

QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN V. S. NAIPAUL'S HALF A LIFE AND MAGIC SEEDS

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Abstract

This paper deals with V. S. Naipaul's Half a Life (2001) and its sequel Magic Seeds (2004) which depict the hybrid identity of Willie Somerset Chandran. Naipaul portrays the protagonist's constant exiled life from India, England, and Africa to rediscover and assert his self-identity. The events that come about to him are the mirror images of Naipaul's life. Willie's expatriate life and behavior have been shaped for the sake of the extensive effects of colonialism. This paper sheds more light on such a phenomenon which has made Willie an ambivalent, dependent person first in his homeland—India—and then disables him to see the miserable condition of his country as an intellectual person, drifts apart from whatever he possessed. Willie cannot settle down in one special place and is displaced from one place to the other ones. Finally, this paper shows how Willie's placelessness eliminates his identity and changes him to an ambivalent, mimic man.



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After Rabindranath Tagore, V.S. Naipaul is the second literary personality from Indian roots to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. Naipaul's most of the works deal with the theme of frustration, isolation and negation in a colonized society which turns out to be villainous, and hostile to the expectations and aspirations of the protagonist. Search for roots and identity is the foundation upon which the works of Naipaul stand (Prasad). The novelist himself had to face many obstacles to assert his identity in a exheridated tradition. The shelter is a burning issue for Naipaul's protagonist. They have to undergo a lot of tribulations, ups and downs. They have a

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desire for a free and fair existence but they are not able to cross the boundary of the colonial society.

Emphasizing the need for a house Naipaul states the meaning and significance of a house. He says that exile and home are the two faces of the same coin - the full meaning of one can be grasped properly only in relation to the other. Home is not simply where one lives. It is one's identity- national, cultural, spiritual. Home is where one belongs- it is the soil that has nurtured one's body and spirit. Home is security, Exile, the loss of home. A home is a place where a man gets solace and security. Home is the place with which we remain intimate even in moments of intense alienation. In diasporic literature, home varies from person to person. Vijay Mishra, a famous critic has aptly shared his views regarding Indian diasporic writers on a home which is quite appreciable here. He says:

Their homeland is a series of objects, fragments of narrative that they keep in their heads or their suitcases. In India, Africa and southeast Asia Colonial education made men ignorant of their own culture and traditions and made them exiles in their lands (Vijay Mishra; Zeleza).

The men became alienated in their own house. They talked about nostalgic sensibilities and feelings, articulating a pain for the loss of a secure home that had been left behind. V.S. Naipaul has some biographical sketches or else Indian names with Indian-based stories. Once Naipaul wrote to his mother from Oxford on May 3, 1954. saying:

I don't see myself fitting into Trinidad's way of life. I think I shall die if I have to spend the rest of my life in Trinidad. The place is too small, values are all wrong and people are pretty... Ideally I would like first of all to arrange for some sort of job in India[...]. (Naipaul *Between Father and Son: Family Letters*)

In his article Naipaul: An Indian Who is not an Indian Rama Kundu comments, "Even in the days of his childhood, the author had not learned to look at Trinidad as separate distinct homeland' in its own right. He was born and brought up in an island which was ethnically considered, but a replica of India." (Kundu)

In post-colonial literature, experience of exile and alienation is a common theme today. Some interesting psychological dimensions of this pragmatic experience may be traced back much earlier in the colonial situation of the indentured laborers in Africa and the Caribbean

islands which may have special bearing for the Indian reader in particular. Before focusing on *Magic Seeds*, it is important to get the important points of his previous novel *Half a Life*. The protagonist of *Half a Life* is Willie Chandran who is in search of stability and completeness in the whole novel. Novel *Half a Life* opens with a question by the protagonist to his father that why he is named after an English writer. Willie feels a sense of negation to himself when he did not get a justified answer. This sense of negation starts in Willie from the very beginning. Willie always thinks about his self-discovery. His mixed parentage shattered the bright prospect of his life. Willie's unusual experiences, his education, and his origin in early life make him uprooted. Willie was unable to settle down anywhere and finally he decides to go to London to get completeness and build his new identity. After reaching there, he finds himself in a different situation. He is an outsider there.

