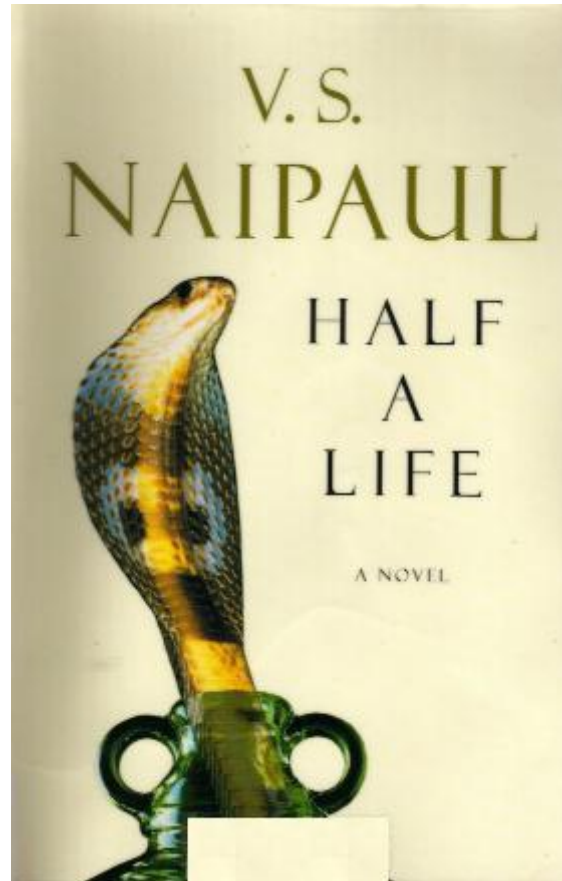


## Identity Crisis in V. S. Naipaul's *Half A Life*

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### Abstract

V. S. Naipaul is undoubtedly one of the most significant novelists of the twentieth century. His novel *Half a Life* delineates Willie Somerset Chandran's search for self-development and self-knowledge. Naipaul masterfully manipulates the protagonist Willie Somerset Chandran's colonial predicament, his anxiety, dislocation and search for his own identity in this novel. *Half a Life* portrays Willie's continuing banished life from India to England, England to Africa and then to Germany to rediscover his self-identity; nevertheless he loses his true identity.

**Key words:** V.S.Naipaul, *Half a Life*, self-development, self-knowledge

## V. S. Naipaul

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, is commonly known as V. S. Naipaul. He is undoubtedly, one of the most significant novelists of the twentieth century. He was born in Chaguanas, Trinidad on August 17, 1932. Naipaul studied literature in England at University College, Oxford. Being an Indian by descent, a Trinidadian by birth, and an Englishman by education, V. S. Naipaul possesses a multi-cultural background. Naipaul has produced a huge corpus of writing that includes novels, short stories, non-fictional novels, travelogues, fictional biographies, fictional autobiographies, journalistic writings and history. His works are *Miguel Street* (1959), *A Flag on the Island* (1967), *The Writer and the World: Essays* (2002), *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), *The Suffrage Of Elvira* (1958), *Miguel Street* (1959), *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963), *In a Free State* (1971), *Finding the Centre* (1984).

### Identity

Identity is shaped as a result of a collaboration of social and personal experiences a person endures during the course of his/her life. Identity is a multifaceted component of human experience. Identity is a very intriguing concept both in psychology and literature. Many modern literary texts revolve around this concept. A number of themes in literature centre on identity. An identity crisis is a period of serious personal questioning where the individual makes an effort to determine one's own values and sense of direction. Identity is confined to man, his reason and freedom of the self in a society. The theme of V. S. Naipaul's 2001 novel *Half a Life* in relation to the question of identity and identity- formation. For Naipaul, identity is not given, but constructed and contingent.

### *Half a Life*

Naipaul's *Half a life*, published just before he received the Nobel Prize, portrays and evaluates the lives of the mixed descent in three countries - India, England and Portuguese Africa (Mozambique) and their struggle to discover their identities. The novel is set in three locales - India, England and Africa.

*Half a Life* runs into three uneven sections, subtitled as (a) 'A Visit From Somerset Maugham,' (b) 'The First Chapter,' (c) 'A Second Translation.' In spite of the thin structure of the novel, the novel has a wide cast of characters: Perci Cato, a Jamaican, Marcus, an

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 16:12 December 2016

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ambitious businessman, Roger, a young lawyer, Perdita, Roger's fiancée, Carla, the convent girl, Ricardo, a Military man, The Noranhas, Julio, Correia, a formidable Portuguese, Greca Carl, the manager's wife, Gouveria, an architect, Mrs. Noranha, a good storyteller and Ana.

