

Living Without Living: Desolation and the Hollow Self in V.S. Naipaul's Half A Life and Magic Seeds

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Abstract: V.S. Naipaul (1932-2018) was one of the post colonial writers born in Trinidad on August 17, 1932 in Chaguanas. He has written both fiction and non-fiction. Over fifty years he has published more than thirty books. He was awarded Nobel Prize for literature in 2001. His own life caught between India, the Caribbean and England. He spent his writing career in a honest way to talk about people who do not belong anywhere and who try hard to build a real sense of who they are. *Half a Life* (2001) and *Magic Seeds* (2004) were written by Naipaul in which the protagonist Willie Chandran was introduced in *Half a Life* and his journey continues in *Magic Seeds*. For eighteen years, Willie lives in Africa without caring about anything. Throughout his life, he has never fully satisfied. Eventually he faces desolation and hollow self. Willie's emptiness is not a personal weakness but a colonial upbringing which provide him no basic ground to abide on and no vivid sense of who he was or where he belonged. His displaced self makes him to feel personal alienation and desolation.

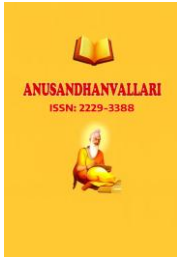
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FULL PAPER

V.S. Naipaul has written the novel *Half a Life* in the year 2001 in the same year he won the Nobel Prize for literature. The novel sets in India, Africa and Europe. It centres around Willie Somerset Chandran, who is the son of a Brahmin father and Dalit mother. Due to his family background he feels ashamed. He has an elder sister called Sarojini. He loved his mother to the core but later the relationship started to distance itself. At the age of 18, he leaves from India to London to study at University on a scholarship. Willie had to change all his habits and manners in the university in which everyone there was stylish and pompous. On the whole he forced to mimic the culture of others.

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry is expressed here. Bhabha argues that the colonial education system makes people who are trained to mimic the culture of the coloniser, but they can never fully become part of it. They try hard to get in the middle but that is not their original culture. It is not truly belonging to the metropolitan culture either (Bhabha 122). This is the position of Willie. He was educated in London, there he mimics the way the people who are in London behave. His experiences are not original. There he has got the aloofness.

Willie published a book while he was in London. There he got a response from a fan called Ana who fanatically loves Willie. She makes him feel confident because she accepts him for who he is. He doesn't want to close his identity with her and finally they married. They settled in Africa, the Portuguese colony in which Ana's grandfather established a mighty estate house. Willie lived with Ana for 18 years. But eventually Ana wanted a divorce from him. He lived his life without living. The desperate feelings which he got was too painful and he was surrounded by emptiness.



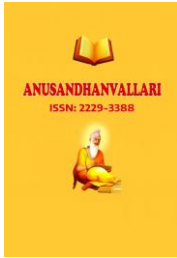
Willie senses the absurd in almost everything he does —he can see that his life is hollow — but he cannot quite bring himself to face it directly. He avoids, drifts, lets things carry him forward. His desolation is, in this sense, the desolation of someone who sees the emptiness but has never found the will to truly reckon with it. *Magic Seeds* picks up where *Half a Life* ends. Willie is back in London, living with his sister Sarojini, still adrift and still without any real sense of what he wants. Then, in a development that surprises even himself, he allows Sarojini to convince him to travel to India and join a Maoist-inspired guerrilla movement fighting for the rural poor. On the surface, this looks like the opposite of the desolation we have been watching — it looks like commitment, action, a cause. But Naipaul makes clear, fairly quickly, that it is nothing of the sort.

Willie doesn't join the revolution out of genuine conviction. He joins because he can't think of anything better to do. He has no real political belief, no deep knowledge of the people he is supposed to be fighting for, and no authentic connection to the movement's goals. He is performing a role again — going through the motions of someone who cares, without actually caring. The guerrilla sequences in *Magic Seeds* are some of the most striking passages Naipaul ever wrote. Willie spends years deep in the forests of India with the revolutionary group, and what he finds there is not solidarity or meaning but once again emptiness.

The question of writing, which surfaces in *Half a Life*, casts further light on Willie's desolation. While in London, he produces stories, and for a brief moment this seems to offer him something — a way of engaging with his own experience, a form through which he might start to understand himself. But his writing turns out to be as half-hearted as everything else. He writes about India, but from the outside, as though it were a foreign country he is describing at secondhand. There is no genuine imaginative investment in the material. The stories are competent enough but cold. They don't come from anywhere deep, because Willie has never been able to reach deep places in himself.

For Naipaul, Writing was always a matter of survival, a means of forging and sustaining a self — becomes for Willie just one more activity he performs without conviction. When the guerrilla period in India finally ends Willie is captured, imprisoned and eventually released — he finds himself back in England, living once again with Sarojini and her German husband. But the novels also show us, consistently, that the world Willie grew up in gave him very little to work with. His father modelled passivity. His colonial education gave him ambitions without the means to realise them. The successive worlds he passes through — colonial India, 1950s London, African settler society, Maoist insurgency — are all, in their different ways, broken or insufficient environments that could not offer him any stable ground.

Willie's desolation is personal but its roots are historical. He is, in a very real sense, what his world made him. This is the point where the Willie Chandran novels speak most directly to the rest of Naipaul's work. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the central character fights desperately for a foothold in the world. In *The Mimic Men*, Ralph Singh retreats into analysis and writing as a way of making sense of a fractured self. But Willie Chandran does neither. He doesn't fight and he doesn't analyse. He drifts. He represents, in this sense, the end point of a long arc in Naipaul's thinking about colonial displacement — the furthest point to which that thinking could travel. Earlier Naipaul characters at least struggle against their condition. Willie barely registers it. His desolation is so thorough that he has almost no sense of what he has lost, or what he might have been. He is Naipaul's most completely hollowed-out creation. Naipaul was consistently sceptical of ideological politics, and especially of the kind of revolutionary movements that drew educated, displaced people throughout the second half of the twentieth century. *Magic Seeds* is in significant part a critique of this world. The guerrilla movement Willie joins is not portrayed as heroic, or even as genuinely committed to the poor it claims to champion. It is shown as another kind of performance — another borrowed identity that doesn't fit its wearer. For Naipaul, political ideology operates in much the same way as colonial mimicry: it gives people a role to play and a script to follow, and in doing so allows them to avoid the harder, more personal work of building a real self and a real life. Willie's desolation is



not lifted by the revolution. It is made worse by it. By the time both novels have run their course, Naipaul has produced a portrait of desolation that is almost without rival in postcolonial fiction.

Willie Chandran is not a villain. He is not a victim in any straightforward sense. He is not a hero. He is simply a person who started out from a damaged place and never found a way to repair it — who moved through the world without leaving any real mark on it, and without the world leaving any real mark on him. He lived, in the most precise sense of that phrase, half a life. *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds* explored the postcolonial condition in which doesn't have any basic foundation. Naipaul suggests, emptiness is not always dramatic. It does not always tell itself in calamity or breakdown. Sometimes it seems like a perfectly ordinary life. But that life has no real centre,. As a result, Willie Chandran, the protagonist of *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds*, is fundamentally a symbol of desolation and hollow self.

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