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ALIENATION, ROOTLESSNESS AND CRISIS OF IDENTITY IN VS NAIPAUL'S *HALF A LIFE*

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ABSTRACT

In the postcolonial period, displacement of people as a result of transcontinental migration creates new cultural alignments which challenge the notions of a stable, rooted and fixed identity. Postmodern and postcolonial concepts of identity undermine the notion of unity, fixity and stability by approaches which stress the unstable and hybrid nature of all identity constructions. Identity cannot be restricted to one particular thing or one particular set of values. Postcolonial theory conceives of identity as a process of negotiation, and of articulation. In the postcolonial world, dislocation, rootlessness and decentered experiences of displaced individuals lead to a crisis of identity. This paper attempts to explore representation of postcolonial identity in V.S. Naipaul's novel *Half a Life*. The work deals with the dilemma of uprooted individuals and their struggle to discover their identities in a multi-dimensional socio-cultural environment. The novel records Willie Somerset Chandran's exiled life in a multicultural society and his search for self-knowledge. In the novel, the displaced subjects who lead half life as exiles are positioned at *in-between* spaces that lead to identity crisis and alienation.

Keywords: Identity, alienation, displacement, exile

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Different disciplines have addressed the issue of identity in various ways. In the traditional discourse, identity is conceived as something fixed, stable and unproblematic. This notion of identity has changed over time and its fixity, authenticity and unproblematic nature has been questioned. Identity has been a major issue in the discourse of both modernity and postmodernity. Metanarratives of modernity aim to "define a generic human nature and destiny without taking into account the individual, the particular, the local, the different, the Other" (Dumitrescu 2001:11). Through its self-sufficient and totalizing perspective, modernity formulates the Other without actually addressing its specificities. The notion of the human subject as unified and rational is made possible only by leaving out the presence of other discourses of power. In

the work *The Postmodern Condition* French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard defines the postmodern condition as one of disillusionment with the metanarratives. The postmodern emphasis on plurality, heterogeneity and indeterminacy stands as a challenge to the power of the grand narratives. Postmodernism rejects the notion of the unified and coherent human subject, and favours "a reevaluation of Otherness under its numberless manifestations" (Dumitrescu 2001:11). So, identity is no longer viewed as monolithic and stable, but rather as displaced, hybrid and continually shifting.

In the postcolonial period, massive increase in migrations, both within and between continents, produces new cultural alignments that problematize the notion of 'essential', stable identity. Identity becomes a process of negotiation, and of

articulation, wherein interrogation of self/other binary destabilizes ideas of 'original' identity. The self is not a finished product. It is always in a constant flux. "The unity, the internal homogeneity, which the term identity treats as foundational is not a natural, but a constructed form of closure..." (Hall 2003: 18). Identity is relational; not absolute. It undergoes a constant process of change. "It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture" (Hall 2006: 435). Identity is not something fixed or monolithic. "Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past... identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (Hall 2006: 435). Identity is always in progress, fluctuating between differences. This fluctuation posits identity in an *in-between* space. In the postcolonial world, new approaches to culture and identity emerge as a result of multiple displacements and cultural alignments. As Edward Said has said:

No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. (Said 1994: 407)

As a postcolonial expatriate writer, the works of VS Naipaul focusses on the themes of dislocation, fragmentation, exile, displaced histories, enigma of decentered experiences and quest for identity in a postcolonial world. In the novel *Half a Life* Naipaul deals with the dilemma of uprooted individuals and their struggle to discover their identities. The novel recounts the life of Willie Somerset Chandran, his quest for identity, his experiences and his realization of halfness in life in multi-dimensional socio-cultural environment. The novel records Willie's exiled life in a multicultural society and his search for self-knowledge. Willie's search for a stable identity takes him across three countries - India, England and Africa. The first part of the novel is set in post-independent India. The second part constitutes Willie's struggle for existence in London and the third section is set in Africa.

