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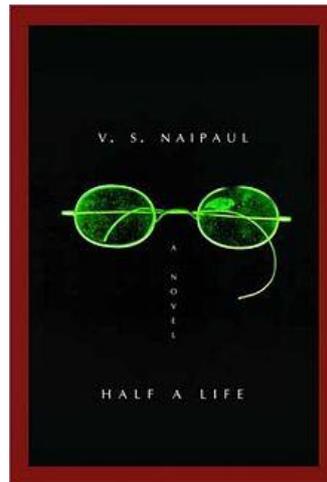
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Self-Identity and Globalization in V. S. Naipaul's *Half a Life and Magic Seeds*

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Rootlessness and Crisis of Identity

The theme of rootlessness and consequent crisis of identity has been a recurring one in the literature of Diaspora and V.S. Naipaul seems to be a champion of this issue. In awarding Naipaul the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001, the Swedish Academy citation

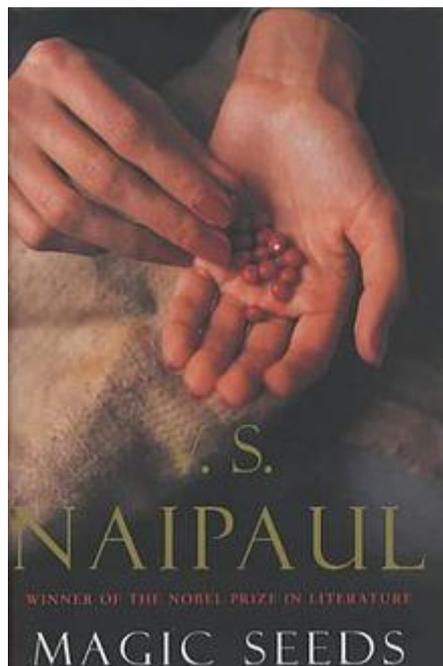
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admires his work "for having united perceptive narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories". He is regarded a prophet, a soothsayer, a doom watcher and a teller of unpalatable truths. His heroes are always in search of a more dignified life and they become acutely aware of their helplessness in achieving the goals they set for themselves. They remain unhoused, displaced, uprooted with no distinct place called 'home' to be proud of, and are therefore located on the margins of sifting identities.

A Writer with Universal Appeal



Naipaul grows out from a regional writer to one with a more universal appeal. His works take the reader on a journey of experiences from the local to the global and from a narrow perspective to a broader and more encompassing vision. In the early novels *The Mystic Masseur*, *The suffrage of Elvira*, *Miguel Street* and *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Naipaul deals exclusively with the colonial society of Trinidad, where he was born and brought up. In these novels the characters, mostly Hindu of Indian origin are continually in search of an identity and home amidst an alien culture. He just records his personal experience in the island. In the novels of second phase *The Mimic Man*, *Guerrillas*, *A Bend in the River* and *In A Free State*, he emerges as a novelist of post-imperial crisis. These novels draw on his travel writing and are analytical in approach. Here, he makes it clear that political independence has changed nothing. The attempt of decolonization and nation building meets a lot of setback. In the novels of last phase, *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds*,

Naipaul demonstrates the existential predicament of the individuals in the contemporary meaningless world. This study attempts to examine the issues of identity in Naipaul fictions during the period of globalization and his growing concern for predicament of man searching for meaning in an absurd universe.

Culture and Identity in a Globalized World

In an increasingly globalized world, culture has emerged as a much contested topic. Culture not only is one of the main warriors of globalization, by which modern values reach external populations, but also it impacts a lot the individual and national identity. In many situations, globalization and modernity meant the collapse of a sense of belongingness to a certain community. The loss of the secure feeling of belongingness leads to a fear from which is born the new identity. The emphasis on individualism, on self-development and self-choice in the globalized society has resulted in a transformation of individual identity.

