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CAN THERE BE A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN: A CRITICAL STUDY
OF IDENTITY AND HOME IN *THE IN-BETWEEN WORLD OF
VIKRAM LALL AND HALF A LIFE*



Furrukh Faizan Mir

DISCUSSION

Half a Life

Thomas Wheeler in *The Immigrant Experience* (1971) says: The history of immigration is the history of alienation and its consequence for every freedom won, a tradition lost. For every second generation assimilated, a first generation in one way or other spurned. For the gains of goods and services, an identity lost, and uncertainty found.

Half a Life begins with a probe, a query about one's name, the very first source of identity for any individual. The protagonist, Willie feeling baffled by his unique name asks (2001:1): "Why is my middle name Somerset? (his full name being Willie Somerset Chandran). The boys at school have just found out, and they are mocking me. His father said without joy, 'You were named after the great English writer. I am sure you have seen his book about the

Abstract

Modern contemporary literature is replete with alienated and estranged beings. It mirrors the general disillusionment and spiritual barrenness felt by man in a world that seems bizarre and unfathomable to him. This sense of alienation and unbelongingness however, gets even more pronounced in diasporic writings. The present paper is an attempt to tease out and present a kaleidoscopic view of one's origin, which gets unrelentingly represented as "identity" in terms of a variety of categories like one's language, class, race, gender and sexuality in two most celebrated works of diasporic experience, The In-Between World of Vikram Lall by M G Vassanji and Half a Life by V S Naipaul. The paper aims to explore the rootlessness, angst, dilemma, alienation, the heart wrenching queries about origin, colonization, the resultant expatriate experience, and its effect on their identity, culture, history and overall existence. This study will throw light on how in the present day world, the expatriate has become the modern wandering Jew, vacillating between two worlds, "one dead the other powerless to be born", hankering from place to place in order to settle down for some identity and find some place that they could finally call 'home'. The above areas of concern will be studied keeping in view Homi Bhaba's concept of hybridity, Said's Orientalism, Benedict's idea of Imagined Communities, and Lacan's notion of identity.

Keywords : diaspora, identity, mimicry, alienation, rootlessness, home.

Short Profile

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house."

The very opening of the novel sets in the ambiance of the work, and we know that we are in for a journey that questions the very essence of a person's being. The question gives us a peep into the underlying pain associated with the dilemma when the very fundamental quintessence of one's identity, that is one's name, seems to be somewhat murky and ambiguous. The reply of this interrogation unfolds slowly and steadily the irony of Willie's existence and also sets up the backdrop of his 'half-discovered', 'half-lived' and 'half-realized' life in 'half-made' societies with denizens themselves living a life of 'in-betweenness'. The first portion of his name, 'Willie Somerset' propounds that he's a Christian, the second half, suggests he is a Hindu, and both put together hints towards

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his mixed, compound and antagonistic ancestry and a complex portrayal about his roots. This search for his roots takes him first to post independent India. He realizes that the half-ness of his life is because of his father trying to construct an 'image' for himself as true disciple of Gandhi, marries a woman of low cast in spite of being a Brahmin. However, his father eventually gets caught in the vicious circle of image 'construction', and loses even the identity he already had. As a result, Willie seems to be caught in a sort of limbo, as on the one side, being a half-Brahmin, he cannot digest his low caste, and on the other, he is not welcomed in the Brahmin community completely due to his mother belonging to the low cast. Thus, the very concept of fabricating one's identity to which Willie later on resorts begins with his father.

Another interesting connection found in *Half a Life* is between knowledge and identity. Willie's mother belonging to the lowest socio-economic status doesn't get opportunity for a decent education, and as such finds no place in the social stratum and hence remains a non-entity with no identity at all. However, ironically for Willie, the more educated he gets, the more conscious he gets of the world around, the more he gets his personal identity via his education, the more distant he gets from his family. This disparity within Willie, gives rise to apprehension in him and he deals with it by running from it, and just like his father tries to create a different image for himself. As a child when he is asked to write an essay, he pours out all the displeasure he had for his father and his oriental background by exhibiting himself as a Canadian, and keeps on inventing lies after lies in order to negate his roots, his history and somehow get rid of his half-ness, getting day by day stuck deep in his own creations. His father realizing this says: "I used to think you were me and I was worried at what I had done to you. ...you are somebody I don't know, and I worry for you because you are launched on journey I know nothing of (49). He also says: "His mind is diseased. He hates me, he hates his mother This is what the missionaries have done to him with mom and popand American magazine...I will ignore it. I will keep a vow of silence so far as he is concerned". (47). In order to search for a new self for himself and flee from his shameful past and lineage he goes to London, but ironically here too, instead of finding that completeness, he loses even the half-life that he had. Everything from food, to people, to education repels

