THE ROAD NOT TAKEN
CHAPTER - IV
THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

Naipaul has shown deep concern for writers and the writing process right from his first novel *The Mystic Masseur* to his last novel *Half a Life*. Though many decades have elapsed since Naipaul’s career as a novelist began, *Half a Life* reveals that he is still absorbed in the concept of a writer. *Half a Life* centres on the life and fortunes of the protagonist, Willie Chandran, who tries to find a place for himself through writing. His efforts are not rewarded, and the writing process ends in creation without success. *Half a Life* is a distillation of different aspects touched upon in the early novels. It deals with the cultural chaos of exile, the spiritual legacy of homelessness and dislocation arising out of colonial oppression and post-colonial turmoil. It is a disquieting story of the failed son of a failed idealist whose endless search for a home takes him across three continents. Even after many years of wandering, he still finds himself disconnected and overwhelmed with the sense of never belonging anywhere. *Half a Life* has been rightly described as “a devastating work of exceptional sensibility, grace and humour” (qtd. in Ray xiii).

*Half a Life* is a story of lost goals, unfulfilled aspirations and uninspiring half-lives. Naipaul takes the readers round the globe to see how people outside the master narratives of the Western mainstream live and think. He charts the suppressed histories of people of mixed caste and racial background who struggle to find acceptance. It is a story not of achievers who become heroes but of ordinary, mundane people who realize, in the end, that their life has not been worth living. Willie Chandran falls short of his mission of writing and emerging as a writer. The
book is the story of the hardships of a writer. Without strong will power an aspiring writer could easily be dissuaded from his literary path.

In 1981, Bharathi Mukherjee observed that Naipaul’s writing “is about unhousing and remaining unhoused” (qtd. in Hensen v). This statement is particularly true of Biswas, in *A House for Mr Biswas*, who tries vehemently to build a house of his own. Towards the end of the novel, his housing problem is solved when he settles down in a house in Sikkim Street, though its glaring defects widen as days pass. This “unhoused” condition is also well proved through the unsettling lives of Willie Chandran and his father. *Half a Life* presents two sets of father-and-son stories, each of which has its own fears and its own solitude. There does not exist proper channel of communication between them. The novel highlights the fact that man is at the mercy of social and political forces and his own personal predilections. Willie Chandran’s father deceives himself by pursuing high principles and ends up as an embittered man.

*Half a Life* is a novel in three parts, scattered over three continents, corresponding to the narrator’s life in India, England and eventually Africa. The first part is set in post-independence India at the politically protected court of the maharaja where Willie Chandran, a promising youth of the mission school, lived with his father, mother and sister, Sarojini. It deals with the reminiscence of Chandran’s father. He tells his son the story of his life: of how he married a low-caste woman whom he neither loved nor respected. The marriage was in the interest of his political ideal. His bold decision of defying his caste, though simple, called forth immense courage on his part and opposition from others.
Chandran's father remains nameless throughout the novel, indicative of the fact that his life is so inconsequential that his name is not worth mentioning. Like Biswas he struggles to establish an identity of his own by choosing untrodden paths of unconventionality. Chandran's father picked up the strands of his past to weave a web of nostalgia — his rebellious trait, his sensational marriage, transformation into a sage and final redemption. Chandran's father undergoes self-deception by trying to be an idealist.

Chandran's query about his strange baptism (of having Willie Somerset before his name) leads his father down memory lane into the mazy labyrinths of his past life:

this was the story Willie Chandran's father began to tell. It took a long time. The story changed as Willie grew up. Things were added, and by the time Willie left India to go to England this was the story he had heard (HL 1).

Chandran's father belied himself by trying to be an idealist. In response to the call of the Mahatma, he bid adieu to English literature and abandoned his education:

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 (HL 2).

By this act he messed up his life, whereas his friends were geared towards success. He made a bonfire of his books to boycott English education. “In the frontyard I 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 my head” (HL 9). His fear of detection proved futile for no message came from the dean and nobody seemed affected by this happening. Books were not easy to burn unless they were thrown into an already consuming fire: “it was possible that in the untidiness and noise of the university frontyard, with the life of the street just there, what I was doing in a little corner mightn’t have seemed so strange.” (HL 9).