It makes it more difficult for individuals to consolidate and construct their identity and to find their place in society. Unlike traditional societies where identity formation was given; the younger ones followed the family profession. Now the identity is a process which depends mostly on the individual only. Identity can no more be fixed, and this contradicts not only the concept of identity itself. Because space and time are compressed, because of the spreading of mass-communications and technology, people find it harder to identify themselves with a specific idea or to stick to a specific group.

Stability Factors in Individual Identity

One's identity depends a lot on the emotional, cultural and social stability of the individual. Stability is the ultimate stage of this quest. Exploring different aspects of one's self in the different areas of life, including one's role at work, within the family, and in romantic relationships, can help strengthen the identity. Researchers have found that those who have made a strong commitment to an identity tend to be happier and healthier than those who have not. Those with a status of identity diffusion tend to feel out of place in the world and don't pursue a sense of identity. They are unsure of their role in life. They feel like they do know their 'real'. Identity diffusion happens due to displacement and an immersion in a very different culture with which a person does not share common ways of life or beliefs. It causes a feeling of confusion and disorientation.

Fragmentation, Alienation and Disorder in Globalization

Fragmentation, alienation and disorder characterize not only the Third World countries, but also the contemporary world in general. When the decolonization and nation building was halfway, the Information and Communication Technology laid the road for globalization. The move from national sovereignty to global economic, political, and cultural institutions causes peculiar anxieties. The concept of welfare state has been eroded and nations give up control of national economies and of their economic policies to transnational companies and international regulating bodies which operate in their shared interests. What has happened is that displaced people can no longer draw on the obligations or guilt of empires or states, since these have been replaced by multinationals seemingly without locality or responsibility to any former metropolitan centre. The political and social struggles of the decolonized are now relocated globally, and the enabled Western subject and the disempowered decolonized subject are revealed to be equally vulnerable to globalization. One doesn't have a side, doesn't have a country, doesn't have a community; one is entirely an individual. Extreme instability is therefore a characteristic of this new political life.

Complex Inter-connections and new Clash of Civilizations

Globalization has created complex interconnections across the world. People move across borders, capital travels across cities and nations, media exchanges are interlinked across the globe, cultures have acquired a mobility that brings about new 'civilization of clashes'. It creates tension, anxiety and depression. Multiculturalism encourages social isolation, increases infrequency in relations and decreases confidence and trust. It has caused decline of traditional social structure: religion is taken for granted; the solidarity has been replaced by individualism. Consumerism is now forming a homogeneous global culture which, like a flood tide has destroyed cultural identities, national identities and stable self identities of peoples by displacing their interest and aspirations. The exposure to multiple cultures results in identity confusion.

Individual Aspirations and Social Sensitivity

Naipaul's ability to depict the aspirations of individuals surpasses his social sensitivity. His corpus is a mosaic of individual portraits, glimpses of ordinary people who exemplify extraordinary reality. In the novels of a later phase Naipaul, seems more interested in a spiritual or psychological state than in the machinery of action. He offers an in-depth

and insightful study, of the existential predicaments of the various protagonists. In his later fiction, Naipaul's vision is more profound. His fictional heroes are among the most complex in modern literature. His strengths as a writer reach far beyond the concerns of the colonial and postcolonial. His greatest gift is that he can unlock the closed cabinet of the male psyche and take out so much that is hidden inside. His later novels *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds* reveal, in the multiple border crossings of Willie and Sarojini, the devastating effect of instability on the diasporic migrant and the globalised citizen, who because of race, gender and class differences remains marginal and displaced.

