicized', hybridity as division and separation. Naipaul whose cultural hybridity leads not into 'intentional' form, can be categorized to write out of their 'organic' hybridity, a fusion of two or more languages, cultural artifacts or historical memory, but do not challenge the static, essentialist colonial discourse.

This problem of cultural hybridity has been beautifully exemplified in his latest novel *Half A Life*. It depicts the agony and dilemma of an immigrant through the tale of three generations of an Indian Brahmin family. *Half A Life* presents two sets of father - son stories

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each of whom has his own fears, his own solitariness, but sadly there does not exist any channel of communication between them. Out of these three people, however, it is only the youngest...the protagonist who is given a name. His father and grandfather, despite having strongly influenced his story, remain anonymous.

Naipaul appears a natural outsider, but he possesses a capacity to interweave his own feelings, with those of others, to recognize in them his own fallibility, and this gives his writing an intense humanity. His recurring themes – the destruction of links to the past and to the land, the wounds created by the loss of the sense of history, and the efforts to heal this, which often only produce greater neuroses – are handled majestically in this book.

Naipaul has been a spokesman, a scathing observer, of the Third World scenario elsewhere – India, Argentina, Africa, the West Indies etc. At the same time, as critical commentaries have alternatively celebrated Naipaul's crucial positioning as a writer, his observations have made significant changes in one's outlook, in reinforcing the idea how histories, societies, ideologies and experience should be looked at the end of the twentieth century. This is so while admitting that the news from the newly freed societies conveyed through his major works has been deeply and incessantly grim. It is this side of corruption, brutality or hostility: "half – made societies that seemed doomed to remain half made", a point that has been finally driven home in *Half A life*.

This novel marks another 'enigma' of return; this time, a desperate search for stability, a place in a post – colonial climate, stretching across India, England, Africa and Portugal. The novel, as it unwinds itself, becomes an accelerated instrument of departures and renewals, filial and associated memories and ties. It unfolds at times in cinematic terms flashes of past recollections of scenes, sites, words, acts that serve to further negotiate the hero's attempts to move away to unexplored locales. Naipaul's *Half A Life* is a continuous

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search of the protagonist to discover his true self. In the novel there is continuing search for identity in a state of limbo.

“Limbo” is a state suffered by the uprooted, the marginal and the exiled. The displacement and dispossession that immigrants are subjected to, bring them into a limbotic position, the agony of which heightens when all efforts of assimilation are disillusioned. Caught in limbo the immigrants lose not only their native place but also their identity. All their efforts at assimilation then are directed towards their search for a face, slow destruction of heritage, language striving towards acculturation. The literature of diaspora focuses on the dislocation of an individual or race and subsequent alienation. Alienation leads to a sense of loss, but life consists not in losing but in the rediscovery of self. Naipaul considered by Asha Chowbey, the “literary circumnavigator” of contemporary times. Naipaul’s protagonists grow away from their native culture and their growing up depends on their growing away. Asha Chaubey 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 a race in search of a familiar face in the mirror, the irony however lies in the fact that even the mirror reflect a face which is not recognizable”.

Through the story of William Somerset Chandran, Naipaul presents the ironical existence of diaspora. The theme of dislocation and consequent loss of identity has been a recurring one in the literature of diaspora. *Half A life* is a record of Willie Somerset Chandran’s quest for identity. In *Half A life* Naipaul has delineated the characters from common and ordinary life. The novel opens with the beginning of Willie Chandran search for his roots. Willie asks his father: “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 mind.’ And

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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 has heard.”

For Willie Somerset Chandran, his name is his destiny. Half of his name does not belong to him, it is borrowed from the famous writer Somerset Maugham, and his first name proclaims him as a Christian whereas his surname signifies his mixed ancestry. William's search for the roots takes him backward because his roots are entwined with those of his father's. His story is set in post – independence India, then in London and then he travels to a pre – independence African country which is closely modeled on Mozambique and then for a brief period in Berlin.