### **The theme of Exile and Longing for Identity**

The theme of exile and longing for identity is very much central to the novel *Half a Life*. It is apparently a record of Willie's quest for identity. The central idea of the novel revolves around the protagonist Willie Somerset Chandran. He is born in India in the 1930's, moves to London with a scholarship to study in Nottingham. He remains in a state of tension, he publishes a book then he marries Ana, a woman of mixed African parents, and then goes along with her to Africa, her family estate. His trace formed a circle, and unfortunately, he still went back to the starting point without finding his sense of belonging. The novel also delineates Willie's continuous exiled life from India, England, Africa, and Germany moving toward affirming self-identity.

### **The Protagonist Willie Chandran**

At the outset of the novel *Half a Life*, the protagonist Willie Chandran seems to be curious to know about his middle name 'Somerset'. On several occasions, the elders fail to satisfy his questioning spirit in their family. Even at the beginning of the novel Willie asks his father the reason for his name "Willie Somerset Chandran". Here the quest starts,

"Why is my middle name Somerset?  
He says that the boys at the school have just  
made out and they are mocking at me". (HL 1)

His father tells him that half of his name does not belong to him. It is borrowed from the well-known writer Somerset Maugham who had an encounter with him in the 1930s. Willie's father Chandran answers the question by recounting his own life as a young man. Chandran goes through a series of upheavals in search of identity. In an effort to break with his ancestry, Chandran insists on marrying a Dalit woman following the ideals set by the Mahatma during pre-independence period. Chandran has an obsession to become a great man like the Mahatma. Chandran's forced life of spirituality gives him an identity. His grandfather's lineage linking him to the temple life shows that the man was to undergo starvation till he could break with it, to become a letter writer outside the Maharaja's palace. Chandran's father, a courtier of the Maharaja, was however obsessed with the temple cult.

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Chandran belongs to a Brahmin family but he marries a low caste woman and has two children, Willie and Sarojini. So Willie thinks himself as a half Brahmin and half untouchable; so his contradiction with self begins in his childhood. He was very shameful on his condition because he couldn't accept the discrimination. Willie begins to hate his parents more particularly his father, and a sense of isolation makes him a traveller. At home his mixed inheritance had spoiled everything. Even the love he felt for his mother, which should have been pure, was full of the pain he felt for their circumstances.

### **Sense of Isolation**

Willie's father soon grasps that his son is suffering from the sense of isolation and thinks that to save him he should provide him freedom which would help him to expand his view about life style. He says:

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. (HL 49)

Chandran has a crisis of his own identity which he thought he could achieve through his children; this is how he replies to Willie's query: "You were named after a great English writer. I am sure you have seen his book about the house". (HL1) Willie comes to know the reality about his family's history, culture, heritage and roots from his father's story. Willie has an incomplete identity of his origin due to his father's deprivation from Brahmin culture.

### **Mixed Identities**

On the one hand his first name gives a clue that he possesses a Christian identity. On the other hand his surname indicates his mixed ancestry. Here Willie feels that his name also increases his sense of identity crisis. Willie is disturbed about his identity. Perhaps Willie's father while giving Somerset's name to his son, is himself in a split personality, mixing illusions and reality. Willie's father is not only leading a half- life himself, he rather creates a background to the dilemma of his son, leading a half- life throughout.

Later on, Chandran was rather disillusioned to see that Willie, his son was drifting away from his ideals. 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?” (HL 37) The strange reply of Willie with irritation is also interesting to note: “You all know what my father does”. (HL 37) In the mission school where their mother had been a student, Willie and Sarojini, his sister studied. But it was a branded school where backward caste children also studied. It was noteworthy that Willie was doing excellently in the composition class by composing poems like Shelly, Wordsworth and others.