him; he began to see himself again as a 'misfit'. "The learning he was being given was like the food he was eating, without savor" (58). He tried to escape from his roots, his history, and that is a sin and it has to be paid for. In London, however, he realizes that he has the unrelenting freedom that he always pined for. As they say old habits die hard, in order to begin a fresh life in London Willie again starts building up an 'image' for himself, an image that is borrowed and manufactured, he kept his father as a Brahmin, projected his mother as belonging to an ancient Christian community, made his grandfather a courtier, he began to play with identities, roots and history giving him an immense sense of power and pride in his abilities. Nonetheless, one positive aspect of living in London was that Willie realized that he was not the only one suffering and walking on slippery grounds, he came across a number of people who like him were living half lives, noticeable among them was his friend, Percy Cato "a Jamaican of mixed parentage and was more brown than black" (61). He like Willie wasn't proud of his background, and like him, he too gives fictitious accounts of his past. His father being brought there as a laborer, is made a clerk by him, not only this, he even dresses immaculately to hide his humble background, doing all this is, is his defense mechanism against his embarrassing and modest actuality. This brings to mind Said's concept of Orientalism, where everything related to the non western is regarded as second rate and what is more, what gives power to such discourse is the easily internalization of such notions by the natives. Also we find echoes of Bhaba's *mimicry* here, where the native feeling himself to be inferior try to fit in the 'superior' culture by mimicking it, but the result is the neither the one he aspires to be, nor the native he once was, it is a state of 'halfness' and 'in-betweenness'.

Willie's sexual inadequacy is another miserable ingredient of his half-ness, feeling jealous of his friends' sexual comfort, Willie tries despairingly to sleep with prostitutes and girls who are not even his, but his friends' girlfriends. Willie finds himself yet again caught in-between the immense freedom to have premarital sex in West, and his Indian heritage, which tries to hold him back, where such things are considered to be taboo.

The only character with whom he gets completely is Anna. The base of this magical

magnetism is Willie's need for wholeness. An instantaneous nexus is struck between the two because of her half-ness. She too like him belonged to a mixed descent. Her identity crisis makes him forget his own, he feels complete, free and confident around her. He didn't need to 'fit in' or impress anyone while around her. "What was most intoxicating for Willie was that for the first time in his life he felt himself in the presence of someone who accepted him completely. One immediately at this point goes to Lacan where identity is not fixed by it is fluidic and gets constructed in interaction with others, what the outer world reflects back to us after coming in touch with us becomes our image "At home his life had been ruled by his inheritance. It spoiled everything" (125). In search of an anchor, Willie kept drifting from Asia to London and finally to Africa, along with Ana. He realizes that going to Africa would mean the change of his language for the third time or to put it more clearly the loss of his present language, the only means of expressing himself. The exploration for identity has thus shoved him into a locus of silence. As Asha Choubey (2002) puts it, one of the biggest things that immigration puts at stake is threat to the immigrants' heritage, one of the means of protecting it is language, and it is this language, on which Willie seems to lose hold. In Africa, his identity gets even murkier. Here he is expected to 'belong', to 'adjust', he lacks a sense of belongingness, confessing to his sister he says that in Africa he has lost even the halfness with which he had come in London, where he was at least known as Willie Chandran in Africa however, he has become "Ana's London man". Willie wants to come out of the callous circle of false or half images that he had been living in right through his life. He does not want to be "Mr. Exile", "Mr. Nowhere Man" or "Ana's London Man" (136). He tells Ana after spending eighteen years in Africa: "I can't give you anymore. I can't live your life anymore. I want to live my own" (128). To which Ana's realizing his position perfectly says: "Perhaps, it wasn't really my life either". (128).