Chandran’s father felt that his life was heading towards futility. In other parts of India there were great men who were accomplishing a great deal. He wished to get in touch with their greatness. But in the servile life around the palace of the maharaja, there was nothing but monotony. The Mahatma himself went through a phase of similar inactivity in his ashram. It was later that “he had come up with the unexpected and miraculous idea of the Salt March, a long march from his ashram to the sea, to make salt” (HL 10). Chandran’s father wished to make a sacrifice of himself, not an empty sacrifice like killing oneself by jumping off a bridge or falling before a moving train. He felt it should be “a more lasting kind of sacrifice, something the mahatma would have approved of” (HL 10). The Mahatma abjured casteism and had highlighted its evils to the people. Like Gandhi, Chandran’s father saw no barriers between castes and gave equal importance to the untouchables. He
felt traditional ways of life were as terminating as death itself. He wished to trample upon age-old customs that appeared to be lacking in substance. He turned his back on his ancestry of a line of "foolish, foreign-ruled starveling priests" (HL 10).

- He wished to prove to others that the spirit of sacrifice advocated by the Mahatma was burning silently within him. He felt that the only noble thing in his power was to marry a girl of a backward class. He was a die-hard rebel of the tradition-ridden society. People of the untouchable / harijan caste were not allowed to enter the sanctum, where the image of the deity is in the temples. On the other hand, being a Brahmin, Chandran’s father was entitled to be a temple priest. Such was the grave disparity between them. Chandran’s father got acquainted with a girl at the university who:

was small and coarse-featured, almost tribal in appearance, noticeably black, with two big top teeth that showed very white. She wore colours that were sometimes very bright and sometimes very muddy, seeming to run into the blackness of her skin (HL 11).

She was a scholarship girl, as the maharaja gave a number of scholarships to people of her community. He was both fascinated and repelled by his girl. Her voice, which was “loud and coarse and rasping” (HL 15), proved to be a source of constant irritation to him. He consoled himself with the idea that a life of sacrifice that he had envisaged, brought with it, such discomforts and agonies: “that was the terror that went with the life of sacrifice I had committed myself to, and I felt I had absolutely to go ahead” (HL 15).
His friendship with the girl changed the even tenor of his life. So far his life was on accepted lines. Being the son of a courtier, he lived in a Grade C official house. In his lack of opportunities, he could merely yearn for greatness, without in any way taking initiative. His friendship with the girl changed his lifestyle. He viewed life from a new angle, where lives of men had two layers – one visible for the world and the other, hidden from the public. His dual role cut drastically on his financial resources: “I had been having all the expenses of a married man, and living like an ascetic in my father’s Grade C house” (HL 21). He nurtured a secret life with this girl, away from the glare of the public eye:

I looked upon that kind of judgement – from waiters, students, simple people – as the first sweet fruit of my life of sacrifice. They were only the first fruits. I knew that there were going to be greater battles ahead, severer tests, and even sweeter fruit (HL 14).

Chandran’s father found a place for the girl in a storehouse where images and busts of various kinds were kept. Many of the craftsmen lived in the same compound along with their families. They were of a neutral caste neither low nor high which fitted his purpose well. It was a place replete with divine presence of deities and busts of human beings. This storehouse accommodated various unknown presences, which appeared disturbing to him. In this place, as fashioning and shaping of forms was carried on, Chandran’s father’s life changed form and began to assume new significance. After having entangled his life with the girl, escape from his present situation seemed impossible. In a spirit of helplessness, he wished to
forsake the girl, whose life got irrevocably linked to his. But the thought of her firebrand uncle scared him and put an end to his thoughts of freeing himself from the girl. He became a victim of his own foolish sacrifice, which boomeranged on him, sinking him in a state of despondency. He was unable to retrieve his steps.

