



Cultural Conflict: A Study of V.S. Naipaul's *Half A Life*

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Culture is one of the most dominant concepts used in contemporary discourse about society. The concept is used by different ways. It refers to the pattern of beliefs and values, reflected in behavior and institutions that is passed on from generation to generation. Conrad Phillip Kattak (1987) offers a definition of culture:

Culture encompasses rule-governed, shared, symbol-based, learned behavior and beliefs transmitted across the generation. Everyone is cultured, not just people with elite educations. The genus Homo has the capacity for culture (in a general sense), but people live in specific cultures where they are raised according to different cultures. (qtd. In Berger 137)

Culture plays an important role in the development of an individual's identity. But when one culture assumes superiority over the other one, then it results in a clash between the two cultures. There are clashes of different beliefs and cultural values. This conflict makes a person alienated and indifferent from the native society and his roots. Jonathan h. Turner defines cultural conflict "as a conflict caused by differences in cultural values and beliefs that place people at odds with one-another." (Introduction 4) The term postcolonial is also concerned with cultural conflict. The colonial era left a culture the mixture of colonizers and that of colonized often marked by contrast and antagonism, resentment, and blended practice. The postcolonial critic Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) used the term 'other', Homi Bhabha's 'homelessness', Frantz Fanon used 'mimicry' and there are also terms as universalization, euro-centrism, subalterns, and hybridity often marked for the cultural conflict of a postcolonial nation. In postcolonial countries the problem of cultural conflict occurs due to the upper-hand of colonizers in every sphere of colonized's lives. They did it with the sense of martyrdom dedicated to the great course of spreading the light of their superior civilization among the backward peoples.

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul was born in 1932. He is one of the greatest novelists of Britain. Naipaul is a postcolonial writer. He sets his novels in both colonial as well as ex-colonial societies and gives a perspective account of the complexities inherent to such societies. Naipaul is a British writer known for his early comic novels of the wider world and his autobiographical chronicles and travels. Naipaul has published more than 30 books both of fiction and non-fiction, over 50 years.

He wrote both fiction and nonfiction works comprise *The Mystic Masseur* (1957; John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize), *Miguel Street* (1959; Somerset Maugham Award), *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) Mr. Stone and Knights Companion of short stories. In 1971 he was awarded the Booker Prize for *In A Free State*. *A Bend In the River* (1979) and *Half a Life* (2000) in 1960 he began travel. *The Middle Passage* (1962) records his impressions of colonial society in the West Indies and South America. *Letters between a Father and Son*, the early correspondence between the author and his family, appeared in 1999. In 1990, V.S. Naipaul received a knighthood for service to literature; in 1993, he was first recipient of the David Cohen British Literature Prize and also awards the Nobel Prize in literature in 2001.

Naipaul is a peculiar Indian diasporic writer of India, who was born in Trinidad and educated in London. He poised between two sharply opposed worlds. Thus, he grew into a consciousness marked by a dictomy. As Naipaul admitted in an interview with Rahul Singh:

"I was born in Trinidad. I have lived most of my life in England and India is the land of my ancestors. That says at all. I am not English not Indian, Not Trinidadian. I am my own person." (Times of India Feb. 19, 2002)

The novel *Half A Life* was published in 2001, the same year when he got Nobel Prize for his literary achievements. The novel begins with meaninglessness and ends on nothingness. The novel records Naipaul's exiled life in a multicultural society and his feeling of identity crisis. The novel *Half A Life* delineates Willie's constant exiled life from India, England, Africa, and Germany to attain self-identity but nowhere he feels at home. Homi Bhabha's theories of mimicry, hybridity, and third space, as the identity making process can be applied in the novel.