As a matter of fact Naipaul's secret art lies not in his personal attachment to the establishment-individual, tradition, culture, but in his creative detachment beyond geography, history and ethnicity. In this respect he is a bit different from his contemporary west Indian writers like Mil Moltzer, George Lamming and Wilson Harris. Naipaul has tried his best to project in his novels a sustaining course for all those who are rootless or homeless. Keith Garbhan rightfully holds the view:

“Naipaul explores landscapes in order to provide characters with a real home, a true place of belonging so that they will not continue to be homeless wanderers, unsure of themselves and their fates. But the mythology of the land is tinged with embarrassment, nervousness, hysteria and pessimism, all products in some way of Naipaul's own history as a colonial with an ambiguous identity.” (Prasad)

At the end of the novel *Half a Life*, Willie Chandran marries Ana, his girlfriend, and goes to Africa, leaving his country, culture, and personal identity behind. Willie started living in Africa with Ana in her house as husband and wife. He became famous there as Ana's London man. He hopes that she might bring him the fulfillment 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 despite appearances, men are looking for women to lean on (Naipaul *Half a Life*). And further, Ana was important for me because I depended on her for my idea of being a man (Naipaul *Half a Life*). Willie wants to discover some object in life through his sensual

associations and sexual encounters in Ana's Africa. When he slips down from steps in Ana's house he realizes that he has wasted the best part of his life by being Ana's London man. At last, Willie says to Ana:

"I am forty-one. I am tired of living your life [...] the best part of my life has gone, and I have done nothing [...] it would be still your life. I have been hiding for too long" (Naipaul *Half a Life*). This paraphrase shows Willie as a crestfallen man and he is broken from body and soul. He does not want to remember his past anymore. Ana is also tired of living with Willie. She is leading a half-life. Both of them are kept in the same situation so Ana said, "Perhaps it wasn't really my life either." (Naipaul *Half a Life*) Finally, the following lines reveal his philosophy of life: Willie thought, 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 as though I am staying (Naipaul *Half a Life*).

Finally, Willie decides to leave Ana and goes to Berlin to stay with his sister. All his expectations and dreams about Africa and Ana proved futile and pessimistic. Even in Berlin, he cannot find himself. He was a confused and perplexed man. Willie starts searching for his identity and roots. *Magic Seeds* starts where *Half a Life* comes to an end. In the novel, the novelist presents the characters who are products of a racial and cultural mixture. All the characters are living in a multi-cultural society. They are discovering their roots and identity (Shailesh Kumar Mishra). Throughout the novel, Willie has a quest for a fixed identity. One cannot achieve a fixed identity in multi-background. *Half a Life* has been set in three locations: first, post-independence India, then London, and finally pre-independence Africa. These all are the places with which Naipaul can identify. These three locations stand for different meanings in the novel for protagonist. India and Africa are inexact, vague, and pessimistic while London is clear and optimistic.

Willie deeply thinks that he must seize the time to construct his subjectivity because he has spent too much time leading a life of gypsy: He thought that how was I appeared in London. That is how I appeared now. I am not as alone as I thought. Then he thought:

I am wrong. I am not like them. I am forty-one 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 from myself. I

have risked nothing. And now the best part of my life is over. (Naipaul *Half a Life*).

In the novel *Magic Seeds* Naipaul brings the hero back to India from Africa after almost 18 years. The beginning of *Magic Seeds* is the ending of *Half a Life*. In *Magic Seeds*, we find Willie neglected and uprooted from his own culture. He cannot get any permanence satisfaction anywhere. He is unable to adjust anywhere. He leads a half-life. He has forgotten his roots and origin that is why he is very curious about finding his lost roots. Now he does not want to live without an identity.

After the gloomy period had gone, Willie is living in Berlin with his sister Sarojani. Willie feels relaxed after having faced a suffocating life in Africa. But soon we come to realize that all Willie's constructive purposes of taking control of his life are not destined to be fulfilled. His visa is expiring soon and Willie, exactly as it happened in London years before, is forced to face the reality of thinking about what to do. But the only answer that he can give his sister is "I don't see what I can do. I don't know where I can go [...] I was always someone on the outside. I still am. What can I do here in Berlin?" (Naipaul *Magic Seeds: A Novel*).

