
Identity Crisis in V. S. Naipaul's A House for Mr. Biswas

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Abstract:

Alienation, fragmentation, and exile are common terms associated with postcolonial literature. This article tries to explore the issue of identity in postcolonial literature. In the era of globalization, the need for immigration has increased for various reasons. This in turn results in the dawn of multi-cultural land with cultural diversity.

One of the best-known writers in English today is Vidyadhar Suraj Prasad Naipaul, himself a product of post-imperialist society.

In an interview with Roland Bryden in 1973, Naipaul remarked, "all my works are really one. I am really writing one big book. I come to the conclusion that, considering the nature of the society I came from, considering the nature of the world I have stepped into and the world I have to look at, I could not be a professional novelist in the old sense".

The article focuses on issues of identity that surges with immigration in a multi ethnical land, particularly in a colonized world. It examines the methods undertaken by these characters to construct an identity in the society and thereby break away from rootlessness. It tries to analyze the characters from the perspective of rootlessness and identity crisis.

Key words: Alienation, identity, home, rootlessness, globalization, perspective.

A House for Mr. Biswas tells the story of its protagonist, Mr. Biswas from birth to death, each section dealing with different phases of Mr. Biswas's life. Here, Naipaul has a more subjective approach towards the problems of identity crisis than the objective one a reader finds in his travelogues, especially on India.

The West Indian literature is the part of the greatest design of commonwealth literature. The cultural experience of the West Indian writers forms an important theme in the literature. A quest for identity, rootlessness and alienation are the significant themes around which the literature of these countries revolves.

A House for Mr. Biswas delineates the traumas of a tainted and troubled past and the attempts to find a purpose in life, beautifully analysing the sense of alienation and the pangs of exile experienced by the characters.

Naipaul portrays the complexity of the relationship between a man and his origins and his inability to escape from it. Aware of his loneliness and dilemma, Mr. Biswas tells his son, "I am just somebody. Nobody at all". Unlike his father and brothers who have inherited the social identity of labourers, this cannot be claimed by Mr. Biswas. Mr. Biswas is looking after his uncle's shop while his brothers are

working as labourers. After leaving his uncle's store, he takes up a job as sign-painter where he meets Shama, a daughter of the Tulsis (an affluent family of the island), whom he later marries. His marriage makes him realize that life, even after a love-marriage, is not romance, but an act of responsibility.

Without money and without a dowry from the Tulsis, Mr. Biswas has no choice but to move in at Hanuman House. He develops a mental complex due to the disagreeable family atmosphere. To Mr. Biswas, it is a typical joint family which functions on the same pattern as the British empire in West Indies. Hanuman House provides shelter to Mr. Biswas but wants total dilution of his identity in return. In a novel dominated by the house metaphor, Hanuman House is described as follows: an alien white fortress. The concrete walls looked as thick as they were and when the narrow doors of the Tulsi Store on the ground floor were closed the House became bulky, impregnable and blank. The side walls were windowless and on the upper floors the windows were mere slits in the facade. The balustrade which hedged the flat roof was crowned with a concrete statue of the benevolent Monkey God Hanuman.

The novel paints a poignant picture of Mr. Biswas as he struggles to preserve his own identity in an alien environment and tries to forge an authentic selfhood. Besides focusing on his dark world, the novel introduces brief glimpses of ethnic and social history of the marginalized East Indian community in Trinidad. The image of the house is a central, unifying and integrating metaphor around which the life of Mr. Biswas revolves. Delineated in compassionate tones, for Mr. Biswas the

house represents a search for emancipation from dependence. The narrative tries to maintain equilibrium between Mr. Biswas's inner self and the disinterested outer view.

The West Indian literature is occupied with the fate of indentured Indian labors, which went to Caribbean islands in search of job. It depicts the challenges of these people and tries to voice the aspirations and yearnings, problems and plights of these people. The breakup of the British Empire resulted in the development of newly independent nations. Emphasizing on the problem of cultural and political identity as one of the major concerns of the West Indian literature.

Naipaul's works- both fiction and non-fiction -has attained great success. His fictional work is concerned with the complex fate of individuals, societies and cultures seeking to define their identity. Madhusudahn Rao analyzes the themes of Naipaul in the following way.

The novel sketches the character of Mohun Biswas, the protagonist, as he tries to find relief from rootlessness and have a house of his own. The "house" is symbolic of identity and self-respect. It represents one's culture and one's roots. The novel is set in Trinidad and covers the story of three generations. The novel has a direct association with the modern problem of identity crisis. It portrays a single man's struggle to arrive at authentic self-hood. Mr. Biswas relentless struggle against the forces that try to subdue his individuality. His struggle is long and tiresome, but in the end he is successful in having a space he can call his own. Naipaul describes A House for Mr. Biswas in his non-fiction book, *Finding the Center*, saying that it was

“very much my father's book. It was written out of his journalism and stories, out of his knowledge he had got from the way of looking Mac Gowen had trained him in. It was written out of his writing” (Naipaul, *A House for Mr. Biswas* xiii).