He got a job in the Land Tax Department. This employment instead of giving him satisfaction, brought regret: "I grieved for myself. This kind of servile labour had formed no part of my vision of the life of sacrifice" (HL 20). The monotonous work in the department dulled his spirits and the thought of going to work in this place every day and doing routine work scared him. He was transferred to the audit section, an area meant to weed out corruption among the tax-collectors and surveyors. The officers in charge of collecting land tax from the poor, who couldn't read, refused to give receipts, so the poor peasants who had three or four acres of land were compelled to pay the tax twice. The officers who took bribes to issue receipts were not much richer than the peasants. Chandran's father found himself on the side of the cheats and destroyed all pieces of evidence against corruption. Finally, he was made an assistant inspector. He was surprised at this elevation, which was the doing of the school principal who had great ambitions to get his daughter married to Chandran's father.

Circumstances became unfavourable for Chandran's father when his secret liaison with the "scholarship girl" was made public. He was caught in a whirlpool of problems. When his father came to know about his relationship with the girl, he was terribly heart-broken for all his plans were upset. His severe reprimand fell on deaf ears, 'You've blackened all our faces. And now we'll have to face the anger of the
school principal. You’ve dishonoured his daughter, since in everybody’s eyes you are as good as married to her’ (HL 24).

For some weeks, after the letting out of the secret, life went on smoothly. Chandran’s father went to work in the Land Tax department from his father’s government house, while making occasional trips to see the girl at the image-makers. Then he was charged for corruption and threatened with imprisonment. His life got enmeshed in a maelstrom of conflicts. Unable to forsake the girl in the image-makers, hostility from her aggressive uncle, threats from the school Principal, fear of imprisonment and wrath of his father – all these plagued him making life miserable. Idealism crumbled and dreams shattered landing him in quandary. Unable to face reality, he ran away and took refuge in a temple in a bid to follow Gandhi:

It occurred then to me to do as the mahatma had done at some stage: to take a vow of silence. It suited my temperament, and it also seemed the least complicated way out. The news of this vow of silence spread. Simple people who had come from far to pay their respects to the temple deity would now also stop off to pay their respects to me. (HL 28)

This transformation of Chandran’s father, in a vain bid of escapism, proved favourable to him. He became a Mahatma, or a great soul, in the eyes of the people. It was at this time in 1930 that the celebrated writer Somerset Maugham paid a visit to India. He wanted to write a novel on spirituality. The principal of Maharaja
College brought the visitor to meet Chandran’s father. This incident proved to be a turning point in his life. The school principal highlighted his renunciation:

He boasted about my own early career, the bright prospects I had. All of these things I had mysteriously given away for the life of the ascetic, living in the courtyard, dependent on the bounty of pilgrims to the temple (HL 30).

Maugham was impressed with the vow of silence taken up by Chandran’s father. In the travel book brought out by the writer eighteen months later, Chandran’s father was mentioned in a couple of pages. This made him popular abroad, his name reaching far and wide. When the writer’s famous novel was published during the war, it brought Chandran’s father renown as one who was the principal spiritual source for The Razor’s Edge that appeared in 1944. As a form of gratitude to William Somerset Maugham, Chandran’s father named his son Willie Somerset Chandran. Ultimately, Chandran’s father realized, to his dismay, that he had joined the same ancestry of priests he wanted to flee from: “I had fallen into ancestral ways” (HL 32). His life was tarnished and he became a fallen man of caste. His life’s path became “a mockery of sacred ways” (HL 32). His mission of leading a life of sacrifice boomeranged on himself and he was compelled to follow the same conventional path of his forebears.

Chandran’s mother had studied at the mission school, so she sent her son Chandran and daughter Sarojini to study there. Chandran was teased by teachers about his parentage and he became a butt of ridicule among his friends. He longed to
go to Canada, where his teachers came from. He even thought of adopting their religion and becoming like them so that he could travel through the world teaching. When he wrote an English composition about his holidays, he pretended he was a Canadian, calling his parents Mom and Pop. He imagined Mom and Pop had taken the children to a beach. They put on new holiday clothes and were driven off to the beach in the family car. The beach was packed with people who had come to enjoy themselves. His family had eaten the holiday sweets, which they had carried. They drove home, tanned and content, at the end of the day:

All the details of [. . .] foreign life – the upstairs house, the children’s room – had been taken from American comic books which had been circulating in the mission school. These details had been mixed up with local details, like the holiday clothes and the holiday sweets, some of which Mom and Pop had at one stage out of their own great content given to half-naked beggars. This composition was awarded full marks, ten out of ten, and Willie was asked to read it out to the class (HL 40).

