

Quest for Identity in Diasporic World of V. S. Naipaul's *Half a Life*

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the pursuit of identity in the diaspora in V. S. Naipaul's *Half a Life*. Willie Somerset Chandran desires to establish himself as a writer, but his own father does not like his writing. He receives scholarship to study in London. There, too, he writes books, but he is discouraged by the publishers. Apart from this, he cannot live in London comfortably because of the strange culture and social activities unlike in India, his home country. In the South Africa, he realizes the loss of 18 years without developing his career and goes to live with his sister in Germany. He is in search of identity in the diaspora in different host lands. His mentality is never stable in the foreign lands as he is unsuccessful to maintain a certain identity that he wishes to have. However, his pursuit of identity continues in various host lands despite his failure. In this qualitative research work, the researcher applies the concept of 'identity' in diaspora theory in order to study the quest of identity of the main character Willie Chandran. Various journal articles and books in relation to diaspora, identity and Naipaul's *Half a Life* have been consulted for the support of this research project. This study will certainly be helpful to the further researchers on the particular text and the diaspora theory.

Keywords: alienation, discrimination, homeland, host land, isolation

Introduction

With the development of science and technology, human mobility from one place to another and from one country to another has been wide comfortably. Human desire is not limited and in order to fulfil their interests, they cannot remain in only one place especially their birth place for years. In search of opportunities in order to flourish their career, they go to the cities where modern facilities are available. More importantly, people are leaving their home for abroad as "a multidirectional fluid movement" (Tapan, 2005, p. 9) for study, business, visits, and work for better future. However, life

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in the foreign land is not so easy and comfortable as they expect it to be. They have to go through several hindrances during their career development process in the host land. According to R. Radhakrishnan (1996), people as immigrants “are in a state of alienation from one’s true being, history and heritage” (p. 166) as they face new culture, language, social system, and customs. They cannot use their own language and follow their native cultures. They are bound to try to assimilate themselves with what everything new there. On the other hand, they face discrimination in work places and business centers as they are “partly separate” from “host society” (Cohen, 2008, p. 6). They are paid less and employed for harder jobs than the native people of that particular nation. They have to accept what they are provided with during their stay there. They are obliged to make a lot of hardships in order to survive in the host land. Things and situations they go through make them have nostalgia of their home and home land as S. Rushdie (1992) states, “It’s my present that is foreign, and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in a mists of lost time” (p.9). In isolation, they suffer identity loss while pursuing for new identity. They become a diaspora in the land where they do not belong to.

In the novel *Half a Life* by V. S. Naipaul, Willie Somerset Chandran leaves India for London and goes to Africa in order to set his own separate identity. He begins inquiring his father about his middle name as ‘Somerset.’ His father has borrowed it from a famous British writer Somerset Maugham. His name itself causes him to raise a question regarding his individual identity. He has interest in writing and being a writer. In London, Willie writes, but finds no one publisher to publish his book. He is humiliated for being an Indian. In the new place of new culture, language, and tradition, he experiences uneasy in walking, talking, cooking and eating. He cannot make love to women there since there is not such culture in his Indian society. In Africa, too, he is not happy though he lives with his wife Ana for eighteen years. He thinks he has wasted his eighteen years without doing anything good regarding his career. He loves to find Indian people and follow Indian culture, but he cannot. Finally, he leaves Africa for Berlin in Germany alone to live with his sister. Despite his continuous pursuit for his identity, he is never successful and remains incomplete in the matter of his identity. In this study, the researcher describes how and why Willie Somerset Chandran as a diasporic character visits different places in the globe for his own identity in spite of his failure to establish it.

Concept of Identity in Diaspora

Classically, the term ‘Diaspora’ originates from Greek language and it means ‘dispersion.’ N. Jayaram (2004) asserts, “Etymologically, the term diaspora is derived

from the Greek composite verb *dia-* and *speirein* (infinitive), literally meaning ‘to scatter,’ ‘to spread’ or ‘to disperse’” (p.16). The Jews were dispersed in the neighbouring countries when their nation was invaded. They were forced to live in the foreign countries though they had love and respect towards their nation. They became ‘Diaspora’ in the foreign land. The life of them in the host land was quite difficult. It was hard for them to maintain survival there. The language was different and so were the other things regarding their culture, tradition, and religious matters. They could not return to their country though they wanted to. It was their compulsion to stay away from their homeland. They would miss their homeland. Following the Greek Diaspora, “we now view the African diaspora, the Asian diaspora, the Indian diaspora, and others, as equivalent to (similar to or like) the Jewish diaspora” (Galvan, 2008, p. 114). During the colonial movement of European countries, people from colonized countries were forcefully transported to the colonizing countries for their use. The classical idea of diaspora is the dispersion of people abroad involuntarily either due to civil war, famine, or colonial power. However, in modern sense, the meaning of diaspora has been widened. For whatever purpose people immigrate to foreign countries, they are diaspora.