The Oxford English dictionary defines identity as “The fact of being who or what a person or thing is”. A person's identity can be shaped by his nationality, ethnicity, gender, language, class and culture. The identity may be broadly divided into personal identity and social identity. The personal identity is the conceptualization of the self in relation to others, whereas the social identity is derived from the person's membership in social groups. The increase in mobilization and post modernism has led to the hybrid identity. , Naipaul has depicted a protagonist in a society that is pandemonic and lacking in ideas and creativity. “Pastorals,” the first section of the novel, describes the birth and early childhood of Mr. Biswas. In this section, Hindu way of life with its customs, traditions, rituals, and philosophy of the people receives full expression in the small Indian world created by indentured Indian labourers in an artificially created colonial society of Trinidad. Culture shapes and informs a person's identity. A person in postcolonial countries tries to assert his identity in society in multiple ways. The present article studies *A House for Mr. Biswas*, from the point of view of identity crisis and rootlessness. It narrates the search for independence and identity of a Brahmin Indian living in Trinidad.

The novel commences with Biswas, who is sacked from his job at the age of forty six. It covers the whole life span of Biswas from his birth to death. But on the death

bed he is relieved as he has a place of his own and he was breathing his last in his own house. The forty six years of his life are years of anxiety, recurrent setbacks, and repeated failures.

Mr. Biswas manages to get a loan from Ajodha and buys a house in Port of Spain. He describes his house thus: “The sun came through the open window on the ground floor and struck the kitchen wall. Wood work and frosted glass were hot to the touch. The inside brick wall was warm. The Sun went through the home and laid dazzling strips on the exposed staircase”. Naipaul uses words like “sun” and “dazzling” in his description of the house, words that clearly reveal Mr. Biswas's happiness and sense of fulfilment. Later, Mr. Biswas discovers many flaws in the house, but the sense of satisfaction that he owns a house is there.

The landing pillars had rotted because they stood next to a tap which emerged from the wall of the house. The water from the tap simply ran into ground”. The house gives him freedom, which is missing in the Tulsi family. He has freed his children from the slavery of Hanuman House.

The yard had no drainage: the house had no back door:the widows downstairs did not close, while the front door flew open when strong wind blows even if the door was locked and bolted. Although the house has many defects and they felt upset about it, yet it gives a satisfaction to Mr. Biswas as he had ultimately freed himself from the hold of Tulsi family. The house is defective one. “In the days that followed they made many discoveries.

For the first time in life, he has a house of his own after his father's death. The metaphor of the house gathers significance

not just as a material possession that provide shelter and security but as a symbol of achievement – a sense of leaving a mark on history, a means to escape the void. Biswas wills to leave a place of his own. For Kath Woodward, “identity is closely linked to place, to key places and often to the place that we call home. In this sense the map is a useful metaphor for understanding the formation and representation of identity in relation to location and situation as well as movements and translation.

He plants a tree to get shade in summer. He enjoys staying in the house with defects. "he was struck again and again by the wonder of being in his own house, the audacity of it; to walk in through his own front gate, to bar entry to whoever he wished, to close his doors and windows every night, to hear no noises except those of his family, to wander freely from room to room and about his yard, instead of being condemned, as before, to retire the moment he got home to the crowded room in one or the other of Mrs. Tulsi's houses, crowded with Shama's sisters, their husbands, their children ”.

Yashoda Bhat too interprets the metaphor of the 'house'. “The symbolism of the house is worked out artistically. The house stands for a rootless man's longing for a home. The expatriate Hindu's love for a home is personified in Biswas's longing for home; it is also the Third World rootlessness in general longing for home and also a universal longing for an identity and a home of one's own. The home also stands for one's identity for which every rootless person strives”.

The reader may find a change in Mr. Biswas' attitude towards having a house.

Earlier the house was expected to lead to a discovery of his authentic selfhood and a proclamation of his identity. This time, owning a house comes out of the humiliation inflicted on his son and Mr. Biswas's helplessness to protect his family. At that point, the house will be on a piece of land where he and his family can live with self-respect and dignity. Even his wife, Shama, agrees to leave the house although she earlier advocated living with the Tulsi family, saying, “I do not want anything bigger. This is just right for me. Something small and nice”.

In order to assert his identity Biswas, needs the security in the society and the support of the family play a major role in finding the roots. He enters into Tulsi household with a thought that they may offer him the protection and identity. But he becomes a mere servant in the house. The Hanuman House symbolizes the conventional Hindu world, which is abound by rituals and superstitions. He passes sarcastic comments against the members of the Tulsi clan. His resultant rebellious attitude towards the Tulsi house hold is in fact a defense against losing his identity. He never conforms to the codes of Tulsi house and is a stranger in the system. In order to get true identity, he participates in the activities of Aryan Samaj, who are protestant Hindu missionaries. In this connection he meets the business rivals of Tulsi family. Mr. Biswas's dreams, assertion of self and evasion of family responsibilities are the result of his cultural, social and psychological rootlessness in a multi-cultural land of Trinidad. Champa Rao Mohan mentions, “The social identity of people is rooted in their culture while at the individual level, it is determined by personal achievements. In

order to experience a "Wholeness" it is necessary to fuse the individual and the social consciousness. In the case of artificially created colonial societies like Trinidad, this spirit becomes even more pronounced.

