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To Be or What to Be: Negotiating Mixed Race Identities

In *Half a Life*, V.S. Naipaul tells the story of Willie Somerset Chandran, son of a high class Brahmin father and lower caste mother, and his search for meaning and a complete identity as he grows into adulthood. Throughout his childhood, Willie remains distinctly aware of his father’s disdain towards his mother, as well as her family, and his feelings of sacrifice regarding his children. This knowledge estranges Willie from his father. Although he loves his mother, his growing understanding of her as “backward” and his subsequent shame later distances him from his mother. His sense of estrangement from his family and awareness of himself as a half caste motivates him to leave India to resolve his fragmented identity. His existential journey takes him from India to London to an unnamed Portuguese colony in Africa. Throughout his journey, Naipaul problematizes the power dichotomy of the oppressor and the oppressed by introducing mixed race identities and multiple layers of oppression particular to a given location, and exposing the multiplicities inherent in post-colonial identity formation for both oppressor and oppressed. Specifically, Naipaul focuses on the psychological repercussions of identity loss and spatial displacement. Through Willie’s experiences, Naipaul explores and ultimately rejects possible solutions, most prevalent being the use of women’s bodies and revolution. In doing so, Naipual deconstructs the traditional identities of colonizer and colonized, and redefines the colonial identity – including both the colonizer and colonized – as a spectrum that needs to account for experiential variation.

The existence of the protagonist Willie Someset Chandran, a “half and half”, represents the multiple regional cultural power relationships within the context of British India. Named for a famous English author his father knows, Willie has grown up constantly hearing the story of his birth: how his father, in an effort to answer the Mahatma’s call to resistance against colonization, impulsively renounces his family heritage and ambitions by socially compromising his lower caste mother and, when consequently forced into a relationship, fails his vow of abstinence, or *brahmacharya*. Initially, Willi’s father, having “heard the mahatma had called for students to boycott their universities” (15), “made a little bonfire of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and Shelley and Keats, and the professor’s notes, and went home to wait for the storm to beat about [his] head” (15). That his father does not simply boycott, but burns his English books in the public space of the university is meant to be a grand, violent statement. This intent is made even clearer by his rhetoric. He hopes to cause a “storm” – an uproar or some large disturbance – centering on him – “about [his] head”, his expectation of violent reaction emphasized his use of “beat” to describe the fallout. However, nothing happens. No one seems to notice. Idolizing the members of the independence movement, believing that he would “[give] anything to be in touch with their greatness” (16), Willie’s father decides to “make a sacrifice of [himself]” (16). Willie’s father resolves that if he cannot become a great catalyst for action like his heroes of the independence movement, than he can give his life for “greatness”, because few can exist as a living sacrifice. By terming his actions a “sacrifice”, he’s implying an unselfish allegiance to a cause or calling greater than himself. By making a “sacrifice” of himself, Willie’s father elevates both his actions and himself to that higher calling; he no longer exist as a person but exists as a figurehead.

Willie’s father decides that “the only noble thing that lay in [his] power to do… was marry the lowest person [he] could find” (17). He chooses Willie’s mother because he is “fascinated and repelled by her. She would have been of the very low. It [was] unbearable to consider her family and clan and occupations…[The priest] would have thrown the sacred ash at them, the way food is thrown to a dog” (17). Again, Willie’s father employs dramatic and offensive imagery to demonstrate that his mother is the lowest person he can find. His mother is of such low caste that she and her family are equated to wild dogs, verging on animal, on the fringes of acceptable humanity. She is “very low”, and the existence of those like her and related to her are “unbearable”, not to be tolerated. It’s not that he in particular finds them intolerable; his syntax indicates that such is the general consensus of Willie’s father’s caste. According to his father, even the priest, the spiritual guidance for the community, just tolerates their presence at prayer; throwing the “sacred ash”, a divine item, expresses his ultimate contempt for them. The caste difference becomes an ontological difference, a difference of being, and the implied gap is wide indeed. His father does not like his mother; he only chooses her for what she represents and as a means of resistance and martyrdom, so that “in her company [he may] live out a life of sacrifice” (18). By engaging in a relationship with her he would be doing something “noble”, of high moral fiber and befitting his class. His sacrificial relationship with her then serves as consecration to “greatness”, to the ideals of those of the independence movement. This notion of sacrifice, of being able to give everything or becoming a martyr, underpins all of his decisions and informs his relationships with his wife, his children, and the community at large. Willie spends his childhood hearing this story and watching his father treat them like a sacrifice, a loss to be endured for a greater good.

