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

T. Antony Cruz<sup>1</sup>, Dr. R. Mayilraj<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar of English A.V.V.M. Sri Puspam College (Autonomous) (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Trichy), Poondi-613503, Tanjore, Tamilnadu, India.

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor of English & Research Advisor, A.V.V.M Sri Puspam College, (Autonomous) (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University Trichy), Poondi-613503, Tanjore, Tamilnadu, India.

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### Abstract

Identity is the innate craving for recognition which has been with everyone. No one wants his self-esteem to be trampled underfoot. The longing for recognition has been with mankind ever since one's own birth. As people live in the world, they encounter diverse aspects of life. The subjects range from religion, caste, tradition, culture. This paper aims at projecting the various issues that entangle weaker sections of people as well as people of all sorts.

**Key Words** Identity crisis, caste, association, misery, disappointment, dogmas and beliefs.

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### Introduction

Vidiadhar Suraj Prasad Naipaul is one of the prominent writers of Post-colonial literature. His subjects revolve around Rootlessness, identity crisis, alienation, a sense of nostalgia. He brings to the core the issues of immigrants. The issues are dealt in such a way that a resolve can be arrived at. The subject of identity crisis is almost obvious in every culture and every country. The author has given the finest approach that the issue is yet to be marked and noticed. Ever since the inception of the human race this issue has remained the subject of agony to the entire human race.

The underlining theme of the novel *Half a Life* (2001) is identity crisis. The subject has been apparent in all the works of Post-colonial literature. There are many factors that determine one's own identity. Factors such as religion, caste, name, social status and so on continue to be prevalent in the works of Post-colonial writers. The central subject of this novel is about Willie Chandran who is the protagonist of this novel. He is born in India. He is searching for identity. The name which he is given does not give him a sense of identity. The search continues from his very name itself. His full name is Willie Somerset Chandran. The middle name 'Somerset' is given in memory of the writer Somerset Maugham. The writer during his visit to the village meets his father. The author makes an indelible mark

in the life of his father. The father of Willie wants his son to be a writer. His devotion for the writer is immense. That is the reason why he has a collection of the works of the author. He wants the same inspiration to be found with Willie. To his dismay it happens the other way around. Willie finds his middle to be something odd. He does not feel proud of this new name. Rather it creates in him a kind of aversion towards his playmates. Name is the most important entity which defines an individual. The human tendency suggests that one needs to be accommodated and identified in the society one becomes part of. Mockery is unacceptable in any cultures. It reduces human dignity and self-esteem. An individual has no right to offend the other individual by any means. Verbal and physical abuses of any kinds in the names of sects, community and people's groups are highly restricted and condemned. Some sects of people with the man-made theories or beliefs never bother about the consequences which affect their fellow beings being affected. The words of Thiruvalluvar are evident with the reality of life. There is a healing for the wounds that are caused by fire. There is no quick cure for words that offend one deeply. In the same way, Willie is deeply hurt or wounded that he demands the reason for the middle name 'Somerset'.

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.' (1)

Association with people around is the most important aspect of life. There can never be a life with isolation. Man is described as a 'social animal'. He depends on the other for the reciprocal living. Living becomes meaningful and complete with the rendering of one's genuine service to the other. Life comes to a standstill if everyone works toward his or her own wellbeing. Willie's longing for recognition and acceptance among his friends is reasonable and natural. The reason for the middle name is expounded by his father. The western society insists upon the rights of the individuals, freedom and choices in all the aspects of life. And the identity is based upon one's own deeds and actions. The identity for the individual depends upon one's own religion, caste, status in the east. That is why many characters in this novel languish with identity crisis. As Willie's father explains the reason for middle the name 'Somerset', he recounts the identity crisis that he himself has undergone in his life. He, as a young man goes through a series of struggles. An individual is always in a dilemma at one's young age. There are varied doctrines and ideologies which one happens to go through. Many a time or often everyone in the world faces innumerable beliefs, customs and teachings which appear to be appealing, enhancing and educative. People are not exposed to the reality of every theory as soon as one comes across. A person cannot switch over from one ideology to the other in quick succession. Such an attitude instills in him a kind of backward lifestyle. To emerge successful in life one ought to hold on to a teaching or doctrine of one's own selection. Willie's father has been under the influence of the call of Mahatma Gandhi to quit English education. Pursuit of an ideology involves a lot of guts. There can be times of wavering, doubts as a person proceeds with a view and an idea of life. Dogmas, traditions and customs of the society encounter individuals with appeal and strong base of life. Every teaching survives to the test of time. Education plays a major role in molding and shaping the lifestyle of the individuals. He thinks that there can be identity of life following the call of Mahatma and his teachings. To his dismay, he finds himself to be unfit for life. Every individual is created with unique characteristics with a lifestyle of his own. None succeeds following the other. Emerson says succinctly in his essay 'Self-reliance'.