With the result this homogeneous cultural identity becomes missing in the case of Trinidadian. They find themselves uprooted in an alien land".

Biswas gets success in proving his identity, when he gets proprietorship of general store situated at The Chase. He becomes a transformed man and takes control of family, wife and children. But after six years, he is despised and cheated by the customers, which leads him to change his place. The absence of this authority means disintegration of the family. Here, too, in the Tulsi family, the disturbance of this hierarchy (due to the absence of Seth and Mrs. Tulsi) leads to dissension and disunity in the family. Instead of co-operation, a competition between Mr. Biswas's son.

The life of Mr. Biswas resembles the life of Naipaul himself, whose series of experiences of exile and alienation while living in Trinidad seem to be portrayed through the character of his protagonist, Mr. Biswas. Yet, the tone is not negative, nor does the reader find a pessimistic approach on the part of the novelist in his dealing with the problem of identity crisis, a theme found also in Naipaul's other novels. Instead, Naipaul addresses the problem of alienation, exile and displacement with a positive approach. He presents similarly, in his Nobel Award ceremony acceptance speech, Naipaul alludes to A House for Mr. Biswas, saying

that "intuition led me to a large book about our family life."

Mr. Biswas, as a fatherless and homeless derelict, needs a shelter when he is battered by the cruelty of society. As a result he continues to be a temporary resident living in the houses of others. He is sent to Green Vale to supervise the work of the labourers in the Tulsi estate. In order to assert his identity and get away from the sense of isolation and alienation, he builds a house. But the house is destroyed by the labourers. Mr. Biswas' quest for independence is achieved through his balancing of this ambiguous belonging to the two worlds. Mr. Biswas leaving Hanuman house and moving to the house he has built at Green Vale is his first attempt at independence. The collapse of the house at Green Vale, however, is paralleled by his nervous breakdown and the subsequent return to the shelter of the Tulsis. He faces the problems of social and self alienation". The social alienation is the result of estrangement brought by the sudden discovery that the social systems are oppressive of man's aspirations. The house, which is his identity, is burnt down and he faces self-alienation. Here the words of Melvin Seaman are worth mentioning.

"The loss of contact of the individual selves with any inclination or desires that are not in agreement with the prevailing social patterns as a result of which the individuals are forced... to feel incapable of controlling their actions. Self-alienation has worse effects on individual than social alienation. It happens to be the basic form of rootlessness and can easily impede an individual's mental and psychic development in a terrific manner".

Biswas succeeds in purchasing a house in Sikkim Street in Port of Spain, after many failed attempts. He finally gets identity in society and it is a legacy that he wishes to leave to his children. Though the house is not built properly and his mortgaged, he is satisfied that he has laid claim on his portion of earth. His long struggle for a house ends and gets place of his own in an alien land.

“Nothing would have ached more than to die without having claimed to die on someone else's portion of earth. How terrible it would have been, at this time, to be without it : to have died among the Tulsis, amid the squalor of that large, disintegrating and indifferent family; to have left Shama and the children among them, in one room; worse, to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one's portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated”.

His heroism lies in his self-respect and integrity. He dies contended man. By achieving a place he tries to emancipate himself from the feeling of alienation and tries to find an identity. Lee sums up the tragedy of Biswas and how a house becomes a symbol of identity for the immigrant.

It is a tragedy of a man who wears himself out trying to adjust himself to a profound change in his society, and his personal outlook, and who, before he is forty, considers his career closed, and resents his ambition on his children. Mr. Biswas achieves little...but leaves his children in a better position to go on into a changing society. He himself is a first generation casualty of the change. He begins with nothing, and achieves only a little. Early in

the book, he had been taught to recite his multiplication tables beginning “Ought oughts are ought, and this that “nothing will come of nothing’ haunts his life. It is his achievement to make a little (a house) come of nothing”.

Naipaul has artistically portrayed the plight of the Indian immigrant in West India. Biswas's search for his identity concludes when he achieves his identity in a form of house.

Conclusion:

Naipaul seems to suggest that for displaced people like Mr. Biswas, owning a house is not just a matter getting a shelter from heat, cold or rain. In fact, it is both an imposition of order and a carving-out of authentic selfhood within the heterogeneous and fragmented society of Trinidad. The novel portrays Mr. Biswas as a man who stays put, struggling against the hostile environment instead of running away from it.

The choice of the protagonist's name in *A House for Mr. Biswas* is also interesting. Naipaul seems to have carefully chosen this name. His aim, I would argue, is not only to depict the Hindu background but also to relate it to the circumstances in which he is living. For instance, the protagonist's first name is Mohun, which means “beloved’ (according to the novel), even though he is depicted as an individual who is branded as unlucky and who experiences hostility and humiliation from society. Similarly, his surname, Biswas, means trust. The novel is part of Naipaul's early phase as a novelist when he, through his novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*, seems to search for his own identity so that he can understand his own place in the world.

In Naipaul's own words, "Most imaginative writers discover themselves, and their word, through their work".

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