There is cultural alienation in Willie's blood because the father got married with an untouchable girl and deprived from his Brahmin cultural. Willie Chandran has no complete Identity of his origin since his birth. Like Homi Bhabha's notion of cultural translation a way of negotiation between two cultures Willie is also neither a complete Brahmin nor a dalit. He is struck between half identity and half culture of his father and his mother. Willie feels otherness from his ancestors. Willie's father set the example of half-lived life for his son Willie Chandran who follows this in same footsteps. He has no firm objectives, and ambitions. There



are moments of promise. In England Willie began 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. (Naipaul 60)

In half a life Naipaul attempts to render his feelings in an objective way. The portrait of Willie's father, who is given no name in the novel, is meant for a substitute of Somerset Maugham's Indian saint in *Razor's Edge*. Naipaul serves here the cultural clashes of the real life of ideas and the myths of these beliefs, which also seen by him when he came to India in 1960. Santwana Haldersays about Naipaul's own experience in India:

“Naipaul wants to replace ‘the ‘unseen’ by the seen and thus the portrait of Willie's father reveals what Naipaul has seen in India. He came to India for the first time in the early sixties. He search for an alternative civilization sanctified by the orientalist love received a setback, as he was rudely shocked by the object poverty, corruption, pretensions and intellectual complacency as portraits in *An Area of Darkness*.”(qtd. In Roy 234)

The novel begins with the words,

“Willie Chandran asked his father one day, why is my middle name Somerset? The boys at school have just found out and they are mocking me” (Half A Life).

From Willie's father's story, Willie understands his family, history, culture, heritage and roots. However, he could not accept that his middle name is after the famous English writer Somerset Maugham who visited Willie's father in the year before independence. Willie thus possesses only a half name. The novel seems to reveal Willie's father's intention that his son mimic the whites since he gave him half of a white man name Willie's can clearly see the gap between the mimicry of the colonizer and his desire to construct himself in a chaotic world. He is aware of the paradoxical nature of his mimicry and became a ‘mimic man’ however the western name his hallow because he cannot possess a western identity, simply only possessing by a western name. The contrast identifying with the western name his Indian name symbolizes the loss of his original culture.

Willie Chandran experiences in missionary school also caused cultural conflict. Here the father taught him about the culture that was different from his native culture. Here he thinks to have Christian life because the colonizers culture attracts him so much that he wished to have Christian to be a missionary in life. In his composition writings he reveals to be a child of Christian Parents and will go on a picnic with his Canadian mother and father. Willie got this idea to have modern life of the colonizers from American comic book which articulated in the missionary school. Because of his mother's education at the missionary school he sees her ‘a half Christian.’ So he boasted about his mother ‘a full Christian’ (Naipaul 58). He also adjusts his behaviour to certain things suited to the manners of a Christian.

He Says “my mother belongs to Christian community of the sub continent [...] almost as old as Christianity itself.” (Naipaul 58) But father always remain only a Brahmin. So Willie is entangled between two opposite cultural communities. However Willie saw a missionary magazine showing on its cover page a picture of a priest with glasses and a wristwatch standing with one foot on the statue of Lord Buddha and chopping it down with an axe. This picture shocked him and he removes the missionary ideas from his mind Willie is suffered from western education as his father from the Eurocentric education system that imposed on him as subaltern.

So the education of European history, literature, music, and language makes him to feel alienated from his own culture about which he never taught by teachers. Willie's identity is unfixed and changing just like the concept of identity expounded upon by Homi Bhabha. He cannot try to achieve one fixed identity because of his multi-background parenthood.

The novel has three settings; first there is post independent India, then London, Capital of Britain, the most powerful colonizers of world, and finally pre-independent Africa. Meenakeshi Mukherjee contends that for Naipaul, “All three are places that Naipaul can identify with. However these three locations seem to signify different meanings in the novel. India and Africa are inexact and vague,” while the representation of London with street names and other markers is clearer, thus, “England is situated at a different level of reality, firm and stable, while other regions can be relegated to haziness”(Mukherjee 1, 5)

There are a lot of myths about superiority of the colonizers. The ground for cultural colonization was prepared through the propagation of myths about the colonized masses that projected them in the most unfavourable light. These myths instilled a feeling of inferiority in the minds of the colonized and psychologically conditioned them for the process which the Europeans chose to call “modernization.” Naipaul deals with the sex taboos and modernization that lacks Willie when he was in India. Willie through his relationship in London and Africa comes to know the difference between Eastern and Western approaches of life. Naipaul seeks to make his stand clear after Willie's first unsuccessful sexual encounter with Juno in London. Juno said to him:

“A friend of mine says it happens with Indians. It is because of the arranged marriages. They don't feel they have to try hard. My father said his father used to tell him, satisfy the women first. Then think of yourself.’ ‘I don't suppose you had anybody telling you anything like that. Willie thought of his father with compassion for the first time.”(Naipaul 69)



After each new sexual experience, Willie thinks of his wretched father in India who never has opportunity to enjoy sexual life, and was gradually absorbed into melancholy. Willie begins to sympathise his father more and more became critical of the suffocating conditions in India. Through Willie's reactions Naipaul sends the message to India, "Life is being accepted fully and naturally and any pose or make believe leaves on crippled and unable to enjoy life" (Naipaul 239) the father represents political colonized and Willie is cultural colonized.