Now-a-days, people go abroad in order to study, work, and trade and create a diaspora. For example, many Nepalese have gone to European as well as other countries and developed Nepali diaspora there. Similarly, there are Indian diaspora, Chinese diaspora, Japanese diaspora and so on. L. L. Roper (2003) argues, “From the late 1960s on, however, the term has been loosely applied to a number of related phenomena, until then covered by distinct terms like exile, expatriate, ethnic minority or migrant community. Hence forth, a wide variety of dispersions considers themselves and have been renamed as diasporas” (pp.10-11). The more there is human mobility around the globe, the higher the creation of diasporas there are. The diaspora people have to bear a lot of problems in the host land. The language, culture, political and religious activities are strange to them. They are not familiar with them there. They have trouble of adjustment as “Migration involves a wider separation, from language, culture and familiar ways of doing things, often from family” (Sales et al., 2009, p. 7). They lose their own native language, culture, tradition and customs as their identity. Moreover, they suffer from some other problems such as discrimination. Since they are the outsiders, they are dealt differently from the native people over there. They are segregated, and frustrated having the “feeling of alienation and rootlessness” (Shukla and Benerji, 2014, p. 19). They have deep attachment with their homeland and keep

missing their relatives, friends, fields and places in their home country. Even though some of them have a lot of earnings abroad, they cannot forget their motherland, cultural and religious activities of their homeland. In one or another way, they realize losing their identity in the foreign land.

In general, the term 'identity' denotes who somebody or what something is. One's age, race, profession, religion, culture, nation and so on can be his/her identity. Moreover, identity can be personal as well as common to a group or community as K. L. Tiwari (2013) asserts, "Identity may be defined as the distinctive characteristic belonging to any given individual, or shared by all members of a particular social category or group" (p. 6). One can be honest and 'honesty' is his/her identity. In the same way, 'hill people' are humble and 'humbleness' is their identity. In addition, identity "needs to be defined, established, maintained, constructed or reconstructed, and can be lost, searched for, questioned, reinvented or reaffirmed" (Ilic and Lopovic, 2010, p. ix). Identity once established may change and it can be remade or reformed as a new identity. In order to reconstruct one's lost identity or construct a new identity is a very challenging job. For this, everyone has to work very hard. In diaspora, people may lose their identity and can construct a new one but it is really hard to accomplish it. In *Half a Life*, the protagonist Willie Chandran shifts from one country to another in order to achieve a new identity but fails to do so despite his helpless search for it.

Seeking a New Identity in London

When Willie Somerset Chandran knows about his mixed racial and at the same time a mixed name identities, he does not like them and decides to go to London for his own identity. His father was a Brahmin and mother was from a low caste family. He was neither a fully Brahmin nor of his mother's caste. Meanwhile, his own name also creates confusion in him. His friends in school question him about the "genesis of his name" (Kumar, 2012, p. 166). It makes him curious to know the reality about his name: "Why is my middle name Somerset? The boys at school have just found out, and they are mocking me" (Naipaul, 2001, p. 1). His father tells him that his middle name is borrowed from his favourite British writer Somerset Maugham. Willie is not satisfied in his present identity. He is interested in writing. His teachers encourage him in this work. He writes a story and shows it to his father who finds it sarcastic upon himself and expresses his dislike as it is all "Lies, lies. Where did he get these lies from?" (Naipaul, 2001, p. 40). He wants to study literature and be a good writer. For this purpose, he plans to go to London. His father is also compelled to send him to London for his further studies.

In fact, Willie aims to establish his own identity in England unlike the one he has in his home country India, but faces failure only. In the new linguistic, cultural, and religious background of London, he has to go through a lot of difficulties for which S. Shukla and N. Benerji (2014), assert that immigrants often “find themselves sandwiched between two cultures” (pp. 19-20). He has to learn new customs from opening doors to walking, talking, shopping, eating and making friends. The frank and open culture of London creates a kind of conflict in him. As he has the culture of arrange marriage system in his Indian society, he cannot easily fall in love with any girls as Willie criticizes Indian fathers, “All men should train their sons in the art of seduction. But in our culture there is no seduction. Our marriages are arranged. There is no art of sex” (Naipaul, 2001, p. 118). He feels he is lacking skill and power of attracting girls to him. The failure in making a good girlfriend of his own alienates him. He thinks that his society also should teach people about making love with girls. Nevertheless, he keeps relation with his friends’ girlfriends unlawfully.

Along with his study in the university in London, Willie tries to continue writing, but fails to find any encouraging publishers for him. He makes contact with his father’s friends for their help in his writing career. Initially, a few of them show interest but discourages him later on resulting that his dissatisfaction becomes stronger in life (Kumar, 2012, p. 170). Once he writes a story book and shows it to a journalist for publication. The journalist discourages him saying that the setting of his story is limited only to India as he argues, “It’s as I feared. Short stories are always difficult, and India isn’t really a subject. The only people who are going to read about India are people who have lived or worked there, and they are not going to be interested in the India you write about” (Naipaul, 2001, pp. 102-103). In Willie’s view, literature can be set in any places in the world and there should not be any difference by setting his stories in India. Another time, he succeeds to get his book published, but again he cannot remain happy anymore. He does not find it reviewed much. About his failure to maintain his new identity in London, S. Kumar (2012) admits, “Willie flees to London to launch himself as a man with enterprise, but ironically in his search for wholeness, he loses even the half-life that has been within his reach” (p.170). It creates some sort of frustration in him for finding an identity as a writer and goes to Africa marrying Ana, an African Portuguese girl.