Chandran excelled in this creative writing, whereas the other boys, who lived poor lives, lacked his inventing faculty and knew nothing of the outside world. Chandran was looked upon with awe and adoration by them. His mother received his school composition with pride and appreciation. But to his father, it appeared to be a pack of lies. This incident throws light on Chandran’s ability to blend fact and fiction in his writing. This same aspect became conspicuous in his years in London when he wrote stories. Chandran wrote the story King Cophetua and the Beggar-
maid in which the son wreaks vengeance against his father for all his mother’s sufferings. This story was received with gratification by the missionary teacher who: “had ticked and ticked in approval” (HL 43).

Chandran’s story, *A Life of Sacrifice*, was the story of a Brahmin who was compelled to sacrifice a young child every year to the spirit of the cave in order to maintain his unexpected treasure. A tribal chief undertook the task of sacrificing a child every year for the Brahmin. After many years, urged by the desire to grow wealthy, the headman approached the Brahmin, seeking half his treasure. The Brahmin refused him money and threatened to expose the headman and the sacrifices he had offered. The Brahmin was shocked when he went for the next annual sacrifice. He realized, to his horror, that the two children sacrificed were his own children. On reading this story, Chandran’s father thought that his son loathed his parents and had turned against them: “His mind is diseased. He hates me and he hates his mother, and now he’s turned against himself” (HL 47).

Chandran wanted to get away from his mission school when he was twenty years old. He had grown up witnessing his parents’ dislike for each other and experienced the heartaches each caused the other because of the rigid society in which they lived. He despised his father’s ineffectuality and his mother’s coarseness and blamed every calamity of his life on the failed idealism of his parents’ union. He had no idea what to do. To flee from his present circumstances was uppermost in his mind. The prospect of higher education in England provided him ample scope to redefine his identity and prove his worth as an individual. He had not completed his education and with fantasies of Hollywood films of the thirties and forties, he went
to London without any purpose or aim. At last “a place and a scholarship had been found for Willie Chandran in a college of education for mature students in London” (HL 51).

The second part of the novel, set in London shows Chandran’s attempts to prove himself through writing. Willie Chandran’s shift to London conveys jubilantly and humourously the sense of discovering a new world and a choice vocation. He entered London’s immigrant, bohemian and journalistic life. The peripatetic mapping of the city, with its dingy bars and sites of lovemaking, revealed a different world altogether from the offices of editors and publishers, which were within walking distance. In order to settle down in the strange new atmosphere of London, Chandran remade himself, by presenting a different picture of his family background. He was free to reinvent himself, drawing the curtains over his past and his ancestry. His mother became a Christian in the eyes of others. He adopted certain ideas he had read about and spoke of his mother as belonging to an ancient Christian community of the subcontinent. “So, playing with words, he began to re-make himself. It excited him, and began to give him a feeling of power” (HL 61). His tutors felt he was “‘settling in’” (HL 61). Chandran got acquainted with Roger, a young lawyer who wrote a weekly London Letter for a provincial paper. He showed Roger the stories written during his school days. Roger suggested that the story of the Brahmin and child sacrifice would be better if it began in the middle. Roger felt that Chandran could have begun the story with the tribal chief coming to see the Brahmin at his hermitage and going back with thoughts of murder. Prompted by Roger, Chandran read the early stories of Hemingway, especially the notable The
Killers. He advised Chandran to write about real rather than out-of-reach, imaginary things. He encouraged Chandran to write, suggesting ideas, providing clues and spurring him to innovative thinking. Chandran picked up this useful advice and rewrote *A Life of Sacrifice* according to Roger’s suggestions. The story was turned into a dialogue, and the setting and the people portrayed were not explained: “He had only to begin; the story rewrote itself; and though in one way it was now very far from Willie, it was also more full of his feelings. He changed the title to ‘Sacrifice’” (HL 85).