***Half a Life* – Willie's Life**

Half a Life is apparently a record of Willie Somerset Chandran's quest for identity. The novel opens with the beginning of Chandran's search for his roots. Willie asks his father, 'Why is my middle name Somerset?' This question forms the very essence of a person's existence. The answer to this question brings into light the irony of Willie's existence and at the same time prepares the background of his half-life in half-made societies with people who are themselves leading a life which is half-discovered, half-realized and half-lived. For Willie Somerset Chandran his name is his destiny. Half of his name does not belong to him, it is borrowed from the famous writer Somerset Maugham; his first name proclaims him as a Christian whereas his surname signifies his mixed ancestry. A probing look discovers the man is as much an amalgam of drastically different traits as is his name an admixture of different and even antagonistic streams. William's search for the roots takes him backward because his roots are entwined with those of his father's. His father revolted against his family tradition by deciding to marry a low caste woman. The son of a half-rebel Brahmin father and a low caste woman, Willie's negation of self begins in his childhood itself. His awareness of his mother's low caste and the resultant low status of his father instill a sense of shame in the boy. The uncertainty of the family position in the society has caused a disgrace in his young mind. He could not be proud of his family.

Willie goes to London to reinvent himself, finds out his face but ironically in his search for completeness he loses his half life that was within his reach. The education that he is getting is absolutely devoid of perspectives. He pursues everything half-heartedly. Cut off from his roots and culture, he aimlessly floats as a survivor of a shipwreck. "I don't know where I am going, I am just letting the days go by" (HL 125). In one bohemian part he meets

a fattish young man, Roger through whom he gets chances to write scripts for B.B.C. Then he writes some stories about India and on Indian themes. As the reviews are not encouraging, 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.

Even in love making, Willie is incompetent. He sleeps with prostitutes and friend's girl only to discover his sexual clumsy. He does not know how to go out and get a girl of his own. It is due to the cultural clash between Indian culture and Western culture. "In our culture there is no seduction. Our marriages are arranged. There is no art of sex." (HL 118). Once, a prostitute threw him off. He was 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.

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. Willie eases into the borrowed life of his wife's world. There is no commitment. He 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. One day he slips on the front steps of the estate house, and is hospitalized. 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)

Ana's grandfather, a Portuguese married to 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. She 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 leaves Ana and goes to Berlin to his sister Sarojini, who, like her brother, has also made an 'international marriage', to Wolf, a radical chic German documentary-maker. Within days of coming to Berlin, he begins to search within for the meaning of his life. He is

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not a fighter. He has lost his will to establish. He wants to sail along with the wind without knowing the destination. One should find a role or a place for oneself in this world and live or fight for it. He does not like to continue his life with Ana because of the war by guerrillas. He lacks in confidence and virility, a sort of unheroic hero, constantly in search of a new safeguard to lengthen his shadow.

Magic Seeds

Magic Seeds (2004) the sequel of *Half a Life*, opens with Chandran contemplating the fact that he cannot stay in Berlin with his sister Sarojini. After Africa, it is great refreshment, this kind of protected life, being almost a tourist. It ends the day Sarojini says to him, “you’ve been here for six months. I may not be able to get your visa renewed again ... You’ve got to start thinking of moving on” (MS 2). “Moving on” becomes both a strategy used by Chandran to maintain “the half and half-life” and a means of resisting the obligations to localities to which he finds himself so curiously detached and unattached. She talks glibly about Lenin and Mao and encourages him to take up a violent revolutionary cause. Willie listens ‘in his blank way’ and says nothing; but eventually shame and resolution grow in him, and he agrees to join a movement in India. Suffering a mid-life crisis, he becomes enraptured by his sister's revolutionary fervor.

Willie comes back to India and joins a movement of armed revolutionaries intent on ending the grip of feudal landlords on the countryside. But his real goal is not social revolution: time is running out for him to make a man of himself, and he figures he'll do it by fighting for a good cause. Almost as soon as he joins the guerrillas, he realizes he has made a mistake: he has fallen in among murderers and terrorists. What he finds among the revolutionaries are people like him, those searching for a purpose to their lives. The people they intend to free are just a convenience for their own interest. Willie's wild-eyed, his self-deceiving fellow comrades, the frustrated bureaucrats with domestic problems are the losers left in the wake of decolonization.

