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V.S. NAIPAUL'S *HALF A LIFE* : THE NASCENT MULATTO IDENTITY CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

V. S. Naipaul is a literary giant revered all over the world. Most of his works revolve around the theme of "displacement and exile". His choice of themes basically refers to his state of mind. He preoccupies with the themes of the sense of isolation, alienation, dispossession, homelessness, rootlessness, fragmentation, mimicry and a relentless quest for identity.

Half a Life (2001) is a deeply affecting, fictional (apparently semi-autobiographical) narrative. It has all the ingredients of a characteristic of Naipaulian novel; a classic satire on the Indian society. It has full of anecdotes and dark comedy. For *Half a Life*, Naipaul was awarded with the Nobel Prize of Literature in 2001. The novel is about the struggle of the protagonist Willie Somerset Chandran to find his own identity in a world disintegrating after the colonial era.

The novel revolves around the story of Willie Somerset Chandran, whose father is a Brahmin from the Hindu caste system and his mother a Dalit. Willie's middle name 'Somerset' comes from the name of an English writer called Somerset Maugham who had visited Willie's father in a temple once. Willie has a strained relationship with his father and decides to leave India so as to go and study in London, England. He lives the life of a poor immigrant whilst in London but later writes a book and manages to publish it. The publishing of his book leads to Willie receiving a letter from a fan called Ana, who admires the book and wants to meet Willie. Ana and Willie fall in love and Willie goes back with Ana to her homeland in Africa. The novel ends with Willie leaving his 18 year stay in Africa and going to live with his sister in Berlin.

Naipaul explores the life of an immigrants living in London and how they come to adapt to their circumstances. Brilliantly orchestrated, at once elegiac and devastating in its portraits of colonial grandeur and pretension, *Half a Life* represents the pinnacle of Naipaul's career.

Key words : home, existence, alienation, colonialism, diaspora, culture, identity.

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V.S. Naipaul's novel *Half a Life* (2001) 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, each of whom has his own fears, his own solitariness, but sadly there does not exist any channel of communication

between them. In this novel, 'fact and fiction', 'biographical materials' and 'historical facts' are all mixed up in creating a wonderful fictive world." Out of three people, it is only the youngest the protagonist who is given a name. His father and grandfather despite having strongly influenced his story remain anonymous. In the words of Mohit K. Roy, "The novel has been rightly described as "a devastating work of exceptional sensibility, grace and humour." (*V.S. Naipaul: Critical Essays*, xiii).

The novel, *Half a life*, starts with a conversation between father and son. The protagonist Willie Chandran questions his father as to his middle name being Somerset. Because of this middle name Willie has been mocked by his school boys. His father told him that he was named after a great English writer. This question forms the very essence of a person's existence. The answer to this question brings into light the irony of Willie's existence and at the same time prepares the background of his half-life in half-made societies with people who are themselves leading a life which is half-discovered, half-realised and half-lived.

On account of this occasion, Willie's father began to tell the story. It took a long time. The story changed as Willie grew up. Things were added and by the time Willie left India to proceed to England this was the story he had heard. Willie's father was a Brahmin. He came from a line of priests. He was attached to a certain temple. He didn't know when the temple was built or which ruler had built it, none the less for how long they had been attached to it. Things became worse when the British came. He was doing penance for something which he had done, and he was living as a mendicant in the outer courtyard of the big temple. It was a very open, public place. His enemies among the Maharaja's officials were hounding him that made him to take a vow of silence. This had won him a certain amount of local respect, even renowned. Inspired by the Mahatma's speech he decided to marry a low caste girl. There was a girl at the university. She was small and coarse-featured, almost tribal in appearance, noticeably black, with two big top teeth that showed very white. This was the girl he thought that he should go and make a declaration to and in her company live out a life of sacrifice. Both of them met several times at a hotel. Someone informed about this affair to the girl's uncle. Her uncle was a fire brand. That made him nervous. He kept her in an image maker's house in the town. The image-makers were of a neutral caste, not low, but very far from being high and perfect for his father's purpose.