His Continuous Search for Identity in Africa and Germany

Since Willie finds Ana to understand his feelings expressed in his writing and both are in the similar situation in the matter of identity pursuit, he marries her and leaves for Africa hoping to discover his own stable identity like S. Sujaritha (2009)

considers that many immigrants “struggle to create their identity in the settled society” (p. 99). When he is unable to bring his book into popularity, he is depressed thinking that he cannot establish himself a good writer. Ana, who is also a girl from mixed racial parents like Willie, is only one to console him and reduce his “feeling of alienation and rootlessness” (Shukla and Benerji, 2014, p. 19) to some extent. In her letter for Willie, Ana writes, “I feel I had to write to you because in your stories for the first time I find moments that are like moments in my own life, though the background and material are so different” (Naipaul, 2001, p. 124). He gets energy and hope in him to move ahead for his own identity. Willie is excited as “for the first time in his life he felt himself in the presence of someone who accepted him completely” (Naipaul, 2001, p. 125). What is more, in their physical meeting, he is attracted by her way of talking and behaving to him. He becomes ready to marry her and leaves London for Africa, her home country in pursuit of achieving something important there. However, he cannot establish himself as he expects to be.

Willie starts feeling alienated and dislocated from the beginning from ship travelling to his stay there in Ana’s house. While heading for Africa in ship, he experiences a kind of “isolation and insecurity” (Cohen, 2008, p. 22) as he finds people speaking languages different from what he can communicate in. He understands the value of one’s own native language at that moment as A. Choubey (2002) argues, “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” (p. 232). However, due to Ana’s presence, his worries subside to some extent even though the situation remains somehow similar later on as well. The house of Ana does not attract him anymore. He does not find the house so much welcoming, but “Everything in the house – the colours, the wood, the furniture, the smells- was new to me. ...I felt a stranger” (Naipaul, 2001, p. 140). He thinks that he is not going to live there for a long time. In one or another way, he misses his own Indian culture, tradition, and people who can speak his own native language as H. Macwan (2014) argues that diaspora people like Willie takes it as “the loss of identity” (p. 113). The language the people speak and the cultural activities they follow in Africa seem to be unfriendly for him. Once he loses his Indian passport and money, he becomes so much worried: “The loss of the passport worried me more than everything else. Without my passport I didn’t see how I could prove to any official in Africa or England or India who I was” (Naipaul, 2001, p. 157). He thinks that then onwards, people will have difficulty in recognizing him as an Indian citizen.

Being unsuccessful to achieve anything important, but realizing only the loss of his cream part of his life in Africa, Willie decides to leave his wife Ana and go to live with his sister Sarojini in Germany. He is unable to make any progress in his long

time stay in Africa. According to Rushdie (1992), people like him often get “haunted by some sense of loss” (p. 10). Once he skids in the bathroom and gets wounded. He gets hospitalized for treatment. The place, people and the environment start being boring for him. Most importantly, people address him differently: “My Portuguese was poor and for some reason I spoke it with an English accent. So, people couldn’t place me and they let me be. I was Ana’s London man, as the little housemaid had said” (Naipaul, 2001, p. 145). His name has been ignored. He knows that London people at least would address him by his name which is his identity. He regrets coming to Africa and spending a long time there without making anything good as he says to Ana, “I am forty one. I am tired of living your life” (Naipaul, 2001, p. 227). He thinks that he has wasted his productive age of his life. So, leaving Ana alone there, he flees to Berlin to live with his sister with “profound uncertainties” (Rushdie, 1992, p. 10). Though Sarojini is also leaving separately from her German husband, he finds her living freely. He becomes happy observing her happy days though it is also a half-life for Sarojini.

Conclusion

As a diasporic character, Willie wanders from his native land India to London, Africa and Germany in search of his own individual identity though he never succeeds to fulfill his desire. His interest of establishing his identity as a writer cannot be complete. He can not get his books published comfortably. The subject matter of his stories is criticized strongly for being Indian. He is humiliated by their comments. Moreover, the cultural, social, and traditional differences in London from his Indian society make him experience difficulty in adjustment. So, being unable to establish himself as a successful person, he flees to Africa with Ana, but there too, he cannot do anything important. Realizing only the loss of his valuable period of life in Africa, he leaves Ana alone for Berlin in Germany. He lives with his own sister Sarojini who is also separated from her German husband. In diaspora, people desires to have happiness earning name and fame as an identity in the foreign land, but they cannot attain their desired result. They turn to be alienated, dislocated and isolated in the host land. Similar things happen in the novel *Half a Life* by Naipaul. Wherever Willie Chandran goes, he is unable to manage his desired identity, but gets frustrated by suffering from identity crisis. Like Willie, other characters also are seen failure to hit their goal in London, Africa and Germany. They are still leading a half- and- half life in diaspora.

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