

**SELF- ALIENATION IN V.S. NAIPAL'S
HALF A LIFE: A STUDY**

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Abstract

Man's reality is his real self and the meaning of self - alienation is the alienation from this real-self. V.S. Naipaul's *Half a Life* illustrates self - alienation through the protagonist. The protagonist of the novel *Half a Life*, Willie Somerset Chandran describes his quest for self-identity. Naipaul skillfully delineates the protagonist Willie's dilemma, his concern and need for self-existence in the novel. He sacrifices his native values. Several insulting incidents happened to him in England. He had to suffer the typical isolation abroad. When he was very far from his homeland he suffered from neurotic anxiety, isolation and depression. Throughout the novel Willie moves from one place to other without a concrete and considerable survival. He cannot achieve a permanent identity because of his multi-cultural background. Willie moves here and there in search of the real identity. In the process of seeking his identity Willie Chandran undergoes self-alienation and this paper attempts to analyze how and why the protagonist is isolated from his self-society and the world at large.

Keywords: Identity, alienation, isolation, self-existence, depression and multi-cultural background.

The Dictionary of Literary terms defined Alienation as "the state of being alienated or estranged from something or somebody; it is a condition of the mind". Encyclopedia Britannica defines it as "the state of feeling estranged or separated from one's milieu, work, products of work or self". Similarly, in the words of Erich Fromm "alienation is the process of feeling in which anyone feels alienated from self" (*Sane Society*, 17). Man's reality is his real self and the meaning of self - alienation is the alienation from this real-self. He remarks that the situation of self - alienation arises when a man makes an ideal-image of himself in his mind that is other than his real-self. There exists a gap between his idealised image and his real- self. Even the pride in

one's respectability alienates a man from his unsavoury past (*Our Inner Conflicts*,66). According to Taviss, Self- Alienation means the loss of contact of the individual selves with any inclinations or desires that are not agreement with the prevailing social patterns, as a result of which the individuals are forced to manipulate in accordance with the social demands or feel incapable of controlling their actions (*Changes in the form of Alienation* 34)

Naipaul's *Half a Life* illustrates self - alienation through the protagonist. It highlights all of Naipaul's thematic concerns like search for identity, cultural dislocation, isolation and alienation. The novel presents the struggle and conflicts of inhabitants surviving in different countries. Naipaul being an Indian has used his own experiences and diasporic sensibility. Naipaul explains his concept of multi-cultural identity in an interview with Bernard Levin "I don't think any of us can claim that we come from one single world. We are little bombarded cells, aren't we? Many things occur to make us what we are and we can surely live with all things that make us" (*A Perpetual Voyager* 98).

The protagonist of the novel *Half a Life*, Willie Somerset Chandran describes his quest for self-identity. Naipaul skillfully delineates the protagonist Willie's dilemma, his concern and need for self-existence in the novel. He sacrifices his native values. He even finds name changed in his life. Several insulting incidents happened to him in England. He had to suffer the typical isolation abroad. When he was very far from his homeland he suffered from neurotic anxiety, isolation and depression. The first thirty five pages of the novel consist of Willie's father's life story, the next hundred and two pages are a record of Willie's struggle for existence in London and the remaining page delineate his life in Africa.

In the beginning of the novel *Half a Life* we can see that the character Willie Chandran is searching for his ancestry which is the main theme of the novel. The story begins with young Willie's simple question to his father "Why is my middle name Somerset?" He says that the bossy at school have just made out and they are mocking at me. (*Half a Life* 1)

This statement is a satire on Willie's existence and his half life in the half made society. He has come to know the reality about his family history culture, heritage and roots from his father's story. His father tells him that half of his name does not belong to him; it is borrowed from name gives a clue that he possess a Christian identity, on the other hand his surname indicates his mixed ancestry. Thus Willie possesses a half identity which makes him incomplete as he faces this incompleteness right through the story. The statement reveals his father's purpose for making him White, so he gave him half a white man's name to his son. So it is clear that Naipaul tries to indicate the impact of the colonizers on the colonized but it destructs the real identity of a person and makes him an isolated soul.