He began to work for the Maharaja's State. He grieved for himself. This kind of servile labour had formed no part of his vision of the life of sacrifice. He did a number of jobs like working in the audit section, as an assistant inspector. One day his father asked whether the school principal had great ambitions for his son-in-law, he replied that he was not interested, more over that he was already married. This made his father wild, and loses his tolerance and kindness. He had betrayed all his family members. Now his father was worried about getting good will from the school principal. Facing different difficulties at last he became a man with an establishment of his own.

There was one little blessing. It was assumed that he was married to the girl. He took a vow of sexual abstinence, a vow of brahmacharya, like the Mahatma, but he failed. He was full of shame. She was pregnant, little Willie was born. Now she was very proud. It can be observed, how Willie's mother was being affected by colonialism. She took lessons in flower arrangement from the wife of an English officer. At that time independence had not yet come. She took lessons in cooking and house-craft from a Parsi lady. She was trained as to how to entertain the guests. Willie's father himself was mortified. She had set out the table in her new way on the side plate of each guest she had placed a towel. Willie's father didn't think it was right. Because of her, Willie's father felt ashamed among his relatives. He had never read about towels on a dining table or seen them in any of the foreign films that he had gone to. She insisted, and used the word 'serviette' or something like that. She was no longer on the defensive these days and soon she was saying foolish things about her husband's ancestors, who knew nothing about modern house-craft. Nothing was resolved when the first guest came and he had to retreat into his own melancholy and go through the whole evening with those towels on the table.

This was the nature of his life. His utter wretchedness, self-disgust, can be imagined when, with everything he had spoken about, and in spite of his private vow of brahmacharya, which represented the

profoundest part of his nature, Willie's mother became pregnant for the second time. This time it was a girl, and this time there was no room for any kind of self delusion. The girl was the image of her mother. He called her Sarojini, after the women poet of the Indian independence movement, in the hope that a similar kind of blessing might befall her, because the poet Sarojini was a great patriot, yet was also remarkably ill favoured.

Willie Chandran and his sister Sarojini went to the mission school. One day one of the Canadian teachers asked Willie, after his father. Willie said with irritation everyone knew what his father was. Willie's mother had been educated at the mission school and it was her wish that her children too should go there. Most of the children at the school were backward, who would not have been accepted at the local schools for people of the upper caste. She had faced many problems in the local school during her childhood.

Willie loved his mother; he understood more about the mission school. He began to long to go to Canada, where his teachers came from. He even began to think he might adopt their religion and become like them and travel the world teaching. On one occasion when asked to write an English composition, there he wrote as if he were a Canadian. In that composition he mentioned; Mom and Pop how they had taken their children to beach, explaining their house and foreign life.

When Willie's mother had seen this composition was extremely pleased and proud. Willie's father was however ashamed of it. Several times Willie had written compositions. His father read them and decided to send him to a far-way place for his studies, because Willie's mind was diseased, and he had become antagonistic to his father's policies.

The relationship that V.S. Naipaul shared with his father has some literary value besides being an intensely personal one. Its literary merit derives from the fact that V.S. Naipaul owes his position today largely to his father. Besides, the father-son bond was so strong that when Seeparsad died in 1953, he left for V.S. Naipaul many worlds unrealised, many words unshared and many dreams unspoken. V.S. Naipaul's creative process is an attempt to realise those worlds, share those words and speak of those dreams. The thread of father-son relationship runs through most of his works of fiction besides serving as the inspiration for his masterpiece *A House for Mr. Biswas*, which he has described as very much his father's book.

Finally Willie's father stopped talking to his son. Willie became very unhappy. His mother tried to comfort him, but she failed. She informed all the matter to her husband, then who thereupon talked to Willie and consoled him. He gave a word that he would be sent to England. Willie's father had written letters to some of the people whom he knew in England. After some weeks, a reply had come from the "House of Lords" from a famous man. The letter contained a little gold and a place had been prepared for Willie for his higher studies on a scholarship in London.