Willie Chandran and his sister Sarojini went to mission school. One day the teacher asked Willie Chandran what his father did. He did not know what to say about his father's business. He moreover, seemed to suffer an acute embarrassment. Willie's hatred for his father was probably due to the latter marrying a low caste woman. The son of a half – rebel Brahmin father and a low caste woman who is only a shadow of a person, Willie's negation of self begins in his childhood. His awareness of his mother's low caste and resultant low status of his instills a sense of shame in the boy. The truth about him was ugly hence he takes to falsehood with impurity and once he presents his projected image before the world, Willie starts living the image years ago Willie's father had also projected, an image inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's call for sacrifice. Willie goes to London in order to discover himself, find out his identity 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 he was getting was absolutely devoid of perspectives. He pursues everything half – heartedly. In the process of settling down in the London life, Willie comes close to a few people, each of whom is leading a half – life in their own way. Here, there is also awareness on the

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protagonist's part of the shared feeling of dislocation felt by both he and his new acquaintances. His bohemian lifestyle in London sets him apart from other expatriate Indians who sweat out a living. Willie is divided within himself in his bid to achieve assimilation or acculturation, which is the only option left to the immigrant in order to survive amidst cultural or imaginative schizophrenia, in this sense, a state of divided identity – divided by culture, history, circumstance.

Immigration threatens one with the loss of heritage which an immigrant tries desperately to preserve, for instance, language. Erosion of heritage language finds an important place in the colonized/immigrant mindscape. Existence is meaningless unless it is expressed appropriately and language is the tool and power of expression. Displacement brings dispossession of this power, which aggravates the sense of alienation. The immigrant is always set at a disadvantage in a foreign land and his escape depends on the degree of his adaptability to that which is essentially alien. In the process of initiation language becomes the most potent instrument to come to the immigrants help. But an inability to forget the native language casts a shadow on the immigrants' prospects in his adopted country. None but Naipaul could understand the agony of losing one's language.

While travelling to Ana's African country from Southampton, Willie's mind is occupied by the confusion that such frequent changes in the setting lead to: "He thought about the new language would have to learn. He wondered whether he would be able to hold on to his own language. He wondered whether he would forget his English .Willie was trying to deal with the knowledge that had come to him on the ship that his home language had almost gone, that his English was going, that he had no proper language left, no gift of expression (132)".

This lose of proper language becomes even more ironical in view of the fact that Willie is an emerging writer and a writer's very existence is dependent on his language. One

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also remembers that on the publication of his first book Willie was introduced as ‘a subversive new voice from the subcontinent’ (122). With his remigration to Africa Willie’s voice itself becomes a prey to dictatorial forces. In her effort to overcome the sense of alienation Ana too enrolls herself at a language school in England. The explanation she gives to her family shows the significance of the language issue in the study of diaspora.

Willie’s fails to see his future in London when he has completed his studies. His immigrant, wanderer soul takes him to Ana’s African country the first day at Ana’s state house, Willie said that it was as long as he could imagine. Everything in the bathroom was new to him – all the slightly antiquated fittings and the old geyser for heating water. Other people had designed that room, had those fittings installed, had chosen those white wall tiles – some of them cracked them, the crack – lines and the grounding black with mould or dirt, the walls themselves a little uneven. In that room especially he felt a stranger. From Asia Willie had come to Britain in search of an anchor but failing to find one he travels to Africa which seems to bear more affinity than the West. Thus drifting away from one place to another, from one continent to another, Willie feels he is going to lose his language. Language has ceased to exist as a set of signifiers for Willie. Before he has completed thirty three years on this planet he has been forced by circumstances and his wanderlust to change three languages making him so confused that he does not know how to express himself. Quest for identity pushes the ‘subaltern’ towards silence.

The very basis and ground of Willie’s attraction to Ana is his want of wholeness. In Ana, Willie discovers a kind of reciprocity. It is her halfness that strikes a bond with Willie. While reflecting on Ana’s admiration of his book Willie thinks: ‘It was possible that she belonged to a mixed community or stood in some, other kind of half and half position’. (124). Strangely this half – ness of Ana makes him forget his own lack. Her company allows him

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room to breathe, to push back the shadow of insufficiency which otherwise looms large on his life.

Willie's fate as a flotsam becomes even worse in this African country where he anticipated belonging in. The narrator description of Willie's arrival in African is quite limbotic. Though this description is modeled on Mozambique Naipaul refrains from giving this country a name. This anonymity is intentional and it is a device to deepen the sense of limbo. One only knows that Willie arrives at a little low built concrete town' (134), and he decides that he shall not make an abiding stay here, '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' (135). Walking in the streets in this town he feels he is walking as if in wilderness (134). Willie becomes a 'Nowhere man', he does not belong anywhere. Lack of the sense of belonging makes him indecisive and despite initial unwillingness he stays for eighteen years. Describing his lot to Sarojini he remembers that in Africa instead of succeeding in finding a place for himself, he had lost whatsoever little autonomy he had in London. In London at least he was known as Willie Chandran but in Africa he becomes simply 'Ana's London man' (145). At the end of the novel, ultimately Willie and Ana seemed to be separated without any definite resolution.