Throughout the novel Willie moves from one place to other without a concrete and considerable survival. He cannot achieve a permanent identity because of his multi cultural background. It can be said that Willie seems to be the shadow of Naipaul himself as he has also a multi-cultural background and has not a fixed identity. Willie moves here and there in search of the real identity.

Willie's father was a Brahmin but was married to a low caste woman so Willie thinks himself that he is half Brahmin and half untouchable so his contradiction with self begins in his

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childhood. He was fully shameful on his condition because he couldn't accept the discrimination. He begins to hate his parents more particularly to his father and a sense of isolation makes him a traveler. His father soon grasps that his son is suffering from sense of isolation and thinks of saving him by providing freedom which would help him to expand his view about life style. He thinks,

I used to think that you were me and I was worried at what I had done to you. But now I know that you are not me. What is in my head is not in yours. You are somebody else, somebody, I don't know and I worry for you because you are launched on a journey I know nothing of. (*Half a Life* 49)

In the fifties Willie goes to London to discover his real identity so he leaves his native land to get education and earn his livelihood but surprisingly he has to lose so many things instead, like loss of identity, loss of human relation etc. His conscience is pre occupied with the thought of getting success but unconsciously he is uprooted from his cultural existence. He faces many problems to get his English education at school.

The learning he was being given was like the food he was eating, without savor, the two were inseparable in my mind. And just as he ate without pleasure, so with a kind of blindness, he did what the lecturers and tutors asked of him read the books and articles and did the essay. He was unanchored, with no idea of what lay ahead. (*Half a Life* 58)

Willie confronts the same situation in England. Though Willie goes to London in search of his identity where he faces the reality and accepts the harsh fact that he does not need to munieer. He tries to adjust in a new kind of life which is also not of his own and begins to lead his life with the false identity:

He adapted certain things he had read and he spoke of his father as belonging to an ancient Christina 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 a courier. So playing with words, he began to remake himself. It excited him and began to give him a feeling of power. (*Half a Life* 61)

Willie comes to know about the ground reality of those persons who have left from their customs, and civilization. Naipaul has given very real picture of the place and condition of Willie. A number of insulting events happened to him. He suffers the typical isolation in a foreign country. In London he can find no way of forming relationships on his own. Whatever joys and freedom he experiences here is incomplete. Even the girls he comes to contact are not his friends but the beloved of his own friends. He blames his problem on his upbringing

If I stay here I would always be trying to make love to my friend's girl friends. I have discovered that is quite an easy thing to do. But I know it is wrong, and it would get me into trouble one day. The trouble is I don't know how to go out and get girl on my own. No one trained me in that. All men should train their sons in the art of education. But in our culture there is no seduction. Our marriages are arranged. (*Half a Life* 70)

Willie thinks that he can make his own identity unreservedly and he begin to understand

that he is free to present himself as he wished. His life becomes worthless when he finds that he has nothing in this world to live for. He starts believing that he is alone and found himself in acute neurotic anxiety. He experiences the racial prejudices; the victim of this foxing hostility of the west towards the East. People go to abroad for getting money, power and prosperity and they achieve it but in return they fail to achieve the peace, pleasure and satisfaction. In England after getting tired by leading a life of false identity Willie decides to find out his own identity. At this point he finds himself in confusion. He does not know where he goes. He fails to see his future in London when he completes his studies so he decides to go to Africa with his lover Ana, the first woman, who admired his writings. He decides to marry Ana who has also a multi-cultural background. Willie decides to go to Africa with Ana to achieve his own self. But once again he proves to be wrong in his decision to settle in Africa. His condition becomes even worse in this African country where he expected to belong. He has to face the same problem in this country as he has faced in London. He remains a stranger and unknown in this new land. In this situation he thinks “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 that I am staying” (*Half a Life* 135).

Willie suffers from the same problems which he has seen in London. He says that in London people know him by his own name that is Willie but in Africa people address him as ‘Ana’s London Man’. In this condition he feels that he has lost his identity. Being educated in London he manages English well. But now in Africa he has to learn a new language to adjust there. The loss of language indicates his loss of existence in this new land. Willie once again finds himself in a predicament.