In London, Willie came in contact with lot of people belongs to different races who had come to London to try their luck as influenced by modern cultured I here they learnt that English people don't like to rent rooms for the accommodation of the black people. This shows the hatred of white race towards colonized culture. Naipaul also expends him them into a study of culture of different races including a study of interracial sex relationship.

"Marxism takes him to the bedroom and Marxism stone in the bedroom.

All the women he seduces know that."(Naipaul 91)

Willie who has Indian origin felt shy when he saw nude picture of racism and sexual oppression in England. Exploitation on the name of Marxism is thus openly attacked in the novel through character of Richard. Naipaul's characters share his homelessness. The characters who have mixed culture and multi origin show how they struggle to find their identity, the characters also adopt the English life style to deny one or more social characteristics in order to become "more respectable" in their estimation. But they eventually discover that their identity cannot be fixed because they are the fruits of multiple cultures. All characters Percy Cato, Marcus, Graca, Ana, Sorojini Richard, Carla, and Alvaro all have no proper place in the world. All are exiled in their characteristic modes. They all are searching for the fullness of their lives.

"There is colonial riot in the novel which shows the highest degree of cultural conflict. The first riot and movement in the novel is Civil Disobedience which the father suffered a lot and Willie sees race riot in London is also given:

"The race riot began in Notting Hill. The silent streets became full of excited people. The houses that had seemed tenanted only by the very old and passive now let out any number of young men in mock Edwardian clothes who roamed the streets looking for blacks (Naipaul 109)

In this background of racial riot Willie was again affected by his earlier feeling of remaining hidden. When he find people casually saying. "Those blacks are going to be a menace." (Naipaul, 109). He feels at once threatened and ashamed. "He felt people were looking at him. He felt the newspapers were about him. After this he stayed and didn't go out to college and left London to Africa with Ana (Naipaul 109)

In Africa Willie experienced a new kind of culture. There were the Portuguese, the African-Portuguese, and the Arabs commonly known as Mohammedan. Through the corruption in the government offices and the social organization Naipaul found fault not only with the colonial power, but also with a section of the colonized.

The description of the glorious culture of Africa, Naipaul also portraits children beggars and children prostitutes complete the picture of corruption both in culture and system. Riot makes Willie more and more and more afraid. He shares Ana's estate and feels completeness of a man. He is now in her colony as the London man of Ana. The African revolt also helps him to realize that to realize that he spend 18 years of his life, perfectly useless. This makes Willie to leave Ana and Africa and he goes to Germany where Sarojini was married with a German Photographer.

India, realizes him into sensuality confusion of caste-system and class system in England. Willie's experience and realization of helplessness in life are reflected in the transcontinental migration and multi-dimensional social cultural environment.

"So Willie comes close to the figure of the post colonial migrant intellectual signifying a universal condition of hybridity. Homi Bhabha's views on the migrant experience as a Post colonial metropolitan assimilation may be recalled in this novel." (Singh6)

Thus, the novel shows cultural conflict through the character of Willie Somerset Chandran. The other characters in the novel also shares their feelings of meaninglessness of life, colonial influence, Placelessness, nationlessness, isolation, and alienation from own culture with one-another. Willie Chandran who entangled between two apposite costs by his birth and cultural by his name as well as class throughout his life. He never feels himself complete. The cultural conflict from which Willie suffered is autobiographical element of the author himself. Willie shares Naipaul's homelessness, identity crisis, exiled life, aimless journeys, and loss of origin in the novel. In fact, Willie Somerset Represents colonial as well as postcolonial issues that results in cultural conflict of a person, society and nation.



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