A week after 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 the “true son of his mother, was challenging him, with all the slyness of a backward class fellow, and he wasn’t sure what he should do”. (HL 41)

Though Chandran did not discuss anything about the composition with his son, he was rather disturbed. This realization of his father was a great compliment to his son. To his father Willie is meant for a special purpose. He therefore writes to the contact persons abroad whom he helped in India to help him, to get a place for his son in some institute. Finally, there is 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. (HL 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”. (HL 51)

### **Seeking to Find Son’s Identity**

This letter creates an opportunity for Willie to go to London. It is therefore the father’s achievement because Chandran has done what he had himself promised his son in his

early life. But then, Willie's father does not know the concrete journey of his son. He does not know what his son's destiny is, what his identity would be. Even Willie, a boy of twenty, does not know what his London life would bring for him in the future:

And that was now, when he was twenty, Willie Chandran, the mission- school student who had not completed his education, 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 has seen at the mission school, went to London. (HL 51)

### **Frightening Experiences in London**

Willie's life in London is fraught with many frightening experiences. He is portrayed here as a young man 'with nothing to his name but his promise as a writer, drifting aimlessly, groping for a voice'. He suffers from alienation and emptiness. He sleeps with prostitutes and friends' girl-friends only to discover his own sexual incompetence. In London, Willie feels that he has to

re-learn everything that he knew. He had to learn how to eat in public. He had to learn how to greet people and how, having greeted them, not to greet them all over again in a public place ten or fifteen minutes later. He had to learn to close doors behind him. He had to learn how to ask for things without being peremptory. (HL 56)

### **Reconstructing Identity**

Willie reconstructs his identity through his father's connection to the great writers and the journalists. In this way, Willie remakes himself which gives him a feeling of power. This seems like Willie is settling down in London. With some confidence Willie moves on in London first making friendship with Percy Cato, a Jamaican of mixed parentage. Likewise, Percy Cato, "a Jamaican of mixed parentage who was more brown than black," (HL 61) falsely fabricates his family history. He misleads Willie to believe that his father is a clerk in Panama. In fact, his father went there "as a labourer". (HL 62)

### **Willie and Percy**

Willie and Percy's fictional recreations only seem to end up with their cheating themselves. They are an escape from an unbearable reality. Their make-believe identities are their performances. The creation of identity here has double meanings. Apparently, Willie seems to forsake his Indian tradition and family history. Even so, when he looks back on his life, he will understand his loss of cultural heritage at the stage of being in London. Willie now realizes that it is necessary for everybody to establish his identity in the world. Through Percy, Willie is being introduced to the "special, passing bohemian- immigrant life of London of the late 1950s". (HL72)

Percy Cato flees from London. Meanwhile Sarojini comes to see him. Willie plays an unwilling host to her. Sarojini, on the contrary, proves her worth here. She chastens him for wasting his life in London. Disturbed and desperate Willie phones Perdita, Roger's wife to help him dissolve his tension. Perdita denies his entreaties dispassionately.

In his early London days, he realizes his ignorance, and therefore he reads a number of books on world history and politics. He could not understand many of them. Meeting many people he realizes the hardships of a real life. He therefore admires his father's ability: "I misjudged my father. 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". (HL 58) Willie knew a lot of rules to cope with the college as well as London life.

### **Bohemian Life**

Willie leads a bohemian life in London along with such friends as Percy, Roger, Richard, Perdita and so on. Roger, helps him to get chances to write scripts for the B.B.C. He suggests Willie should write stories not necessarily having a neat beginning and a neat ending because life in reality is not like that:

Life doesn't have a neat beginning and a tidy end. Life is always going on. You should begin in the middle and end in the middle and it should be there. (HL 83)

### **Story Writer**

Willie, accepting the suggestion of Roger, revises his early stories of the missionary school days, and then writes some more stories to find a publisher for them. Then he writes some stories about India and on Indian themes. He is anxious for the publication of the book. Finally Richard agrees to publish it. This book has India as its background setting. Through the book he wants to have an identity. However, his book could not be reviewed much favourably so he gives up writing. He has nothing to hold him. He drifts from bars to dinner parties to newspaper offices, and the fun lies in watching him observe odd social customs and sad class incongruities. Willie is gradually getting fed up with those bohemian parties with Percy and June and others. Badly broken, finally he goes into a cafe full of prostitutes.

Now Willie could learn in London that “Everything goes on a bias. The world should stop, but it goes on”. (HL 113) Without getting so much favourable reviews of the book, Willie is very frustrated:

Let the book die. Let it fade away. Let me not be reminded of. I will write no more. This book was not something I should have done, anyway. It was artificial and false. Let me be grateful that none of the review spotted the way it was done. (HL 123)

### **Adjust with a New Kind of Identity**

Though Willie goes to London to get his real existence and identity but very soon he faces the reality and accepts the harsh fact that he does not need to mutiny. Willie tries to adjust in a new kind of life which is also not of his own and begins to lead his life with that false identity.