He thought about the new language he would have to learn. He wondered whether he would be able to hold into 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. (*Half a Life* 132)

Willie feels more alienated in Africa in comparison to London, he leads eighteen years of his life in Africa in search of his identity. He realizes his failure and thinks that he has achieved nothing worthwhile in Africa. This self-realization forces him to get back the time he has wasted. And finally he again takes a decision of his life, to leave Ana with the expectation of finding his true existence and his lost name and identity that is Willie, not Ana’s English man “I mean I’ve given you eighteen years. I can’t give you any more. I can’t live your life anymore. I want to live my own. It was your idea, Willie. And if you leave, where will you go? I don’t know. But I must stop living your life here” (*Half a Life* 136).

Willie leaves Africa and decides to go to Germany where his sister Sarojini lives. There he sees several Tamil boys playing on the street and manages to see the signs of his character in them. They are of another generation, but Willie sees himself in them. He reflects, “That was show I appeared in London. I am not as alone as I thought”. Then he says “But I am wrong. I am not like them. I am forty-one in middle life” They are fifteen or twenty years younger and the world has changed. They have proclaimed who they are and they are risking everything for it. I have been hiding for myself. I have risked nothing. And now the best part of my life is over” (*Half a Life* 138).

Willie's statement that now the best part of my life is over indicates the time he has passed in London and Africa and he has achieved nothing. The time which he has wasted in the search of his identity he might have used it in a better way. Thus the novel concludes with the self-realization of Willie.

Willie, the Indian immigrant cannot identify himself either with his previous land or his new land. With *Half as Life*, Naipaul has succeeded in his depiction of society's perception of race and identity and also Willie's failure. Willie is not a particularly interesting character, but he is endearing and universal.

After listening to the story of wretchedness and self-disgust of his father, Willie expresses his hatred towards him "I despise you what is there for me in what you have said? You offer me nothing". (*Half a Life* 35). However, Chandran would argue "It has been a life of sacrifice. I have no riches to offer you. All I have are my friendships. That is my treasure" (*Half a Life* 36). In the context of Sarojini, Chandran said to his son "Her prospects in this country are not bright. But foreigners have their own ideas of beauty and certain other things, and all I can hope for Sarojini is an international marriage" (*Half a Life* 36).

In the first chapter, the novel focuses on the life of Chandran, who actually goes through a series of upheavals in search of identity. In an effort to break with the ancestry through his insistence on marrying a dalit woman by following the ideals set by the Mahatma during the pre-independence period, Chandran had an obsession to be a great man like him. His compelled life of spirituality gave him an identity, which his son now challenges. His grandfather's lineage to the temple life shows us that the man was to undergo starvation till he breaks with it to become a letter writer outside the Maharaja's place. Chandran's father, who continued as a courtier of the Maharaja, was however obsessed with the temple cult. Chandran, who understood his grandfather's rage against the poverty of the Brahmin by sticking to their ancestral profession, wanted to do something by which he could be a free man and live with dignity. Though he studied in the Maharaja's college, he was disillusioned to learn the stereotype mechanical way of learning. That is why he found no interest in learning the romantic poets and other renowned writers who told only lies in their observations. He therefore wanted to do something greater for which he burnt books as a protest against the English education in India. Later on when he joined the service in the Maharaja's Tax Department, he was also frightened to think of leading such a life of servility to work in the office throughout his life. It was very much frightening on his part for which he was not working like others. He did not even want to marry the Principal's daughter for which he was framed with the charges of corruption. Finally, he kept away from power and also led a life of sacrifice under confusion, compulsion and disillusion.

Though he could establish his identity as a spiritual man, later on Chandran was rather disillusioned to see that Willie, his son was drifting away from his ideals. In the beginning of the second chapter, there is also a reference to both the identities of Chandran and Willie in the question of the Canadian teacher in the mission school "What does your father do?" (*Half a Life* 37). The strange reply of Willie with irritation is also interesting to note "You all know what my father does" (*Half a Life* 37). In the mission school where their mother had been a student, Willie and Sarojini studied. But it was a branded school where backward caste children also read. It was noteworthy that Willie was doing excellent in the composition class by composing stories of inventive nature. However, the father noted that Willie invented stories of lies like Shelley, Wordsworth and others. He thought about his son

“But I have done him nothing. He is not me. He is his mother’s son. All this mom-and-pop business comes from her. She can’t help it. It’s her background. She has these mission school ambitions. Perhaps after a few hundred rebirths she will be more evolved. But she can’t wait like other decent folk. Like so many backwards nowadays, she wants to jump the gun” (*Half a Life 41*).