Chandran plunged into the art of writing using *The Killers* as a model and translating situations from Hollywood movies into vaguely conceived Indian settings. Chandran spliced stories from London movies onto stories he remembered from home. He threw himself into the fury of composition with vigour and gusto. Writing became his preoccupation and brought with it self-discovery: “To Willie’s surprise, it was easier, with these borrowed stories far outside his own experience, and with these characters far outside himself, to be truer to his feelings than it had been with his cautious, half-hidden parables at school” (HL 86). Chandran realized how Shakespeare had written with borrowed settings and borrowed stories, never with real tales from his own life and the life around him. When he wrote about real things, he felt constricted. He felt comfortable with imaginary things for he had the freedom to write what he liked. So he began: “the business of remaking himself by writing” (Kermode 9).

Chandran’s six stories ran to forty pages. Roger appreciated his stories for their originality. He liked the atmosphere portrayed in them. After some time, the
speed of writing slackened, and he was running out of material. To recoup himself with ideas, he went to see old movies. He derived inspiration from *The Childhood of Maxim Gorky* and wrote some stories. For weeks on end, Willie Chandran got absorbed in his writing; it became his absorbing obsession. He was taken by surprise that writing

gave him a new way of looking at his family and his life, and over the next few days he found the matter of many stories of a new sort. The stories seemed to be just waiting for him; he was surprised he hadn’t seen them before; and he wrote fast for three or four weeks. The writing then began to lead him to difficult things, things he couldn’t face, and he stopped (HL 102).

He emerged from the furore of creation with a fund of twenty-six stories in all. “They came to about a hundred and eighty pages, and he was disappointed that so many ideas and so much writing and so much excitement had produced so few pages” (HL 102). After the initial difficulty in publishing his book, it went to Richard: “a very high-class vanity publisher” (HL 108). Richard offered to take up the publishing work after making Willie sign a standard contract. Roger stated that many people wanted to be writers and have their book published: “It’s the last infirmity of the powerful and the high-born. They don’t actually want to write, but they want to be writers. They want their name on the back of a book” (HL 108). Through Roger, Naipaul voices the opinion that even though the writing process is an arduous one, it does not hinder people craving to become writers. They wish to attain the distinction of being termed men of letters.
Chandran's disappointment knew no bounds after the publication of his book. His frustration was due to the fact that his book was barely noticed. It strengthened the belief that pursuing a career as a writer was beyond his powers of endurance and competency. "Those bohemian parties with Percy and June and the others [...]" (HL 111) distracted his attention and deviated him from achieving his target. His book attracted a few reviews and an intriguing one in culinary style:

[...] Where, after the racy Anglo-Indian fare of John Masters, one might have expected an authentic hot curry, one gets only a nondescript savoury, of uncertain origin, and one is left at the end with the strange sensation of having eaten variously and at length but of having missed a meal [...] (HL 123).

Roger felt that the reviews were not bad, as it was a difficult book to write about. He came out with the premonition: "Books have their destiny, as the Latin poet says, and I feel that your book will live in ways you cannot at the moment imagine" (HL 123). Roger's words uttered through goodwill, did not ring true and Chandran's book sank into oblivion without a trace. Instead of bringing fame, it helped in the blossoming of a relationship with a girl from Africa with a Portuguese name Ana. She was an heir to an estate in Mozambique. She had read the review on Chandran's book in the Daily Mail and became interested in it. She wrote to him:

At school we were told that it was important to read, but it is not easy for people of my background and I suppose yours to find books where we can be ourselves. [...] I feel I had to write to you
because in your stories for the first time I find moments that are like moments in my own life, though the background and material are so different. It does my heart a lot of good to think that out there all these years there was someone thinking and feeling like me (HL 124).

Chandran was surprised at this adulation, knowing how his stories were put together and what went into their composition. Ana wanted to meet him. He wrote to her asking to come and see him in college. But he grew worried. She may not be nice in person. He was totally ignorant of her Portuguese African country and its tribes. After probing too deeply into his book, she might have asked him several questions. “He might find himself giving the game away, [. . .]” (HL 124) if he discussed the book with her. Chandran did not wish to let down the girl. He wanted to be admired and appreciated.