Willie Chandran was selected for B.B.C. A stout young man who worked in BBC invited him to work in B.B.C. He went to the B.B.C studio and showed his talent, where everything was recorded. He excelled in his duties. At this time he met a young lawyer called Roger. Both became friends, they met about once a week. Roger introduced his girlfriend to Willie. Her name was Perdita. Roger was tired of her. Roger said to Willie that his editor was coming to London soon. On this occasion he had arranged a big dinner party. Roger described the different life styles of different persons, like Marcus who was dedicated to inter-racial sex. Another man was Richard who was a bed room Marxist and another was Peter, whose style was entirely different. Peter and Richard were coming with a Colombian woman, for dinner which was to be arranged by Roger at ten. The invitees to the dinner had come there. The editor recollected about Gandhi that he had seen him in 1931. The Colombian woman Serafina was escorted by Richard and Peter. The others, Willie, Roger and Perdita were also there. Serafina had a conversation with Willie regarding men and their cosmic strength. The editor cleared his throat once or twice and expressed that he was so thankful to all of them because through their conversation he came to know whether the world was going. The editor narrated a story which brought tears to all of them. Willie was fascinated by the editor's story. Meanwhile Willie's eyes were on Perdita. After the party was over all people left the place.

The next day Willie wrote a story about the editor. He was surprised upon writing such a nice story. The stories seemed to be just waiting for him. He had written twenty-six stories in all. He showed all of them

to Roger. Roger thought it was a fair size for a book. He began to send the book out to people he knew in publishing. Every two or three weeks it came back. At last Willie met Richard showing his stories, by striking a contract, Richard gave some amount to Willie, to get it published.

For many weeks Willie had been in and out of Roger's house at Marble Arch, taking advice during the preparation of the manuscript. Somehow he was fascinated about Perdita. At one stage he thought of going to Roger's chamber to discuss about the love affair between them. But he didn't do it because that weekend the race riots began in Notting Hill. The newspapers and the radio were full of the riots. When he came out of the college everyone was reading the newspapers. They were black with photographs and headlines. He heard 'blacks are going to be a menace.' Willie felt at once threatened and ashamed. He felt people were looking at him. He felt the newspapers were about him. He stayed in the college, didn't go out. This kind of hiding wasn't new to him.

His friend Roger wrote a letter to encourage him. Hiding away in the college, Willie now saw more of Percy Cato than he had done for some months. They were still friends but their different interests had scattered them apart. A letter came to Willie from India. The handwriting on this letter was his father's. The letter, informed that in India they were fine, the marriage of Sarojini had been solemnised. She got married to a German. As his father expected an international marriage, it was a great satisfaction to Willie's father.

In the third part of the novel, it occurred to Willie one day that he hadn't seen Percy Cato at the college. This enquires revealed that Percy had packed his bags and left the college without telling anyone. Willie was forlorn at the news. His sister Sarojini wrote from Germany. She recounts her life at Germany with her husband Wolf. It also intimates that she would come to London for a few days to see him. Willie was not happy with that news.

His sister came and stayed in a small hotel near the college. She came everyday to Willie's college room to prepare a little meal. He was asked number of questions by his sister regarding his degree, and in what way it would help him. He answered that he was waiting for a reply concerning a book written by him. At this juncture, Willie contemplated and gave a number of statements of his experience in London. The following words of Willie disclose how he was affected by the influence of colonialism :

"I don't know where I am going. I am just letting the days go by. I don't like the place that is waiting for me at home for the past two and a half years I have lived like a freeman. I don't like the idea of marrying someone like Sarojini. The trouble is I don't know how to go out and get a girl on my own. No one trained me in that. I am like my poor father. All men should train their sons in the art of seduction. Nobody talked about sex and seduction at home, but I discover now that it is a fundamental skill all men should be trained in..." (*Half a Life*, 117-118).

Willie telephoned Perdita early one morning, to come to him. But she didn't come. He went looking for June. He hadn't seen her at her work place. There he came to know that she was married. Out of his emotions he met a woman on the street to have sex. He failed and was full of shame. When he saw a prostitute whom he had given half a week's allowance going with someone; he thought -- "Humiliation like this waits me here. I must follow Percy. I must leave" (121).