The In-Between world of Vikram Lall

Like *Half a Life*, this novel too seizes our attention at its very inception, and suggests that it is going to be a biographical narration of an Indian named Vikram Lall. The uncanny, catchy and ambiguous phrase "in-between" of the title sets in the mood out rightly. *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*

is an interesting endeavour by Vassanji to traces out migration and its indelible sway on the identities and lives of his characters. It makes an effort to trail the peculiar and somewhat uncertain place that Asians of Kenya find themselves in; they are neither native Africans nor European. They feel at 'home' neither in Indian, nor in Africa. They feel unrooted in Africa in spite of living there and enjoying its legal status. This book unravels all the quintessential contours of diaspora, and the immigrant's heart jolting search for his place, identity and completeness in the world around. One thing, that stands out, in this work, is the account of people who are caught 'in-between'. It validates how an individual is torn between the pressures of race and nation. The events in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* are unfurled by Vikram Lall, a Kenyan born Indian, now living in Canada. He begins by giving a seductive account of the peaceful and ordered life he lived in Kenya as a child. This life however, goes topsy-turvy as soon as the Mau-Mau rebels increase their raids against the whites. They kill the entire Bruce family including Vikram's beloved Annie in a ghastly attack. This macabre incident leads to anarchy and a sense of deep displacement for everybody. Like many others, Vikram's family too goes to Nairobi leaving the now newly independent nation they once called 'home'.

In a very mesmerizing manner, against the backdrop of Kenyan political and national struggle the book brings to light the aspirations, dreams and inhibitions of many Asian Africans including that of Vikram Lall. We find in the year 1965, Vikram successful in securing a place for himself and his family due to his abilities and hard work, but his corrupt employee Paul Nderi, makes him a scapegoat and gets him involved in a money scam, earning him from the very people who lauded him, the title of being "one of Africa's most corrupt men", and "a cheat of monstrous reptilian cunning". Vassanji, thus, investigates the search for place and identity of many immigrants like Vikram Lall who feel anchor less and find their identity in jeopardy. The reader doesn't find Vikram to be an independent, confident individual who acts in whatever manner he wants, but he seems to be caught in a situation where he has to follow what he is told to do, even though he recognizes it to be wrong. For Vikram, this obscurity of his identity continues to cripples him morally as well as emotionally way into his later

years. Likewise, Vikram's grandfather, Anand Lall also feels the 'in between' nature of his life, he was brought to Canada from India as an indentured worker and since then he and his family's position has remained that of an inscrutable 'misfits'. They are considered as 'outsiders', as the 'other' by both natives as well as the colonizers. The natives feel that they have their feet in two places, when they feel hot at one place they can easily go to the other, failing to realize their strange and uncanny situation. Vikram thus feels stuck in a sort of limbo, where he feels that he is neither a native like Njoroge nor is he like Bill and Annie, the children of European couple; Is he an Indian? Is he an African or Is he a Canadian? What is he? This question keeps on haunting him. His sister Deepa too seems to be caught in the 'middle' ground between the white and the black communities. Deepa and Njoroge's love which defies all shackles, crossing the threshold of cultural, religious and racial obstacles, doesn't realize that in such a racial and murky society interracial love is not only 'taboo' but may have dire consequences as well. Love in such nationalist novels, leaps across politically unbridgeable fissures, such as intercaste, interclass, and interracial marriages and sexual unions. Deepa's parents staunchly oppose her decision by saying: "What do you mean you will marry anyone whom you want? We are not Europeans, remember that, we are desis, Indians. Proud Indians, we have our customs, and we marry with the permission and blessings of our parents! You will do as you are told, girl!" (184-185). Vikram even though encouraging his sister's 'taboo' romance reconciles himself with the fact that he cannot court Yasmin, a Muslim girl. A consequences of such an interracial love made them victims of a vehement attacked by a mob of Tanzanian Muslims who found it quiet unpalatable that a Punjabi Hindu, Vikram should court a Muslim, whose sister is dating an African.