A number of insulting events happen to him. He suffers the typical isolation in a foreign country. In London Willie can find no way of forming relationships on his own. Whatever joy and freedom Willie experiences here are incomplete. Even the girls Willie comes into contact are not his friends but the beloved females of his own friends. They do not come to him through his identity. Even in love making, Willie is incompetent.

Once, a prostitute throws him off. He is full of shame. He wants to leave London, but he doesn't know where to go. He doesn't like to return to India and lead the life of his mother's uncle, a firebrand who forced the union of his mother and father.

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 16:12 December 2016

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He thinks that he can create his own identity unreservedly and he begins 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 finds himself in acute neurotic anxiety. People go abroad for making money, power and prosperity and they achieve it, but in return they fail to achieve the peace, pleasure and satisfaction.

### **Freedom of Expression and Identity**

In England Willie begins to understand that he was free to present himself as he wished. He could, as it were, write his own resolution. These possibilities were dizzying. He could, within reason, remake himself and his past and his ancestry. After getting tired of leading a life of false identity in England, Willie decides to find out his own identity. At this point Willie finds himself in confusion. He does not know where he is going. Willie fails to see his future in London.

In England, he lives with the idea of getting himself liberated from the cruelties and rules of home. At this point of time Willie receives a letter from Sarojini, his sister from Cuba enquiring about his plans for the future and the publication of his book. But Willie had not planned anything for his future. He had been living in a fool's paradise.

Then he receives a letter from an admirer of his book, Ana, a young girl, from an African country, living in London. Since her African culture goes easily with his own culture, he falls in love with her, gets married and moves to Portuguese East Africa. Ana's grandfather, a Portuguese married an African and later when he grew rich, he chose a Portuguese son-in-law. Ana's mother left her Portuguese husband and remarried a man of mixed race. In her step father's home Ana was seduced by him. Because of all the experiences Ana has developed a vacuum in her mind and longed for love that would remove her loneliness.

### **Encounter with Ana**

Willie finds love in the chance encounter with Ana, a girl of mixed race from Africa and admirer of his book. They meet in his hostel room. Willie has been a little tense before her arrival. But 'as soon as he saw her, all his anxieties fell away, and he was conquered'.

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(HL 125) The most intoxicating thing was ' that for the first time in his life he felt himself in the presence of someone who accepted him completely. When he has completed his studies, he decides to go to Africa with his lover Ana.

His time is going to be over in the college. It is time for him to get a job and a place to live in with Ana. After much contemplation he realizes that he would have to go with Ana to Africa where they could live together. After such a proposal, Ana agrees. Willie decides to marry Ana who has also a multi-cultural background. Willie decides to go to Africa with Ana to find his own self-identity. 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 has expected himself to belong. He has to face the same problems 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. (HL 135)

When Ana comes to meet him in college, Willie could understand that for the first time in his life he met someone who accepts him completely. At home in India, his life was governed by mixed inheritance, rules and regulations. His experience of love with Ana, he hopes, might bring him the fulfilment he so desperately seeks. At Ana's estate house in Africa, Willie feels like a stranger, and says, 'It may be because of something in our culture that in spite of appearances, men are really looking for women to lean on'. (HL 141) And further, 'Ana was important for me because I depended on her for my idea of being a man'. (HL 142)

Ana finds completeness in marrying Willie. But at last when Willie leaves her, she looks at life as an illusion. She says, "Perhaps it wasn't really my life either". (HL 217) Willie eases into the borrowed life of his wife's world. There is no commitment. He has his weekends with Ana's European friends and submits to the consolations of bourgeois comfort. It includes sex with young African girls. But very soon Willie finds less and less pleasure in sex. "It has grown mechanical". (HL 195) He spends 18 years there, an outsider again. Ana takes him to her estate house in Africa. He has intense days of love making with Ana which is disturbed when he finds another lover Graca.