"There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide". (62)

It is agreed upon with one's own sense which is explicit that individual's choice of life is utmost for life. Selection of a particular ideology seems to be inevitable. A person doesn't have to be carried away by someone's. This can result in a life with instability. Throughout the recounting of his past to Willie, he admits that the oscillation exists between the precepts of Mahatma Gandhi and his practical life.

“The English literature I knew about was Browning and Shelley and people like that, whom I had studied at the university, for the year or so I was there, before I foolishly gave up English education in response to the mahatma's call, and unfitted myself for life, while watching my friends and enemies growing in prosperity and regard.”(2)

Willie's father feels elated for some time with the way of life. He strives hard to succeed in all his endeavors. It is common with everyone that people put the blame on fate when things don't work out their ways. Decisions based upon emotions are fluid in nature. He does not work out the concrete decisions on his own. There are numerous fluctuations in his actions. He moves forward to execute his determination of following Gandhi with loyalty. As a devout follower of Gandhi, he wants to marry his own classmate who belongs to the lowest of the low. At first, it is exhilarating, enthusiastic and commendable feats. Sooner or later he is filled with hatred, contempt and bitterness for the girl. When he becomes close to her, his love for her remains unstable. Events and decisions of life eventually fill him with confusion. The end of this lifestyle leaves him in identity crisis. Men have been on the quest for identity since their birth. This quest varies from person to person. A particular subject matter does not have to be common to all. To the one it can be the religion and to the other it can be the social system which can sap the power and energy completely. The one a person trusts in can turn out to be detrimental. This has become a reality in the life of Willie's father. Willie's mother goes through a crisis of a kind which roots out human dignity. The culture of the society is engineered with the discrimination of caste. She has been born in the low caste. This degrading social status makes her life miserable. She is not permitted to study along with other students. The entire society has been gored with the manacles of caste. It makes the lives of the individuals pathetic beyond boundary. Willie's mother, as a young child goes to school despite many resistances. Her self is wounded beyond recovery. She severely suffers from discrimination of caste. She is expelled from the school with words of abuse. The country or the society that must give life to the individuals acts as a source of conflicts and torments. She largely suffers from identity crisis. For Willie, the protagonist the world is not a safe and secure to live in. He assumes that movement from one place to another can perhaps make sense. He is like his father taking or following the lifestyle of some one that he can find fulfillment, meaning and purpose in life. His association with the Canadian school seems to be successful at first. Over the years, things become clear to him that it leads to his horror. His father manages to send him to London for studies. His father is of the opinion that his life has become a big failure without proper education. He does not want his son to live a life of misery. He is of the belief that Education is the powerful weapon that can dispel darkness of any kinds. Willie wishes to be a missionary. With the help and direction of his father he alters his decision. He goes to London as per the direction of his father. He finds himself with a cultural shock. His dream of becoming a writer comes to the fore. Though the west believes in the freedom of the individual, he experiences some degree of crisis in the west. His sister sarojini dissuades him to become a writer. She works with a vision of making her brother a mark in the history of the world. She continually persuades him to be a part of the war which makes life meaningful. His own career of being a writer does not make him become a writer. The recognition is present with a lesser degree. Reader like Ana encourages him to pursue the career with commitment. He

finds Ana to be a potential life partner with whom he wishes to live the rest of his life. Perhaps his accompaniment with Ana to Africa may give a sense of life. Rather he grows tired of her. Thus the issue of quest for identity makes him move from one type of living to the other. The conclusion of the subject is that one should persevere one's own goal and ambition irrespective of disappointment, failures and dissuasion. If one is not firm in one's own determination, he or she becomes a subject of contempt, ridicule and rejection in the society. The individual ought to be like a lighthouse encountering storm, heat, and thunder and lightning. If the individual is flexible, he is liable to be shaken by everyone. His father shakes him to pursue his wishes. His sister constantly finds fault with his deeds and actions. Ana leads him in a way which is not his own. The life of Willie is made miserable as he gives room for decision making. It is needed that one should give heed to the others' views and ideas. When a person follows strictly without analyzing and examining the ideas of others, he or she loses his uniqueness and individuality. Emptiness or identity crisis continues to exist and bankrupts the life of the individual. The discernment of choosing good and evil, right and wrong has been endowed with everyone. It is the responsibility of the individual to remain cautious and conscious that one may maintain his own identity. One should not depart from natural inclination with which one has been made with purpose. Otherwise the life of an individual goes on to be with conflicts, confusion, misery, bitterness and identity crisis.

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