Chandran’s undue fears and anxieties faded away and he was captivated by her. She was young, pretty, and thin. He was bowled over by her pleasing attitude:

what was most intoxicating for Willie was that for the first time in his life he felt himself in the presence of someone who had accepted him completely. At home his life had been ruled by his mixed inheritance. It spoilt everything. [. . .] In England he had grown to live with the idea of his difference (HL 125).

Chandran began to luxuriate in the novel feeling of being accepted as a complete man. The book indeed had brought about this attitude on Ana’s part,
increasing his stature in her eyes. The reason for accepting him might be Ana’s mixed background. He was completely overwhelmed by “her voice, her accent, her hesitations over certain English words, her beautiful skin, the authority with which she handled money” (HL 126). No other woman had been so good at dealing with money.

Chandran learnt about Ana’s country through her talk. He visualised this country on the eastern coast of Africa, with all its emptiness. She told him about her friend who became a nun because no man was willing to marry her. Chandran sympathised with Ana’s friend, because he, too, at one stage, wished to be a missionary. Ana told him several stories of the despondency of African women. She narrated the sad plight of a girl who lived with her father and stepmother. After some time, her real mother remarried and the girl went to live with her. Her happiness became shortlived when her stepfather began taking an interest in her. It led to a divorce and a scandal. Chandran recognized that Ana was none other than the frightened African girl of the bush.

Chandran realized that his scholarship was nearly at an end and he would be asked to vacate his room. He had nowhere to go. He resolved to accompany Ana to her own country:

I’ve been a fool. I’ve been waiting to be guided to where I should go. Waiting for a sign. And all this time the sign’s been there. I must go with Ana to her country (HL 130).
The book proved to be a turning point in his life. It helped in gaining Ana’s acquaintance and it precipitated Chandran’s leaving England for good. The third part of the novel is set in Africa. Chandran turned his back on his literary career and followed Ana to Africa. During the period that Chandran lived with her in Mozambique, the colony was part of a crumbling empire and in the culturally and politically turbulent process of becoming independent. But it had no spectacular effect on his personal evolution. He had been waiting all his life for a spectacular illumination, which he believed would reveal his future and supply him with the meaning of his undeniable anxiety. He hoped that in the tumult of the independence movement, he could truly escape from his past. He looked forward to external forces, rather than those within himself, for the meaning of his existence. His first thought was, “‘I must not unpack. I must never behave as though I am staying’” (HL 135). Yet he stayed for eighteen years, idle and passive about everything and suffered the plight of the diaspora. He found himself mired in his own mixed inheritance, when he discovered traces of his Indian heritance even in the furniture around him:

The glory of the room, though, was the furniture. It was of ebony or some black wood and it was intricately carved, so intricately that each piece of wood seemed to have been hollowed out first and then carved on the front and the back. It was not furniture to sit on; it was furniture to look at, to see wood turned to lace, [. . .]. It was said to be old as the house, and it all came, or so Portuguese official standing beside me said, from Goa in Portuguese India. [. . .].
So unexpectedly I found myself very close to home (HL 200-01).

Chandran learnt nothing of its language and he disliked the people who (according to him) were unremarkable and stinky. For the first ten years, he lived in relative comfort, rising to be nothing more than a mere male presence that helped to give his wife a status as a married woman in a society that was strange and only half-real equally to both of them. He eased himself into the borrowed life of his wife’s world, but when the vapidity of his existence galled, he sought out physical adventures. For a brief while, it appeared that he had discovered a sense of passion and of belonging. But he found himself alienated and displaced, for physical encounters did not provide him with what he was looking for. He felt estranged from his wife and visited African prostitutes. But it was too late, because Chandran inhabited a shadow land of sadness and loss, one threatened by a calamity to come.

A bush war was raging, guerillas of the liberation army were powerful and the Portuguese were preparing to leave Mozambique to the chaos of the civil war. The prevailing insecurity made Chandran feel an outsider again. He decided to leave Africa for good.

After spending eighteen years there, he told Ana that he could not continue living with her, and that he wanted to live his life on his own terms: “‘I’ve given you eighteen years. I can’t give you any more. I can’t live your life any more. I want to live my own’” (HL 136). He then went to Germany to stay with his sister Sarojini for the rest of his life. He told Sarojini the story of his life in Africa.
J.M. Coetzee, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2003 observes that the third section of the novel in Africa:

belongs to a mode of writing that Naipaul has perfected over the years, in which historical reportage and social analysis flow into and out of autobiographically colored fiction and travel memoir: a mixed mode that may turn out to be Naipaul’s principal legacy to English letters (10).