A week later when Chandran again went through the exercise book of his son, he found another offensive composition against mom and pop. He therefore thought that the boy was “true son of his mother, was challenging him, with all the slyness of a backward, and he wasn’t sure what he should do” (*Half a Life 41*). Remembering the Mahatma’s “Civil disobedience”, he did nothing to the exercise book. Willie, back from school, thought that about his father “Not only is he a fraud but he is also a coward” (*Half a Life 41*). Though Chandran did not discuss anything about the composition with his son, he was rather disturbed. He thought there was something treacherous in the exercise book. He read the next composition in the exercise book titled *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid*. This time he was more disappointed about the attitude of his son “We’ve created a monster. He really hates his mother and his mother’s people, and she doesn’t know. But his mother’s uncle was the firebrand of the backwards. I mustn’t forget that. The boy will poison what remains of my life. I must get him for away from here”. (*Half a Life 43*) Thinking so he told him to pursue his higher education in Benares, Bombay or Calcutta, but Willie insisted that he would go to Canada with the help of the fathers of the Missionary school. He further persuaded his son that he himself led “a life of sacrifice” and did not get his degree, but Willie gets his degree. He did not approve of the missionary idea of his son : “They will turn you into little monkey and send you right back here to work with your mother’s family and other backwards. You are a fool”. A few days later Willie would write a longer composition titled “A life of Sacrifice”. By reading this composition, Chandran was greatly disturbed and thought about Willie

“His mind is diseased. He hates me and he hates his mother, and now he’s turned against himself. This is what the missionaries have done to him with mom and pop and Dick Tracy and the Justice Society of America comic magazine and Christ on the cross movies in Passion Week, and Bogart and Cagney and George Raft the rest of the time. I cannot deal rationality with this kind of hatred. I will deal with it in the ways of the mahatma. I will ignore it. I will keep a vow of silene so far as he is concerned” (*Half a Life 47*).

During his crisis Chandran was practicing this vow of silence. However, two or three weeks later he was to break the silence due to a breakdown of Willie after seeing a picture of a priest with glasses and a wristwatch standing with one foot on a statue of the Buddha. Willie had decided not to go to school, nor even to go to Canada to become a missionary. The boy therefore stopped going to school. Chandran was moved to see his son one day sleeping with his face down with the closed copy of the school edition of *The Vicar of Wakefield* .

There was such unhappiness and such energy there that he was overwhelmed with pity. He thought,

I used to think that you were me and I was worried at what
I had done to yu. But now I know that you are not me.
What is in my head is not yours. You are somebody else,
somebody I don’t know, and I worry for you because
you are launched on a journey I know nothing of (*Half a Life 49*).

This realization of his father was a great compliment to his son. To his father Willie was meant for a special purpose. He therefore wrote to the contact persons abroad whom he helped in India to help him to get a place for his son in some institute. But it was not that easy. Many letters came with no concrete help. Finally, there was a positive response “But he was spared the humiliation of an all-round refusal. There came a letter in a blue envelope from London, from the House of Lords, from a famous man who had paid a brief visit to the ashram just after independence. His fame and his title had made him memorable to Willie Chandran’s father” (*Half a Life* 50). This man wanted to display his power to Willie’s father. It was a letter containing some gold for Willie, “The letter contained a little of the gold the little man had spun a place and a scholarship had been found for Willie Chandran in a college of education for mature students in London” (*Half a Life* 51).

This letter created an opportunity for Willie to go to London. It was therefore the father’s achievement because Chandran had himself assured his son in the early life. But; then, Willie’s father did not know the journey of his son. He did not know what his son’s destiny was, what his identity would be. Even Willie, a boy of twenty, did not know what his London life would bring for him in future.

Naipaul’s fiction combining the accuracy of empirical fact and the objective of psychological insight, furnishes a coherent view of the human predicament in all its paradoxes and contradictions. His fiction is the testament of the desperate faith of a man without ancestors, without traditions, and without a home, seeking to arrive at rest in his mind through the power of art.

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