The novel opens with the words, "WILLIE CHANDRAN asked his father one day, 'Why is my

middle name Somerset? The boys at school have just found out and they are mocking me'" (1) Willie's query about his middle name unfolds before him the paradoxical nature of his existence- the complicated picture which relates to his family history, cultural heritage and roots. The revelation of history instils a sense of shame in him. Willie's father studied at the university and had English education which he decided to give up 'in response to the Mahatma's call.' (2) By marrying a low caste woman he also revolted against his family tradition and decided to sacrifice himself,--'a lasting kind of sacrifice, something the mahatma would have approved of.'(10) But it is ironical that "he who begins his self discovery with his revolt against his ancestry is forced by the very centre of his revolt towards taking sanctuary in the very tradition he abhorred" (Choubey 2002: 171). He tells Willie:

I began to think of taking sanctuary in the famous old temple in the town. Like my grandfather. At this moment of supreme sacrifice I fell, as if by instinct, into old ways. (26)

On the other hand, Willie is stuck in a conflict between his father from a Brahmin family and his low caste mother. Willie's ethnic identity is hybrid because he is the son of a high caste Brahmin and a low caste mother. Besides, Willie's middle name Somerset which is borrowed from the famous writer Somerset Maugham also leads to a crisis of identity, as; Willie cannot possess a western identity simply by possessing a western name.

Willie's mother had studied at the mission school and she sent her son Willie and daughter Sarojini to study there. Willie longed to go to Canada, where his teachers came from. He even thought of adopting their religion and "become like them and travel the world teaching." (39) When Willie was asked to write an English 'composition' about his holidays "he pretended he was a Canadian, with parents who were called 'Mom' and 'Pop'" (39)

All the details of this foreign life- the upstairs house, the children's room- had been taken from American comic books which had been circulating in the mission school. These details had been mixed up with local details,

like the holiday clothes and the holiday sweets, some of which Mom and Pop had at one stage out of their own great content given to half naked beggars. This composition was awarded full marks, ten out of ten, and Willie was asked to read it out to the class. (40)

To flee from the present circumstances and also to redefine himself Willie went to London "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 he had seen at the mission school..." (51) But ironically, London disillusioned him. He failed to obtain a place of his own in London. The education he was getting there could not provide him a sense of completeness. "He was unanchored, with no idea of what lay ahead. He still had no idea of the scale of things, no idea of historical time or even of distance." (58)

At the college Willie had to "re-learn everything that he knew. He had to learn how to eat in public" (58-59). He loses not only his native cultural heritage but also his sense of place. He identifies neither with his original homeland nor with the new world. Willie tries to adjust there by re-making himself and his past. "By re-making himself intentionally, Willie invents or recreates a myth of origin centered on his family's history in an attempt to gain acceptability and to manage his developing new world" (Colon 2005: 173). In search of his identity in a strange place Willie projects a make-believe identity through fictional recreations of his past.

...he adapted certain things he had read, and he spoke of his mother as belonging to an ancient Christian community of the subcontinent, a community almost as old as Christianity itself. He kept his father as a brahmin. He made his father's father 'courtier'. So, playing with words, he began to remake himself. It excited him, and began to give him a feeling of power. (61)

In London, Willie comes close to a few people who are leading half life as exiles. One of them was Percy Cato who was "a Jamaican of mixed parentage

and was more brown than black" (61). Like Willie, Percy was ashamed of his background and he "appeared to have no proper place in the world and could be both Negro and not Negro in his ways" (62). When Percy tells Willie that his father went to work on the Panama Canal as a clerk, Willie thought that he was lying:

That's a foolish story. His father went there as a labourer. He would have been in one of the gangs, holding his pickaxe before him on the ground, like the others, and looking obediently at the photographer. (62)

As a youth, Willie failed to understand his father's dilemma. But, his struggle in London helped him to come close to reality. Willie's experience in London helped him to see his father in the proper perspective.