Then there is the heart touching account of how the Lall family empathizes with Rama's exile when he is the subject of Anand Lall's stories, for Anand, life has narrowed down to a reminiscence of Indian mythology and Kenyan history. He tells his grandchildren "Indian tales of Lakshman and Rama and Sita speaking with monkeys and devils in the enchanted forests of a distant land" (18), but for the children, "the lion stories (of Kenya) were always favourite, because they were scarier and so much

more immediate and realistic" (18). This manifests the fact that the children have already accepted Kenyan history as their own than the history/mythology of a distant land. On hearing such sorts of myth, Vikram, the protagonist comments, "India was always fantasyland to me" (19). No doubt he was brought up in Africa, but his lineage is Asian, He had thus inherited mechanically the traditional ways of life from his elders even without understanding their real connotation. He says, "Even now, even here in this Canadian wilderness, I cannot help but say my namaskars, or salaams, to the icons to carry faithfully with me, not quite understanding what they mean to me" (20). The Indian families in Nakuru celebrate Diwali and have shrines in their homes rather than looking up to Mount Kenya to search for guidance supplied by Ngai, the god of the Kikuyu.

This aspect of cultural hiatus at once brings to mind Anderson's concept of national communities. Benedict Anderson (1983) says that our belongingness constitutes what is called "an imagined community". Communities are not to be acclaimed by their falsity/genuineness, but by their style in which they are imagined. Nations, Anderson suggests, are not only sovereign political entities but "imagined communities". One has to see how do people imagine their relation to home, what is the nature of their belongingness? How do they feel the sense of difference or belongingness after diaspora?

Even though Vikram swings back and forth between his Asian and African tendencies, he still yearnings for England, the land of Annie, Bill, the Queen, the world that holds out electrifying and wonderful possibilities out there. He feels he is the native of the country when on a train journey through Kenya: "But this, all around me, was mine, where I belonged with my heart and soul" (Vassanji, 2004, 121). It is, pleasurable nonetheless to observe, that this feeling of belonging is unyieldingly bound to space and not to the 'natives' occupying it. The following questions keep on haunting Vikram: "I told myself how desperately I loved this country that somehow could it not quite accept me? Was there really something prohibitively negative in me, and in those like me, with our alien forbidding skins off which the soul of Africa simply slipped away?" (325) incredibly signalizes the "the Land of Not-Yet" (193). Eventually, Vic moulds himself to live a new life as he depicts, "Life beginning of truth and reconciliation"

(397).

Despite his position as the 'other' where his being African is contested, Vikram renovates his Kenyan identity along position and class connections. Getting over with his studies in Tanzania, he joins post-independence political in Nairobi. He makes a dramatic progression from being a humble railway inspector to becoming Kenyan government's chief money launderer. Both these position thus deconstruct the stereotypical positions associated with Kenyan Indians. Through his financial dealings, he who was earlier labeled as "one of Africa's most corrupt man" now becomes "one of the chosen few among the nation's multitude" (Vassanji, 2004: 323). When Jomo Kenyatta invites Vikram to call him father, he appeared to have finally adopted and embraced the identity of a 'native' Kenyan. However, in spite of all this, as soon as his serviceability outwears a new president from a different ethnic group is established, rejecting him and making him leave the country he once called "home".

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it is commendable to observe that both Vassanji and Naipaul, have successfully in their novels portrayed colonialism as being not a mere geographical or military conquest, but an unfortunate event in history of mankind, that left behind it trails of spine-chilling scars and agonies. Such anguishes still echo in the tragic lives of expatriates transplanted mostly as indentured laborers to various parts of the world. The trauma, however, does not stop there, the future generations of such people even after living for so many years in the new place, still feel as rootless as their elder generations, in fact they have become the living tragedies of multicultural experience in its most horrendous aspect. Various characters in both the novels, especially the protagonists, realize the futility of search for identity and home, though identity at many times appears to be within reach for them, it remains largely an illusion. They finally discern that identity is not fixed or stable, but gets created in the process of making. They take a step forward and maintain a positive attitude by deciding to face the dilemma of their fluidic identity without fear and accept it rather than withdraw from it. Willie no longer wants to be Ana's "London man" and Vikram Lall wants to start a new life, "a life as simple and pure as the mountain streams" (389). Therefore, they

characters in the novel do find a room for themselves but not in the conventional manner that they would have expected, but by accepting the ambiguous nature of their identity and moving on positively to find a niche for themselves.

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