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Struggle for Identity and Independence in V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*

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Abstract

V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*— a biographical and fictionalized novel— sheds light on the dangling position of Mr. Mohun Biswas, the protagonist, epitomizing his root culture and alien culture in the course of his search for identity. This research study explores the trauma of cultural alienation and the central character's shameless efforts to establish his belongings. He confronts the problem of dislocation and displacement while struggling for owning a house of his own at the frontier of cultures. The difficulty of adjustment, assimilation, and belongingness is evident in his involvement in various jobs. He is devoid of sound links with his customs and values. His constant repulsion and attraction to the cultures and traditions of the West and East leave him in a state of in-betweenness. Moreover, this research article has examined the pain, the plight, and the predicament of Mr. Biswas continuously struggling to acquire a house of his own which is a potent symbol of his autonomous existence. In line with such a backdrop, the purpose of the study is to examine the state of anatomical/cultural identity and freedom of individuals in the novel, weighing up the diasporic sensibility through the protagonist. The research applies a descriptive-based qualitative research design employing the diasporic underpinnings as a theoretical lens. The study is significant for it discloses more about persons' root identity and freedom, the prime and demanding right of people.

Keywords: Cultural identity, freedom, diaspora, displacement

Introduction

This study is an investigation of V.S. Naipaul's masterpiece *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961). Generally considered one of the finest novels of the twentieth century, the novel explores the failure, futility, frustration, fragmentation, isolation, dislocation, displacement, valuelessness, and crisis of identity of the unanchored people in the postcolonial society. The novel was published when the colonial power was fading away from the continents like Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The newly independent nations were emerging, hopefully trying their best to redefine themselves along with their cultural modes. In these continents, people were caught up between the cross-cultural currents of the values of the West and East. They are in a critical situation of belonging to neither of the worlds.

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The protagonist, Mr. Biswas, in Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* also happens to get the same fate of being in the position of in-betweenness. He can neither attach himself to the root culture nor do he do so to the alien culture. He faces the problem of dislocation and identity crisis in the colonial milieu. Regarding the term dislocation, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin say, "the phenomenon may be a result of transportation from own country to another by slavery or imprisonment, [...] a consequence of willing or willing movement from a known to an unknown location" (Key concepts 73).

Naipaul was a leading novelist of the English-speaking Caribbean world and the winner of the Nobel Prize in literature in 2001. His writings explore the cultural confusion and contradiction of the third world and the problem of an outsider. Specifically, he documents the experience of an Indian in the West Indies, a West Indian in England, and a nomadic intellectual in a postcolonial world. *A House for Mr. Biswas*, acclaimed by many critics worldwide, tells the heart-rending story of a man without a single asset who enters a life devoid of opportunity and whose tumble-down house becomes a potent symbol of the search for identity and independence in a postcolonial world. Thus, the novel is a vivid portrait of a marginalized man who struggles to emancipate himself from the entanglements of family, customs, community, culture, traditions, and religious rituals.

Naipaul's works show the cross-cultural tension on the part of Indian immigrants. They have a realistic touch on both cultures and lead the readers to experience both sides of the world. Commenting on the story of the novel, Nandakumar (1965) says, "The hero of *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a creature trapped in the framework of Indian society in Trinidad, and his attempts to achieve freedom, individuality and security constitute the theme of the novel" (p. 272).

Naipaul's one of the seminal novels, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, has received a wide variety of responses since its publication in 1961. This novel carries the central theme of Naipaul's almost his fictional and non-fictional writings. Regarding the novel, Meenakshi Mukherjee comments, "the un-accommodated man's repeated attempts to find a stable location in the ramshackle and random world get imbued with traces of colonial history and memories of coercive dislocation (p.53). Thus, Mukherjee focuses on the protagonist's search for true cultural belongingness and his endeavor to assert his independent existence.

According to R.S. Pathak, Naipaul in *A House for Mr. Biswas* delineates the Indian immigrant's dilemma realistically. He further says:

The novel presents the problems and plights of a whole people. It is conceived and executed in the great tradition of the humanist novel and is a subtle and comprehensive analysis of the colonial experience as anything in imaginative

literature. The character of MohunBiswas, against his background, imparts striking success to the novel. Mr. Biswas's complex and insightful story is the story of the community he belongs to. The novel directly bears the important modern problem of the crisis of identity (p.146)

Through Pathak's review, we infer that Naipaul, in this novel, exemplifies the colonial world of the West Indies, their hybrid culture, and Indian's struggle to seek and affirm their identity. For Biswas, the quest for identity is of great value. He faces struggles throughout his entire life to gain independence and a distinct identity by building his own house. Amitava Kumar observes *A House for Mr. Biswas* as his struggle to become a writer, which he finds throughout Naipaul's writings. He says:

But what makes the search meaningful is not the house in itself but the reason why Mr. Biswas longs for it. He wants to write. The mismatched pieces of furniture that Mr. Biswas carries with him are the props for the stage on which he wants to define his selfhood. This self, the writing self, and it comes into being with the son. This is the strand that unites in and the son, the writer and his subject (p. 61).