The use of women’s bodies as the means for men to form their colonial identities prevails throughout the narrative, whether in India, London, or in Africa. For Willie’s father, his mother’s physical body serves as his means of resistance, allowing him to escape the life of servility to British India and participate in India’s freedom movement. Other characters, like Marcus, a “Negro… from West Africa” that Willie meets in London, view women’s bodies as a means of cleansing their identity as the colonized. Even before he meets him, Willie learns that Marcus has two ambition: to have a white grandchild, and to be the first black man to have an account in the Queen’s bank. To that effect, Marcus has “five mullato children, by five white women, and he feels that all he has to do now is to keep an eye on the children and make sure they don’t let him down” (66). The women do not matter as individuals; their only importance lies in performing their biological function of child bearing. He selects five different women instead of committing to one to increase his gene pool, and thereby increase his chances, because “the Negro gene is a recessive one” and can be “bred out” (69). By this practice, he reduces both women and children to less than human, like a lab rat. He treats them as a means to an end – turning his legacy white. He does appear to give a thought to fatherhood; rather “all” he has to do is to “keep an “eye” on them so that they don’t thwart his plans – perhaps by marrying a non-white person. Marcus maintains an almost scientific distance. This presents a reversal of the usual socio-political reality of the mixed race person’s birth. Mullato children have generally been the products of white male masters – the oppressor – and their slave women, or of native women – the oppressed. This kind of controlled breeding employed by Marcus inverts that order and destabilizes post-colonial dichotomies. Here, gender mediates power relationships, placing an educated Black male in a position of power over a white female. Furthermore, the intention is not an exhibition of power by the oppressor-colonizer on the oppressed-colonized, but complete ontological assimilation by the oppressed-colonized. Quite simply, Marcus wants his blackness to be subsumed by whiteness.

Colonizer’s like Ana’s grandfather, who had gone native, represent a third kind of use for women’s bodies, which they use them to reclaim their lost heritage and racial identity. In fact, most of Ana’s neighbors are the legacy of colonizers gone native, being “second-rank Portuguese….because most of them have an African grandparent” (100). Initially, Ana’ grandfather had settled in Africa and taken an African wife, but, desiring “to recover the European personality he had shed” (103), he sent his daughters to be educated in Portugal and “to marry proper Portuguese, to breed out the African inheritance he had given them” (105). Once again, women’s bodies, specifically their biological function, serve as the medium by which to negotiate racial-social identities. The implication is that their African blood excludes them from being “proper Portuguese”, or Portuguese but not Portuguese, trapping them in liminal space from which their children may eventually emerge with controlled breeding. Furthermore, it sets up the white European identity as the final aim for completeness, under which all other identities are not only subordinated but subsumed. In any case, Ana’s grandfather fails to breed out the African inheritance, as both Ana and her mother eventually develop a relationship with mixed race colonials.

Ana’s grandfather represents the antithetical colonial relationship to Marcus, who strives to create a European personality. By using the word “shed”, Naipaul indicates that Ana’s grandfather already possessed and could choose to discard his white identity, thereby exposing the superficiality of said identity. He remained in a greater position of power, unlike Marcus, whose skin tone limits him from obtaining a “European personality”. In this region of Africa, the Portuguese colonizer- oppressors gained African attributes – and bloodlines – and thereby complicating power dynamics once again. While the African race continues to be considered ontologically inferior socially, much like the lower caste in India, the African colonized continued to retain more of their cultural identities than those from the West Indies like Marcus. The psychological repercussions of fragmented identity appears less, perhaps because it has not been compounded by a trauma from displacement. Instead, the trauma of identity loss and displacement appears to be visited more upon the Portuguese colonizers, who underwent a sort of reverse assimilation initially, as indicated by the existence of the second class Portuguese population. Others, like Ana’s father, could not adjust to the realities of colonial life in Africa and eventually returned to Portugal.

Naipaul continues to deconstruct existing binaries of the colonizer-oppressor and colonized-oppressed by demonstrating that power relationships are informed by multiple factors, and differ according to geographical and temporal contexts. In doing so, he exposes how such post-colonial rhetoric does not allow for expressions of agency from or influence by the colonized-oppressed, or accommodate for the potential erosion of identity and trauma of displacement faced by the colonizers. Whether imperialist or apologist, most post-colonial rhetoric situates Western identity as the main subject, forcing colonized populations to engage primarily from a position of victimhood or powerlessness, and so remains Euro-centric. In *Half a Life*, Naipaul explores the reflexive relationships between the colonizers and the colonized and presents a kaleidoscope of experiences. He depicts colonial identity as being in flux; neither women nor revolution offer a permanent resolution to the fragmented identities of the colonials. The crux of the matter is that the foundational ideology – that mixed race person is half and half but somehow not a whole – is false. Identities are not fixed wholes because the social realities that underpin identity formation are usually human constructs. Politics of difference are virtual, continuous, and constantly changing. That is, a person may actually have dark brown skin, but the abstract values accorded to that skin are simply projections; value changes depending on time, place, and situation. Also, as Naipaul clearly details in India, rather than a single collective experience of the colonized- oppressed, post-colonial experience requires multiple collectives in a continuous process of deconstruction and resignification. This eliminates both the possibility of an idyllic pre-colonial existence and the ontological premise for colonizers’ superiority. An identity never stands still because all people go on being as long as they live. Overall, Naipaul manages to bring home these points: that collective identity differences are primarily superficial, and that there’s no “whole” identity, which makes Willie’s whole journey rather pointless.