## **Discover Some Purpose in Life**

Willie wants to discover some purpose in life through his sensual associations and sexual encounters in Ana's Africa, "Willie's submission to sexual desire is wholly believable for the very reason that he has previously been stunted into half life by the constrictions of caste in India and class in England, Africa releases him into sensuality". (HL 9)

Willie spends eighteen years in Africa with Ana. After he ships out one day, he is injured for which he is to be treated in the military hospital among the wounded black soldiers. After recovery, he says to Ana, "I am going to leave. I have 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". (HL 136) Willie expressed his desire to leave Ana in the hospital itself. However, Ana consoles him and tells him: "People exaggerate the fighting in the bush. You know that. There's not going to be a new war". (HL 135)

## **Symbolic Loss**

The loss of passport by Willie is symbolic. Willie, by losing his passport, perhaps loses his identity, the pastness of his past, his ancestral inheritance. In Africa, he is completely a new man: "the loss of 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". (HL 157)

He suffers from the same problems which he has seen in London. He imitates that in London people know him by his own name that is Willie Chandran but in Africa people address him as 'Ana's London Man'. (HL 45) In this condition he feels that he has lost his identity. Being educated in London Willie 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.

## **Alienated Person in Africa**

Willie feels like a more alienated person in Africa in comparison to London, he leads eighteen years of his life in Africa in stable search of his identity. And finally he again takes a decision in his life, to leave Ana with the expectation of finding his true existence and his lost name and identity that is Willie Chandran, not Ana's English man.

With the passage of each year in Africa Willie is acquiring new identities with new experiences. However, each time with a new experience he goes back to his ancestry his roots even though he has already denounced such a life of Indian ancestry with rules, codes and regulations. When his life with Graca is known, Ana suggests to him after two years of his drive with Graca that as a man of self-respect and order, he should refrain from all these ungentle ways.

Now that Willie is forty-one and has spent the part of his life with Ana during the last eighteen years, he expresses his gratitude to her for obliging him. However, he has done nothing because he has led a half life by hiding there for a long time. To Willie, his life was a shadow life, the life of Ana rather than his own. Even to Ana, this was not her life either. The anguish of Willie is the result of the shattering of all his illusions in the post colonial scenario of Africa. Willie leaves Africa and decides to go to Germany where his sister Sarojini lives. After his dreams are shattered, he prepares to go to Berlin to his sister, but it is not his home. Willie has not yet arrived at his final identity. He is yet to explore something more about his identity.

### **The Aftermath of Willie's African Life**

In a way this novel carries on with the aftermath of Willie's African life when he comes to Berlin to his sister, Sarojini after spending a "half-life" with his wife Ana. Willie Chandran tries to explore his identity soon after coming back to his sister. He passively allows his sister Sarojini to tell him, in her bossy way, what he should think. He is easily and thoroughly disheartened by the reviews of his book of stories: 'Willie thought, "Let the book die. Let it fade away. Let me not be reminded of it. I will write no more"'. (HL 189)

There he sees several Tamil boys playing on the street and manages to see the glimpses of his character in them. They are of another generation, but Willie sees himself in them. He thinks, "That was how I appeared in London, I am not as alone as I thought". (HL 138) Then he thinks

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. (HL 138)

### **Looking Back**

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. He might have used his time for better, which he has wasted in the search of his identity. Thus the novel concludes with the self-realization of Willie.

At the age of twenty, Willie's flight from the burden of his family's painful situation takes him from India to London, where he tries to arrange a new identity. Failing to do so, he is rescued from self-doubt and determined to become a writer by adhering to a woman. Together they go to her African country to live out the last doomed days of colonialism, where Willie remains for eighteen years as a spectator in yet another life that is not his own. With the help of his sister he flees to Germany.

Willie's predicament is that he does not know himself well initially. He tries to explore his own self to know his identity. In India or London or Africa he is always the half-man, and therefore leads a half-life only. The book is therefore about the half-lives of various people:

In a larger sense the novel points to various 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 threatened, caste considerations are some of those factors. The book also suggests that most of us get only 'half a life' . . . to live choices of various kinds that we make do shut out other ways of life to us. (Chandra Pradhan 99)

### **Uprooted**

It is true that the protagonist of the novel, a man uprooted from his home and ancestry, is facing a crisis of identity. Willie leaves his native land to earn a good amount of money, but surprisingly he has to lose so many things instead, like loss of identity, loss of human relationship and so on. Willie, the Indian immigrant cannot identify himself either

with his previous land or to his new land. With *Half a Life*, V. S. Naipaul has succeeded in addition to society's perception of race, identity and failure.

All the major protagonists of Naipaul suffer from the dilemma of displacement and identity crisis. *Half a Life* portrays Willie's constant banished life from India to England, England to Africa and then to Germany to rediscover his self-identity. Nevertheless he loses his true identity.

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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 16:12 December 2016

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