Being the son of a man who thwarted caste rules and married a girl from a lower caste, Chandran failed both in writing and in love. His father sent him to England with the words that he had created a monster and that Chandran would poison what remained of his life. So he sent Chandran away in an act of self-protection.

In this chaotic scenario everyone leads half-lives bereft of love. “Self-determination is not able to blossom fully in this climate, and spirituality regresses into self-castigation or loses itself in physical desires” (Leusmann 57). The novel portrays half-a-life of Chandran who continues searching for the meaning of life. He realizes with dismay. “‘I have been hiding from myself. I have risked nothing. And now the best part of my life is over’” (HL 138). The story of Chandran ends abruptly when he is still only in his early forties.

*Half a Life* is a moving melancholy novel, a parable for modern times about how history, the politics of caste, race and class play itself out in the life of the individual. The need to communicate drives the protagonist round the continents.
Chandran’s stories are the saga of both a personal and universal sense of frustration that the children of colonialism inherit. It is written in a prose that is taut, which is in keeping with the rigidity of the characters. The novel is comic in parts, but its vision remains the pursuit of the fragile idea of freedom, the individual trying to disentangle himself from the shackles of place and history in order to emerge successful in writing.

In Half a Life the personal exchanges between the narrator and the other characters are carried out through letters. They tend to establish the impact of the written word. In response to requests for assistance for Chandran in England, Somerset Maugham wrote two brief almost identically worded letters. One letter was addressed to Chandran’s father in India and the other to Chandran in London. The brevity of the letters nullified all hopes of recommendation and help. A reputed London journalist, who had met Chandran’s father on his trip to India, had written an article about him. He too exhibited similar insensitivity in his letter, towards offers of help, for Chandran. These scantily worded letters emphasize the communication gap between the former colonizers and the colonized people. Some letters were concerned with Chandran’s sister, Sarojini. Chandran’s father wrote to his son about the arrangements for Sarojini’s wedding with an elderly German photographer. Sarojini wrote to her brother from Germany about her involvement in a film on Cuba, along with her intention of visiting him in London. She wrote from Columbia on knowing about his intention of going to Africa with Ana. She cautioned him to beware of strangers. There was a letter from Chandran, written from the military hospital, in a town in Portuguese Africa, to Sarojini in
Charlottenburg. It proved to be his preparation for departure to Germany, after eighteen years in Africa. These letters tend to reveal the intimacy of the brother-sister bond in Indian families despite geographical separation and differing world-views. They mark key turning points in the unfolding of the novel's events. Ana's letter to Chandran in London changed the course of his life, taking him to Africa. It proved to be the starting point of her acquaintance with him. The letter points to similarities in the situations and reactions of people across all human societies in the Third World. Ana felt a kind of similarity and moral kinship with the author of the book reviewed.

The frequent use of letters in the novel strikes a personal chord in Naipaul's life. When Naipaul was in London, he communicated with his father, Seepersad Naipaul in Trinidad and his sister Kamala in Benares through letters. These letters, compiled in Letters Between Father and Son, throw light on Naipaul's period of study in London and the situation at home in Trinidad. These letters bear testimony to the inimitable bond of love and affection between father and son and reveal much about the young Naipaul's attitude and aspirations. There was mutual admiration between father and son. The declining health of the father, the economic condition and the trauma of Seepersad's death, are evinced in the letters.

Half a Life contains transposed versions of three fundamental aspects of Naipaul's own life and oeuvre. These are encapsulated in each of the three sections of the novel. In the first part, set in India, Chandran's father (by his choices and attitude) immensely influences his son's life. In the second part, set in London, the challenges of launching into a life of writing are focused upon, through the
protagonist. In the third part, set in Portuguese Africa, the ambivalences of people leading half-lives under a colonial regime are portrayed. These people desperately try to find order and meaning in their lives.