He had no idea where he might go. Willie could only go back to India, and he didn't want that. All that he had now was an idea and it was like a belief in magic that one day something would happen, an illumination would come to him, and he would be taken by a set of events to the place he should go. What he had to do was to hold himself in readiness, to recognise the moment.

Facing different problems, his book was published. Some of the reviewers didn't give any compliments. Besides he had two letters from Roger, and another was from a girl or young woman from an African country. She wanted to meet him. He at once wrote to her asking her to come to the college. She was doing a course of some sort in London. Her name was Ana. Willie didn't want the woman to be let down. He wanted her to stay an admirer. But as soon as he saw her all his anxieties fell away and he was conquered. She behaved as though she had always known him, and had always liked him. She had a wonderfully easy manner. The most intoxicating thing for Willie was that for the first time in his life he felt himself in the presence of

someone who accepted him completely. He thought of Perdita, and June, among them she was the best woman. Both of them fell in love. Both of them shared their sweet memories in their past life. The very bias and grounds of Willie's attraction to Ana is his want of wholeness. In Ana, Willie discovers a kind of reciprocity.

Willie Chandran decided to go along with Ana to her country. At first Ana hesitated and then accepted. A letter came in his last week at the college from Sarojini. She counsels on how to lead life in Africa, and mentioned about the love affair of Ana, and cautioned to be careful of strangers.

Now the total scene changed. Willie and Ana left England to Africa. Willie thought about the new language he would have to learn. He wondered whether he would be able to hold on to his own language, or he would forget his English. He thought all the time when he was in the capital, in the house of one of Ana's friends, "I am not staying here. I am leaving I will spend a few nights here and then I will find some way of going away" (133).

Naipaul could understand the agony of losing one's language. Immigration threatens with the loss of heritage to preserve. An immigrant tries desperately to stick to his heritage, food and language. Attrition of heritage, language finds an important place in the colonised, 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." (Asha Choubey, 232). The immigrant is always at a disadvantage in a foreign land. His or her escape depends on the degree of his or her adaptability to that which is essentially alien. In the process of initiation, language becomes the most potent instrument to come to the immigrant's help. But an inability to forget the native language casts a shadow on the immigrant's prospects in his or her adopted country.

The loss 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. Ana makes an effort to overcome the sense of alienation, she enrolls herself at a language school in England. The explanation she gives to her family shows the significance of the language issue in the culture of diaspora:

"I wanted to break out of the Portuguese language; I feel it was that had made my grandfather such a limited man. He had no true idea of the world And I didn't want to learn South African English, which is what people learn here. I wanted to learn English, English." (154-155).

Willie and Ana arrive at a little low-built concrete town. The house was in the middle of an overgrown old garden and in the shade of a great, branching rain tree. The air was hot and stale inside. Looking out from the bedroom Willie thought:

"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).

The first day at Ana's estate house, he was moved to wonder on seeing settings and the architectural constructions of the house. He found all the strange old Portuguese colonial furniture. He loved Ana and believed in her luck. Ana was a woman who had given herself to him. As long as he was with her he felt a sense of reassurance that no harm could come to him.

Willie came to know about African way of life. He met an African maid. She told her family problems, she also spoke about her father Julio and how he treated her family. She speculates, "I hardly knew to a colonial country in Africa of which I knew little except that it had difficult racial and social ideas" (141).

One day Ana and Willie went to a party. She introduced him to a second rank Portuguese. At that party all of them are keeping their heads down. So in the colonial State they kept their heads down and made what money they could. That was to change in a couple of years but at the moment that regulated colonial world seemed rock solid to everybody. Willie completely accepted this. He described about the crops of the estate. Most of the colonial shops they used were Portuguese. One or two were Indians. Ana's parents began to live separate lives. And for many years no one outside the family knew that anything was wrong. It was the pattern in colonial days. Once Willie lost his passport and was terrified. At last he got it by taking the help of Ana.