Willie is still lost and disillusioned in himself. His sense of negation and displacement has not diminished after the departure from Africa. Berlin is a new and promising place for Willie. Very soon he realize that this is not a city where he can settle. He is the victim of the colonial psyche. He rejects his previous life in London and Africa as an unauthentic life in which he did nothing but hiding his true self both to others and to himself. (Madhusudhana)

All his previous desires and needs now seem to him to have been "false", as they were not part of himself but the product of an alienated condition. It is at this point that Sarojini starts telling him about an Indian guerrilla movement whose leader is a certain Kandapalli: according to Sarojini this revolutionary movement, which fights to emancipate the poor low-caste Indian villagers from the land owners' abuse of power, is part of the same regenerative process in our world. Willie decides to join the movement and therefore leaves Berlin for India. A new kind of emotional life came to Willie, the time spent in Berlin seems like a time of reconciliation and revelation, a time in which Willie eventually manages both to find his location in the world and to develop a different, new, and more authentic way of relating with himself. After more than twenty years Willie saw India again:

India began for him in the airport in Frankfurt, in the little pen where passengers for India were assembled. He studied the Indian passengers there [...]. He saw India in everything they wore and did. He was full of his mission, full of the revolution in his soul, and he felt a great distance from them. India began to assault him, began to remind him of things he thought he had forgotten and put aside, things which his idea of mission had obliterated; and the distance he felt from his fellow passengers diminished. [...] He felt something like panic at the thought of India he was approaching. (Naipaul *Magic Seeds: A Novel*).

Somehow, he joins the guerrilla group and starts to live in the jungle, sometimes finding shelter in the small country villages, sharing his time exclusively with the other members of the movement. Willie's placement with communist guerillas is illogical and he thinks that: There has been some mistake. I have fallen among the wrong people. I have come to the wrong revolution. I don't like these faces. And yet I have to be with them. I have to get a message out to Sarojini or Joseph. But I don't know-how. I am completely in the hands of these people. (Naipaul *Magic Seeds: A Novel*). Willie is confused and perplexed by the people of the guerrilla movement. His mind is with several questions about his position.

Willie lost himself in conjecture about the people around him [...] They were all people in their late thirties or early forties, Willie's age, and he wondered what weakness or failure had caused them in mid-life to leave the outer world and to enter this strange chamber [...] Among these people [...] he was a stranger. (Naipaul *Magic Seeds: A Novel*)

After years of purposeless and risky life, here, lost in the jungle, Willie realizes that he is losing also himself, and therefore the only purpose becomes that of surviving. Willie says, "I've forgotten myself. Now I'm truly lost in every way. I don't know what lies ahead or behind. My only cause now is to survive, to get out of this." (Naipaul *Magic Seeds: A Novel*)

Eventually, together with another deserter of the movement, he escapes and he intentionally gives himself up to the police: for his involvement with the revolutionary actions he is given a ten-year sentence. Fortunately, Willie will not spend much time in jail due to the intervention of his sister Sarojini and his friend Roger, a lawyer, whom Willie met when he was

in London. After six months Willie is free and again bound for London. His return to London signs the last stage of Willie's peregrinations around the world.

Willie during his entire life keeps looking for his roots everywhere. Willie said, "It is the one thing I have worked at all my life, not being at home anywhere, but looking at a home." (Naipaul *Magic Seeds: A Novel*). There seems to be no magic and no miracle in the life of Willie Chandran but history is being repeated. Displaced life is not going to cease at all. The quest for roots continues (Tayal). Thus Willie represents the fragmented cultures and displaced populations. The title '*The Magic Seeds*' refers both to the abortive revolution sown by the revolutionaries and also to the seed that will produce a race-less society, a new class of drifters' for whom 'Home' remains a utopian dream which is never realized. Thus we see that Willie's search for self remains a cry for the moon.

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