Willie is quickly disillusioned with the guerrillas but remains anchored with them out of fear that his former comrades might kill him. But eventually he realizes that he must leave. He thinks, “The most comforting thing about life is the certainty of death.” (MS 102). He surrenders and finds comfort in the jail. Willie, set free under the pretext of being an

erstwhile writer, negotiated by his British friend Roger, returns to a London. On reaching London, he asks Roger, “What will happen to me? How will I pass the time?” (MS 178). Willie finds sensual fulfillment through a mechanical sex with Roger’s wife, Perdita. He plods on, as do the rest of the people. He tries again to fit into an alien culture. As a result, the reader cannot help but focus on the inner picture, the progressive wearing away of all that would orient a man toward meaning. He finds a job in a publisher company. He joins a course on architecture. The weekend becomes wretched for Willie and he feels alienated. Willie never seems to know what will happen next. His character throughout the novel is entirely passive; he allows himself to be forced into action upon by the other characters in the book, while refusing to take any active role in charting his own destiny.

Migrant Behaviour

This kind of migrant behaviour is seen as a state of indeterminacy, of tentativeness, of ‘in-betweenness’. Migration, dislocation and ensuing marginality are some of the most important post colonial influences subverting the long-standing beliefs in the linearity of progress and the stability of cultural identity, and these have been the determining influences on the inner conditions of contemporary humanity. The following quote sums up Willie’s identity drama: “I have never slept in a room of my own. Never at home in India, when I was a boy. Never here in London. Never in Africa. I lived in somebody else’s house always, slept in somebody else’s bed. [...] Will I ever sleep in a room of my own?” (MS 177). His quest for identity takes him once more to another continent and back again, but it is the internal journey of self-discovery and final self-assertion that matters. Much of what is important in the book takes place inside Willie’s head, or in the letters to his sister that he begins to compose but rarely sends. His lack of a sense of belonging leaves Willie feeling, “I am like a man serving an endless prison sentence.”(MS 166)

A Dream Deformed

Half a Life and *Magic Seeds* offer a gripping glimpse at the sadness of a dream deformed. Willie has wandered the world listlessly looking for a meaning to his life. He is caught in a storm of different roles and he perishes realizing the futility of his search. He, in an understated way, is engaged in an epic struggle to come to terms with life. He seems to represent some sort of struggle to reassess the crisis and defend the revelation. The approach

‘Accept the fate and move the life peacefully’ gives the soul the happy wings. But is it worth living? It is an eternal tide in which every soul must get through to reach the shore and soil, whether it is fruitful or futile. Willie is half way in his journey. Willie Chandran may be an uninspiring character caught in the crisis of self deceiving, but he turns a perceptive one in the end. “It is wrong to have any ideal view of the world (as well as self). That’s where the mischief starts.”(MS 294).The book ends with Willie reflecting on his life and on Britain's new multi-racial identity

Internal Contradictions

The processes by which the new global order establishes and maintains itself contradict its own principles, which are concerned with the accessibility of technology, promotion of democracy, the free market and the narrowing of the gap between the rich and poor, the settled and displaced. Chandran and Sarojini are never afforded place or settlement. Chandran’s inability to identify himself with either place (locality) or cause (activism, human rights), or family, results from the exclusionary practices associated with globalization. He is a nomadic soul who drifts from India to England, to Africa, to India, and then back to England again, in pursuit of his own identity; a man who feels himself to be forever trapped within a "half and half world", (East and West) neither one thing nor the other. Chandran and Sarojini are subaltern voices attempting to resist, but overwhelmed by the hegemonic discourses associated with globalization.

Safety Belts

Cultural identity and National identity are safety belts that can save one and that can prove so efficient in the process of not losing one’s uniqueness and originality. Although adjustment to the changing world is a must and is highly recommended, keeping our national and personal conscience becomes a matter of urgency. One can enjoy being all the same only when one is different. And the best thing one can do is to remain faithful to self. These two novels remind us of the fictional musings of Camus and Sartre on existential pursuit of the ever unknowable and unreachable essence. Only few writers can portray the tangled mass of humanity and confusion of the postmodern and post-colonial era with such conviction as V.S. Naipaul.

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