On weekends Ana and Willie usually set out on a two hour long journey to see her friends. In the beginning Willie felt life to be rich and exciting. He liked the houses and the culture of the Africans. Willie learned to use a gun. Willie narrated about the African government. The government was authoritarian. The peace was continuing people no longer lived with the idea of danger. There was a named man Correia who had started different business, Correia invited Willie to take up books business. Correia began to think of manufacturing helicopters. Willie admits,

“I found myself amazed at how little I knew of the modern world and amazed at the same time at the ease with which Correia was picking his way through it.” (171).

For years Correia had talked of a calamity to come, something that would sweep away the life of the colony, sweep away his entire world. On one Sunday they went to a beach restaurant, afterwards Correia led all of them to his beach house. Carla and Corriea wanted to go to Europe to see her two children who were in their teens. But due to some unavoidable problems they could not go.

Willie got to know about the Correia’s estate manager called Alvaro. With this friendship Willie was involved in deep sex. One afternoon both were at café. Alvaro said :

“I will come for you tomorrow evening it’s much better in the evenings, and it’s much better at the weekends. You’ll have to find some way of making your excuses to Madame Ana.” (179).

“Sexual promiscuity is a factor witnessed in the third world immigrants who move from the parochial society which imposes sexual taboos to a liberal Western World which is not infested with such inhibitions.” (Asha Choubey, 231). The process of adjustment in this respect bears before the immigrant, the narrowness of his native background, to combat which he indulges in sexual excesses. Willie Chandran is a man doomed to live under a shadow. His cultural background and his awareness of his incompleteness have bred inhibition. Willie may hide himself by projecting a false ancestry but he cannot kill his reality and at all crucial moments his background and his half-ness become apparent and give him away. His sexual frustrations are not his own, they are the frustrations of a society, of a race and of a culture.

Willie and Alvaro after crossing many villages reached the night markets. There many young African girls were dancing and selling their lives. After enjoyment Willie always degraded or insulted his parents in his heart. The following words reveal his thoughts : “I thought of my mother and I thought of my poor father who had hardly known what sex was” (185).

At last they went to the place Alvaro had been looking for. It was a place with facilities for sex. It was a big warehouse like a building. At the ware house the girls were abusing their own bodies and darkening their lives. Some kind of spirit was locked up in every girl. Willie was touched by a girl, and went after her. In the ware house he began to have an idea that there was something in the African heart that was shut away from the rest of them, and beyond politics.

Willie had found less and less pleasure in the places of pleasure. The main reason was that the act of sex there, which used to excite him with its directness and brutality, had grown mechanical. He gave himself none at all. So he was more restless and dissatisfied.

Carla found a new manager for her estate who was called Luis, and his wife Graca. Graca was a convent school friend of Carla. At a special Sunday lunch Willie happened to see Graca. Her eyes attracted him so much. In his own words, he confesses : “Those eyes had looked at me in a way that no woman had looked at me before.” (198). He met her again two weeks later at a patriotic occasion. There were more than a hundred people in the room. When the programme was going on, all the time he was thinking of Graca. Accidentally he met her alone. Willie asked her to meet him later. Though Willie had past experience in sex, again he was dragged by his own desires with Graca. He enjoyed the affair with Graca. In his own words he describes how he was captured by sex:

“How terrible it would have been if I had died without knowing this depth of satisfaction, this other person that I had just discovered within myself. It was worth any price, any consequence” (205).

Willie began to arrange his life around Graca. He didn’t care who noticed. With one part of his mind he was amazed at himself. Willie lost his shame. Graca shared her family problems and her childhood with

Willie. When Graca went with any other person, Willie became jealous. She had lovers in her past life. In fact he had never known jealousy before.

The psychological damage is obvious. Ana helps Willie to get over it. Some other African women he makes love to when he is in Mozambique make him feel even better. Coetzee points out : “Willie’s adventures in Africa are mainly sexual, he begins to visit African prostitutes, and many of them, by Western standards, children ... with uncharacteristic compassion, and his thoughts go to his parents in benighted India, to “my poor father and mother who had known nothing like this moment.” (Amitava Kumar, 126).

