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A SAGA IN SEARCH OF COMPLETENESS: A STUDY OF V.S NAIPAUL'S 'HALF A LIFE'

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ABSTRACT

"I am the sum of my books," said V.S.Naipaul in the Nobel acceptance speech on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2001 and went on to add, "Each book, intuitively worked out, stands on what has gone before and grows out of it. I feel that at any stage of my literary career it could have been said that the last book contained all the others"(Two Worlds 5). He received the prestigious Noble Prize after publishing his *Half a Life* book.

The present paper aims at a study of V.S.Naipaul's novel 'Half a Life', in which he has gone over his familiar domain—people of mixed descent in three countries- India, England and Mozambique- struggling to find their identities. It is a beautiful work of Naipaul about half-developed societies. It analyses the pangs of the exiles, their living a half-life, their sense of alienation, and their cultural traditions. The novel is partly autobiographical and describes the story of a man who goes to England from India on a scholarship and feels alienated there. Almost all the characters struggle for existence but fail to find perfection or completeness.

**Key Words:** Half-developed Societies, Exiles, Alienation, Completeness

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V.S. Naipaul as an expatriate writer occupies a unique position on the facade of world literature. He has won many literary awards including the Nobel prize for his eminence as a writer of world status. He examines human situation and suggests the complexity of human experience. Although he starts with Trinidad as the background of his stories, what he ultimately depicts is the universal human predicament. It is his lack of tradition that gives him intellectual freedom and makes him present a realistic picture which sounds harsh at times. His protagonists make a quest for self-knowledge and identity. Throughout his writing career Naipaul insists to aim at "truth to his own experience."

Much of Naipaul's writing, both his fiction and non-fiction, draws our attention on the autobiographical material to furnish overlapping accounts of his life. Half-a-Life is partly autobiographical in nature where it delineates the traumas of a tainted and troubled past, of attempting to find some meaning and purpose of life. As said by Naipaul, 'This novel describes the feelings of exile, their sense of rootlessness and cultures. In the words of Maggie Ball,

"Half a Life has been over eight years in the making and combines

many of the traditional Naipaul themes such as cultural alienation, the concept of national literature, how we define ourselves with an unusual narrative structure.”(3)

The novel is divided into three parts – One: A visit from Somerset Maugham, Two: The First Chapter and Three: A Second Translation. The story comes to us moving through three different settings--- India, London and Portuguese Africa and three different eras and told by three narrators. The first part of the story is told to Willie Chandran by his father. His father’s name is not mentioned anywhere in the novel except as Willie’s father. The second part of the story is told by the omniscient narrator – the author, and the third part of the story contains Willie’s life in Africa and recounted by him to his sister.

Willie Chandran’s father, an idler student of B.A. at the university, had no interest in literature, hears the call of Mahatma “for student to boycott their university,” ultimately decides to sacrifice his life and joins Mahatma’s call. To get Mahatma’s favour and to turn his back on his ancestry; he lives with a backward caste girl. When his father came to know about his ideas of sacrifices and his refusal to marry the daughter of the Principal of ‘Maharaja College,’ he says “you have blackened all our faces and now we will have to face the anger of the school Principal. You have dishonoured his daughter.” (Naipaul 24). Though he had not touched either of them and had not gone through any form of ceremony with either of them, there were two women whom he had dishonoured. As result of not marrying with daughter of the Principal, he is charged with corruption and forced to leave the job of Maharaja’s Land Tax Department. And finally he takes shelter in the courtyard of the temple. He declared himself a mendicant to the temple priests and claimed sanctuary. Even as he takes the vow of sexual abstinence, a vow of ‘brahmacharya’, he fathers a son and a daughter in quick succession. The son’s name is Willie Somerset Chandran, the middle name taken from the visit by the famous English writer Somerset Maugham to his ashram during the period of taking up ‘Vow of Silence’. He chooses the name Sarojini to his daughter, after the woman poet of the independence movement, in the hope that a similar blessing might fall on her and for whom he wished an international marriage.

“This Pantomime of high intention and pathos subsumes the story of Willie Chandran’s father’s life; his stints in the Maharaja’s Land Tax Department, his refuge in melancholy and his eventual career as a bogus holy man. Curiously it stands Naipaul’s own most poignant story on its head the story of his first father’s ambition and failure” (Soma Hindustan Times)

From this story one is reminded of the scenes in *The Guide* by R.K.Narayan where the protagonist becomes popular mendicant by chance. It can also be alluded to stories of fake pundits in Naipaul’s early works like ‘The Mystic Masseur’, where Ganesh, the sincere school teacher, degenerates into a fake pundit whose lucky cure of a paranoiac enables him to practice sham politics. Willie’s father, a sincere follower of Gandhiji’s principles becomes a fake mendicant to protect himself from the threat of his customs, parents, the principal and the fire brand uncle of his wife.