Naipaul, after becoming a distinguished writer and reaching the pinnacle of success, looks back at his past to see what would have been the situation if he had been weak-willed like Chandran. The novel is like a rewriting of Naipaul’s life, not from the angle of success but one of imagined failure. The protagonist gets dissuaded from his goal of becoming a writer by succumbing to a life of ease and physical delights. The half-lives led by people in colonial and post-colonial countries are reflected through Willie Chandran. It is in this character’s failed fulfillment of his life that Naipaul shows how the path to literary career is beset with pitfalls and success proves evasive.

In his Nobel Lecture “Two Worlds” on 7 December 2001 in Stockholm, Naipaul expressed the joy he experienced in his writing career:

I am glad to have done what I have done, glad creatively to have pushed myself as far as I could go. Because of the intuitive way in which I have written, and also because of the baffling nature of my material, every book has come as a blessing. Every book has amazed me; up to the moment of writing I never knew it was there. But the greatest miracle for me was getting started. I feel – and the anxiety is still vivid to me – that I might easily have failed before I began (10).
Naipaul has repeatedly emphasized that he became a writer only due to his steadfast will. The second part of *Half a Life* in London is a rewriting of Naipaul’s initial struggle in Oxford. Like Chandran, who wished to leave his surroundings, Naipaul wanted to flee from Trinidad and go to London: “I didn’t want the degree. I wanted only to get away; and I thought that in my three or four scholarship years at Oxford my talent would somehow be revealed, and the books would start writing themselves” (FC 38). Like Chandran, Naipaul felt the impact of cinema: “Nearly all my imaginative life was in the cinema. [. . .] don’t think I overstate when I say that without the Hollywood of the 1930s and 1940s I would have been spiritually quite destitute” (RW 64). Chandran resembles Naipaul and yet is not fully Naipaul. Chandran is far less literate than Naipaul, lacking the verve and steely determination to pursue the presumptuous as well as the vague wish to become a writer. Naipaul stuck to his unflinching decision of becoming a writer, which has paid him rich dividends. Naipaul used as his models for writing, his father, Evelyn Waugh, Aldous Huxley and Somerset Maugham with his characteristically English tone: “aloof everywhere, unsurprised, immensely knowing” (EA 125). Chandran had no models to follow in his writing and no forerunners to enable his writing process.

Naipaul claims that the urge to be a writer mysteriously stirred in him even before he had anything concrete to write about. This happened to be his first fiction, even before he had written anything worth publishing. The idea that he “was to be a writer” took strong roots in him even at a young age (FC 39). His writing career got started quite suddenly as revealed in *Finding the Centre*. He hesitated to put the word “writer” on official forms before he had produced at least six books (FC 25).
In his Nobel Lecture Naipaul explained that his identity as a writer as well as a human being is inextricably linked to the books he has written:

everything of value about me is in my books. [...] I will say I am the sum of my books. Each book, intuitively sensed and, in the case of fiction, intuitively worked out, stands on what has gone before, and grows out of it. I feel that at any stage of my literary career it could have been said that the last book contained all the others (5).

This last novel, Half a Life, highlights the fact, the road to literary success is cumbersome, and one can easily be led astray. Chandran fell short of his goal in life and slipped in his determination to pursue a literary career," "The world is full of slippery substances" " (HL 136). It is easy for man to get retracted from his goal because there are many pitfalls on the way to success. At the end of the novel, it is apparent that forty-one-year-old Chandran had only one accomplishment worthy of notice: he had published a book of stories and had become a writer, though not a successful one.

Naipaul illustrates, through Chandran, that there are many people like him who are not firm in their resolve to traverse the difficult path of writing. In Chandran, this resolution is missing and the sense of mission is lacking: " 'Let the book die. Let it fade away. Let me not be reminded of it. I will write no more. This book was not something I should have done, anyway. [...] Let me be grateful that none of the reviewers spotted the way it was done' " (HL 123). People like Chandran lack the grit to fulfill their goal with single-minded devotion. Naipaul tells
aspiring writers not to be like Chandran, but to pursue one's goal with a steadfast will. *Half A Life* succeeds in providing yet another perspective of Naipaul's corpus in which the motif of the writer becomes dominant.