I used to think that the world was easy for him as a Brahmin and that he became a fraud out of idleness. Now I began to understand how hard the world must have been for him. (58)

After the release of his book of stories Willie receives a letter from Ana, a mixed race young girl from a Portuguese African country, who has admired his writing. In the company of the girl Willie feels like a complete man.

She behaved as though she had always known him, and had always liked him...And what was most intoxicating for Willie 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. It spoilt everything. (125)

Willie was completely overwhelmed by "her voice, her accent, her hesitations over certain English words, her beautiful skin, the authority with which she handled money." (126) It was Ana's halfness that brings Willie closer to her: "It was possible that she belonged to a mixed community or stood in some other kind of half-and-half position" (124).

Ana takes Willie to her estate house in Africa where he found himself alienated just as in India and London. He felt estranged from Ana, and visited African prostitutes. After spending eighteen years

there, he told Ana that he couldn't continue living with her. Willie was brought face to face with his own passivity, and he tells Ana that he is leaving. "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." (136) he says. His life in Africa did not help him to overcome the sense of being unanchored and he came to this realization: "I have been hiding from myself. I have risked nothing. And now the best part of my life is over" (138).

Willie is constantly drifting from India through London to Africa to construct his own identity. But his life in London and Africa could not provide him the sense of belongingness and a stable identity. In Africa, Willie remains a stranger, just as in India and London. Besides, the loss of his native language due to his migration aggravates his sense of alienation. In London, he learns to handle English well, but in Africa, Willie has to communicate in another language. During his journey from Southampton to Ana's African country, Willie is confused whether he would be able to hold on to his own language.

He thought about the new language he 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, the language of his stories.... 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)

Willie feels alienated from the environment in Africa, and swears to himself that he will leave as soon as possible. "I must never behave as though I am staying", (135) he tells himself. But, despite initial reluctance he stays there for eighteen years. In Africa, Willie comes across 'second rank Portuguese' (145): estate owners who are mixed-race people, since 'most of them have an African grandparent' (145). In his attempt to assimilate in the new environment, Willie is divided within himself. His travels bring him into contact with many people who are leading half lives as exiles. Ana also "looks like an extension of Willie's own

existence, mirroring his own sense of being on the outside of life" (Nayak 2005: 258). Willie gradually moves towards the realization that:

...the World I had entered was only half – and – half world, that many of the people who were our friends considered themselves, deep down, people of the second rank. (160)

In the novel, the displaced subjects who lead half life as exiles are divided between cultures. Reflecting on the dilemmas and plights of exile Edward W Said (2006) comments that "exile is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (439). The state of exile does not simply indicate physical displacement. It is also disintegrating in its effect on the mind and spirit. Edward Said (2006) further says:

Exile is life led outside habitual order. It is nomadic, decentred, contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew. (442)

Exile is not just about the social conditions that separate people from their homelands but various states of being unanchored that results from different forms of displacement and alienation. Therefore, "the social relations of exile and the forms of consciousness they give rise resist capture by empirical generalizations and lead into more subtle theoretical and philosophical terrains" (Gimenez 2003). A confined political view of exile does not help to understand fully the experiences of millions of displaced people, uprooted workers, peasants etc. Likewise, a purely universalizing concept of exile cannot fully address its social and historical specificities which Edward Said also points out. So, exile is both a particular phenomenon and a "universal phenomena that captures, in a powerful metaphor, the psychological and emotional effects of loss of that which anchors individuals in space, both literally and figuratively" (Gimenez 2003).

Half a Life captures the tragedy of displacement of exiles and the half life they lead. From India Willie had come to Britain in search of stability, an anchor but failing to find it he decides to move to Ana's African country. But his drifting away from one place to another did not help him to shed the sense of alienation and exile. In Willie's case,

locational changes did not relieve him from the anxiety of being unanchored, the state of being dispossessed.

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