In the course of the novel we also come across the minor characters such as Sarojini, Percy Cato, Roger, Alvaro, Carla and Graca. Their life mirrors Willy's in so far as they too are half – made, with identities that are as fractured and fragmented as the Protagonists. Again, coming back to the consideration of the minor characters, it is worth noting that it is not only the Protagonist who is the traveler but character like Carla Correia, Luis, Graca, Ana who are also waiting to achieve something. Naipaul makes use of literary reference in depicting the salient traits of his characters in a brilliant way. Not only such allusions create rich associations in the mind of the reader but also render the character in question all the

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more life and vivid. *Half a Life* provides a series of characters; which are waiting for something to happen which never does. Although of course, death always comes sooner or later. However, the waiting itself, longing, becomes its own kind of meaning. About his characters drawn in *Half A Life*, Naipaul realized, “they’re not really free men. The niche of the world is too confining”. He said he thinks that observation still holds true about some of his characters: “Within their own little territories, their life is as confined as it was before”.

The loss of identity, sense of alienation and exile is the lot of the mixed, unpedigreed class. The stigma of being a second rate citizen hangs around Willie. Willie gets temporary relief due to some slippery substance which awakes him to the futility of all his efforts in a half – made society. In Africa Willie gradually finds some solace in the realization that he is not the only one bearing the burden of the albatross, there are many like him who are infested with a sense of double exile. He discovers he is in a ‘half –and half world’ (160) with ‘half – and – half friends’ (162) who had come to reconcile with their position as ‘people of the second rank’ (160). There are the Correias, Ricardo and the estate manager of Carla Correia – Luis and his wife Graca. These people are living a Caliban like existence in Mozambique. Despite all adverse circumstances Willie still feels much at home among the Africans. “In Africa I had after a while let those London lies drop, in our half – and – half group they seemed to have no point”. (179).

Willie’s rejection of a vicarious existence has been seen as ‘coming of age’ of Naipaul’s hero. The protagonists of Naipaul’s fiction may be different persons but there may be in many ways different from Mohan Biswas in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Ganesh Ramsumair in *The Mystic Masseur* and Ralph Singh in *The Mimic Men* but essentially they are all one as they present different aspects of the same cultural mindset. Naipaul once said, “all my work is really one: I’m really working one big book”. All his minor protagonists

suffer the tragedy of displacement and separation from their land. Separation from land leads to disorder and the forlorn spirits search for land is concomitant with its search for order.

Perhaps, the unifying vision of the novel is provided by the sexual choices. Willie makes, and most of them are driven by the urge to replace, shift or simply to move away from one passionate state to another, one body to the next in short, his failed career as a student, writer and then a migrant makes a typical Naipaulian statement about every journey as one of “watching without seeing and hearing without listening”. Initially if you think of the ‘First chapter’ and the ‘second Translations’ one will be reminded about the well known Rushdie remark in *Imaginary Homelands* about the scattered concept of belonging and broken mirrors of identity. “Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately to the nation that something can also be gained”.

It is in fact, difficult not to see Willie as some alter – Naipaul, perhaps the very person Naipaul always feared he might become. Not as brilliant, without the supportive family, from India rather than Trinidad, Willie seems something of a lesser Naipaul. But his experiences in England, especially, suggest what might have been. Willie seems an unlikely author, but he does manage to get published and he could have chosen to continue down that path, instead he dismisses the possibility. Naipaul, of course, embraced it – but perhaps the choice, indeed the life, was not as clear as it now seems in retrospect the final section of the novel suggests that possibly that is where Naipaul sees Willie’s future, that is where, after only half – living for so long, he must turn to try to fill in the void of his life.

Willie’s search to have an ideal view of the world remains only a dream for him. His attraction towards the Western world brought him to England but unable to get any stability went to Africa, where he completely lost his identity of whatsoever he had in England. After

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leaving Africa he joined the revolutionary movement in an attempt to do something but failed miserably. And at last his self imprisonment may allow him to know his true self. Despite being charged with an anti-black bias, Naipaul shows in *Half A Life* a profound understanding of one part of the African way of life. In a large sense the novel point to various predicaments of various half and half people and of people uprooted from a way of life on account of factor often out of their own control. A war, an uprising, a change of government, ethnic hostilities that make people feel threatened, caste considerations are some of those factors.

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