Willie was born to a low caste woman and high caste man, in an undefined place in pre-determined India and sets out on a journey of life. The ridiculousness of the significance ordinary men attach to their own lives is another topic dear to Naipaul, and that forms the second part of the story. In the Mission School when the teacher asked a question, “what does your father do?” he felt ashamed and irritated. From that day Willie began to despise his father. The more successful he became at school, the distance between him and his parents grew greater. He longed to go to Canada, where his teachers came from and even began to think to adopt their religion. Both Willie and Sarojini face a hostile and confused Mission School environment and family atmosphere that make their future uncertain. Willie obtains a scholarship to a college of ‘education for mature students in London, with the help from one of his father’s contacts. In England, he starts playing with words and remade himself. Percy Cato, a Jamaican of mixed parentage in the same college becomes Willie’s guide o he city. He starts writing some short stories, modelled on the borrowings from ‘Old Hollywood Movies’. But his book was dismissed by the reviewers as a ‘nondescript savoury’. Willie fails to establish himself as a writer: “Let the book die. Let it fade away. Let me not be reminded of it. I will write no more.” (Naipaul 123). Only two persons admire this book. One is Roger and another is Ana from an African country

who is dwelling in London as a student. He suffers from alienation and emptiness in being in Metropolis, 'a sense of being without history or understanding, the difficulty a writer from the colonies faces in finding material and his shocking sexual encounters. The most intoxicating thing about his love with Ana was that for the first time in his life he felt himself in the presence of someone who accepted him completely. At home his life had been ruled by his mixed inheritance and it has spoiled everything. He was in an impression that his travel with her, to her home in a Portuguese Africa, might bring him the fulfilment he so desperately seeks.

The eighteen years of Willie's life with Ana in Africa recounted by him to his sister Sarojini forms the third and final part of the story. At Ana's estate house in Africa, Willie feels like a stranger but draws sustenance from Ana: 'It may be because of something in culture, Willie reflects that in spite of appearances, men are really looking for women to lean on.' (Naipaul 141). And further, Ana was important for me because I depend on her for my idea of sex, a new idea of his capacity. But he does look beyond Ana for satisfaction. He betrays Ana and begins to visit African prostitutes. Coetzee sums up: 'Willie's adventures in Africa are mainly sexual. Willie's visits to the 'places of pleasures' cease to give him any real pleasures now and the excitement which he used to have, had grown mechanical.'(195)

Willie gets disgusted and perplexed with the breakdown of Post-Independence Civil War in Africa. He longs to go away from that place. He slips one day on the front steps of Ana's estate house and becomes unconscious. He wakes up later to find himself in the military hospital in the town among wounded black soldiers with shining faces and tired red eyes. When Ana comes to see him in the hospital, Willie tells her that he is going to leave her: 'I have given you eighteen years, I can't give you anymore. I can't live your life anymore; I want to live my own' (Naipaul 136). When Ana proposes that they should go to Portugal, Willie replies: "Even if they let me in there, it would be still your life. I have been hiding for too long." (Naipaul 227). And Ana's assertion, 'Perhaps it wasn't really my life either suggests that even those who seem to be living their own lives don't really have more of a personal life than 'half a life'.

Thus Willie, uprooted from his own culture, cannot get any permanent fulfilment anywhere. He fails to adjust anywhere he leaves Ana, leaves Africa and thus arrives in Berlin, at his sister's house. Not only Willie and Ana are portrayed as exiles living a half a life but even some other minor characters are found to be living 'half-life'. Sarojini, Willie's sister is married to an Old German Man. When Willie meets his sister Sarojini in Berlin, he asks about her husband. She simply says, "He's with his other family" (Naipaul 137). He understands that she is also leading the life of an exile. Willie's friend Percy Cato too is leading a half-life and has no proper place to stay. Willie and Percy Cato belong to the same background. Greca and her husband also lead a half-life. They move from town to town, house to house and job to job. It was difficult to establish himself as "The local rich people controlled everything and didn't allow the poor man to live" (Naipaul 209). Almost all the characters struggle for existence but fail to find perfection or completeness. Our origins always remain with us. The bonds of tradition are too steely to break. The exploration of one man's struggle to learn to live and love is convinced through the story of Willie. His life story of the first forty one years living in exile seems to suggest that man's search for wholeness is only half-successful. In the words of Maggie Ball,

"The displacement of the novel's characters, from Willie through to the other exiles he comes into contact with, and how they manage this disappointment forms the tension in the story"(2).

V.S.Naipaul speaks the truth without malice. There is honesty in his writings. He always writes about real things because he believes that the writer should not have any secret. Naipaul feels agony in half-developed societies and pines for 'Utopia'. But it is impossible to have completeness. Naipaul calls himself a man without a country and an outsider who is in search of roots. He writes clearly about societies not because he is against any country or religion in particular but against 'Avidya' in general. He wants to see a complete and developed society. *Half a Life* confirms Naipaul's stature as the greatest living analyst of the Colonial and Post-Colonial world. The novel shows that a man may pick up ways and habits of better civilized societies but his own background forms a base of all his growth and achievement in later life. One can find fulfilment only in his own culture. In the words of Patrick Marnham,

“In Half a Life Naipaul remains constant to himself, awkward and uncompromising, succeeding where few novelists, venture to go--And once again demonstrating his ability to raise the failed lives of his characters to the tragic dimension by reference to public issues and universal truths”(123).

The novel is a devastating work of exceptional sensitivity, grace and humour. In its depiction of love fulfilled and thwarted, in its vision of the half-lives quietly lived out at the centre of our restless world. The novel brings its own unique illumination to another aspect of our shared humanity”. The language of the book has dignified simplicity. It has its own style. Unaffected by literary fashion and models, he has wrought existing genres into a style of his own in which customary distinctions between fiction and non-fiction are of subordinate importance.

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