A few years he felt himself helpless in this life of sensation. With fear of God he started respecting the religious outlawing of sexual extremes. Ana has heard about the relationship between Willie and Graca. When Ana questioned Willie, he said it was true.

Coetzee states that “the freedom to go against orthodoxy is consistent with Naipaul’s ultimate position towards his own colonial past, namely that just because he is descended from indentured Indian plantation workers he cannot be locked forever into postures of victimhood.” (Amitava Kumar, 119). The other point brought home is that wherever on this globe one dwells, one has to lead a life and make it as unencumbered and uninhibited as possible, sexuality too being a part of it.

Carla had sold her estate to a big property company in Portugal. So Luis and Graca were going to be on the move again. The property company wanted the estate house for their own directors when they came out on a tour. The company apparently believed that the colonial order and colonial style were going to continue after the war. But things were not all bad for Luis and Graca. The company wanted Luis to continue to stay on as the estate manager.

In order to build a separate house for Luis an architect had come from ‘Portugal called Gouveia. At this time the war commences. Great events in the life of the colony, the final rites, happened at a distance. The colonial government in the capital closed down. The guerrillas took over. The Portuguese population began to leave. The army withdrew from the town. People had died, but the army hadn’t really wished to fight this African war. The war was like a distant game. It was as though the army, with some political purpose, had colluded with the guerrillas.

In due course of time the new government put together a kind administration. The great hardship was over but just at this time there were rumours of a new tribal war. Willie didn’t think he could live through another war. He could see that it would have a point for Ana. For some weeks he was perplexed. He didn’t know what to do. Even he didn’t have the courage to tell Ana. It was the rainy season. He slipped and fell heavily. He was admitted in the run-down military hospital in the town, the physical pain of his damaged body was like the other pain that had been with him for months and perhaps for years.

Loss of identity is an inevitable evil of colonization which afflicts both sides, the colonizer as well as the colonized. Willie comes to know this plain truth in time and decides to call it a day. For years he has allowed himself to become easy victim to slippery substances. But on a rainy day when he slips after having spent eighteen years in Africa, he comes to realise that at forty-one, it’s high time to stop making a fool himself. He wants to emerge out of the shadow of the image of ‘Ana’s London man’ which was thrust on him without his knowledge. He is resolved that there are not going to be any more slips for him. Resolutely he tells Ana :

“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*, 136).

Ana is in the same boat and she knows the agony too well. She has herself been leading a borrowed life. She tells Willie, “Perhaps, it wasn’t really my life either.” (128). Ana started thinking, when Willie had no idea where to go after the completion of his studies she became intimate with him. Indeed Willie had a great gratitude towards Ana, without her he was not a complete being. Willie decided to leave Ana, because he was tired and somehow vexed.

Ana asked him whether he was afraid of the new war. Willie expressed his deep love and affection for Ana. Even the last words of Willie to Ana remind of her goodness and his gratitude to her :

“I know. You did everything for me. You made it easy for me here. I couldn’t have lived here without you. 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 afloat. But now the best part of my life has gone, and I’ve done nothing” (227).

Naipaul shows an anti-black bias in *Half a Life*, a profound understanding of one part of the African way of life. Willie fares much better in Africa than he does in London. In a larger sense the novel points to innumerable predicaments of various half and half people and of people uprooted from a way of life on account of factors 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. The major strength of *Half a Life* is that it shows a much better understanding of the attitudes to sex characteristic of the non-Indian Black and the mixed-race people in areas where they and Indians live in close proximity.

The novel ends in the middle, and the recent novel *Magic Seeds* (2004) continues Willie’s story. James Wood in *The New Statesman* gave a beautiful compliment on this novel, “*Half a Life* confirming Naipaul’s stature as the greatest living analyst of the colonial and Post-colonial dilemma. In the simplest possible prose, in sentences dried down to pure duty, this novel unfolds its compelling, story.” *Half a Life* thus, shows up as a novel of surpassing emotional conflict, agony of separation and pathos of yearning for what is lost.

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