Naipaul tries to deliver the hollowness of the world where the individuals like him are wandering in the search for belonging, security, autonomy, and stable identity. As Rob Nixon points out, the world Naipaul belongs to is the postcolonial world, "in sustaining his high profile as an interpreter of the postcolonial world" (4). Homelessness, exile, and the defiance of the Indian diaspora can be traced in Naipaul's works.

Literature Review

V.S Naipaul's magnum opus, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, has attracted a numerous amount of criticism, analysis, and studies in English. Although the subsequent literature somehow deals with the proposed issue of my study—cultural identity and freedom of an individual—clutching the facet of diaspora, I find their studies are peripheral. As an overview of the section, I affirm that Mukharji (2005) emphasizes 'root identity as an 'intrinsic merit,' Bautiyal (2014) 'security', Shojaan (2015) the 'state of immigrants in a creole society,' K.S. Saradhambal (2017) 'development of time' as one of the determinants of a person's identity, Zumara (2018) on symbolic cum metaphorical meaning of the world' home', and Imami (2020) on the real issue of human life' discarding the religious norms of the individuals.

Mukharji (2005) claims that the root and newly established identities vary with and without 'intrinsic merit,' respectively. His way of using houses by tying up the adverbs, the first, the second, and the third, prompts up metaphorical images, i.e., an old or a real house and a new or a bought house. In doing so, Mukharji indirectly

tries to delve into the distinction between an individual's primary and secondary identity. The quote, "the actuality of each house makes a travesty of the dream and the vision, the first two spontaneously combusting as it were. The third house-bought, not constructed- has no intrinsic merit, only glaring defects (p.117), showing such sensibility described above. However, he seems implied to the issue of identity of a root or fundamental culture and its freedom of an individual.

Bauthiyal (2014) studies the protagonist's life, Mr. MohunBiswas, from the perspective of security on the hard life of Indian immigrants in postcolonial society. Showing the dilemmatic state of the protagonist, Bauthiyal states, "every failure in the outer world propels him to return to rich Tulsī, but it could not solve his problems of security"(p.96). In this sense, Bauthiyal focuses more on security that imbibes the individual affair of doing one job and the other dissecting the issue of autonomy and freedom. Similarly, Shojaan (2015) examines *A House for Mr. Biswas* with a query, "what happens to the people of other nations immigrating to a creole society". He further stresses that *A House for Mr. Biswas*" draws our attention to the characters who are immigrant Indian people spending their lives in the creole society of Trinidad under the dominance of colonial power" (p. 1). However, Shojaan's study, so far, I perceive, highlights the state of immigrants in a creole society. This state of immigrants points to the linguistic transition and identity that becomes peripheral literature.

Contrarily, Saradhambal (2017) analyses the "space of feminine in the works of V.S. Naipaul from the beginning of his writing till his last work" (p. 36). He marked out that evident variation that parallels the development of time is flawless. Likewise, Zumara (2018) does not examine a person's cultural freedom and identity but employs "the symbolic and metaphorical meaning of the word 'home'" (21). Moreover, Imami (2020) places a spotlight on "the realistic issues of human life" rather than the religious issues like "Hinduism and Christianity" (p. 21). Imami's focus on "the realistic issues of human life", as per I comprehend, is closer to the sense of cultural identity and freedom of a person.

A closer look at the literature discussed so far indicates a peripheral discussion on Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* focusing on diasporic issues. More particularly, the discussion concentrates on cultural identity and freedom.

Methods and Procedures

The paper uses a descriptive qualitative research design applying the theoretical underpinnings of culture and identity to diasporic sensibility. In a general sense, 'cultural identity' refers to the collective features of a group which comprises the place of birth, culture, religion, foods, language, social state, literature, and so on. To be specific, there are two prime theoretical concerns regarding 'cultural

identity', i.e., (i) cultural identity in terms of "shared culture—one true self", and (ii) cultural identity in terms of "becoming as well as of being" (Hall, pp. 223-225). Moreover, the connectivity of other related theoretical perspectives for the paper is properly managed with the textual analysis under the discussion section. As the study is research in the field of literature, it claims for a close analysis of the primary data employing theoretical tools. Thus, the analysis of the primary sources is further authenticated with confirmations from the secondary sources—the critical works on the primary text—*A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Results and Discussion

Cultural studies

Cultural studies is an institutional name often given today to bring together all new vocabularies and practices emerging in cultural criticism and theory. It is not a tightly coherent unified movement with a fixed agenda but a loosely connected group of tendencies, issues, and questions. Cultural Studies is composed of the elements of Marxism, Feminism, New Historicism, Gender Studies, Anthropology, Studies of Race and Ethnicity, Popular Cultural Studies, and Postcolonial Studies. Regarding its diversities, Kenneth Womack writes:

Cultural Studies manifests itself in a wide array to interrogative dimensions, including such intersecting fields of inquiry as gender studies, postcolonial, race and ethnic studies [...] The politics of nationalism, popular culture, postmodernism, and historical criticism among a variety of other topics. (p.243)

In this regard, cultural studies refuse the idea of universal culture. So, a cultural study is a multi or post-disciplinary field of inquiry that blurs the boundaries between itself and other subjects. It remains difficult to pin down the boundaries of cultural studies as a coherent, unified, academic discipline with clear-cut substantive topics, concepts, and methods that differentiate it from other disciplines. A post-colonial critic, Edward Said (1994), defines culture as each society's reservoir of the best (Culture XIII). Said's definition further highlights the importance of culture as a source of identity. Samuel P. Huntington asserts, "people come to the cultural lines to define and to create themselves" (p. 21). Thus, culture is a shaping force of man's behavior. Men identify themselves with their respective cultures and thereby establish their identity. Similarly, Kenneth Ramchand declares, "*A House for Mr. Biswas* I would suggest is the west Indian novel of rootlessness par excellence" (p.192).

Identity is the meaning or self-concept that one gives to oneself or the meaning in general that human beings give to themselves. In other words, it is the sum totality of values attached to individuals by age and a community in terms of their class, group or culture, and institution of any kind. Thus, with the change in

values, or the intellectual developments in human history, man's concept of self has always changed. It gets sometimes only modified and any other times radically changed. Identity has become the central area of concern in cultural studies during the 1990s. Identity is the process of how we describe ourselves to each other. Cultural studies explore how we become the kinds of people we are, how we are produced as subjects, and how we identify with descriptions of ourselves as male or female, black or white, young or old, Asians or Europeans.

Identity is a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within the representation. In this regard, Stuart Hall writes, "Our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences" (p.111). Dislocation is related to homelessness. Someone abandoned by tradition is a homeless man alienated and haunted (Nixon 14-17). People often realize this fact of loss when they are displaced and dislocated. This displacement is the dislocation of the subjects, which gives them a sense of alienation. There are several internal ruptures and fragmentation in modern culture, resulting in dislocation and displacement.

Dislocation makes the individuals feel a loss of their cultural belonging, giving a victim a sense of cultural alienation. It comprises the dimension of powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, formlessness, and self-estrangement of the individuals.

Mimicry and Hybridity

Mimicry refers to adopting the dominant authority's style or conventions, whether national or cultural. It also carries some of the association of poking fun- the language of parody. Thus, through mimicry, a colonized subject gets reproduced like the colonizer but never quits. The copying of the colonizing culture, behavior, manners and values by the colonized contains both mockery and a certain 'menace.' For Bhabha (1994), "mimicry is at once resemblance and menace" (p. 89). Thus, mimicry is related to the adoption of others' cultures. However, the people who do that need not reject their own culture. Then there arises the double articulation of the identity. Such articulations are intermingled so that there appears to be mongrelism creating a crisis in identity.

Hybridity emerges when people from different cultures from different parts of the world get intermingled. Once the colonial settlers arrive in an alien land, they feel the necessity to establish a new identity because of their dislocation from their place of origin. In colonial society, a binary relationship emerges between the peoples of two cultures. It is an in-between space that carries the burden and meaning of cultures, which makes the notion of hybridity. Recently within the domain of cultural studies, the term has also been associated with analyzing the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. In a state of hybridity, a person does not belong to the

world of either colonizer or the colonized. They become other in both cultures. So, hybridity becomes a cultural mix and creates a new form of identity.

Struggle of Mr. Biswas for Identity and Independence

Naipul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* represents the symbolic experience of the people in the colonial world. In the novel, the characters speak Hindi, the official language of India as well as Trinidadian English, characterized by simplified grammar and the omission of words. Tulsi represents the mother country, Great Britain, which has strictly controlled the colony's daily life and development. Mr. Biswas would represent the colonized people. He is economically and psychologically dependent on Mrs. Tulsi (when he calls the old Queen, perhaps recalling the height of British colonialism under Queen Victoria.) He struggles for independence and freedom, but his progress is slow and difficult. Like many former colonists, Mr. Biswas has not had an opportunity to learn the skills needed to manage in an independent society. His attempt to run the store at the Chase is a disaster, and he is ill-suited to oversee the sugarcane workers. Even his self-identity has got jumbled, and his traditional roots obscured; he does not know the house where he lived as a boy. He believes that the Tulsi family represented colonial slaveholders. He points out the similarities between the Tulsi activities and those of the slaveholders of the 1800s.

The present study explores the dangling position of Mr. Biswas arising from his acute experience of cultural displacement in the society of colonial Trinidad. Therefore, I intend to understand the protagonist's lifelong struggle to construct his identity and independence in the colonial milieu in this study. Every part of the novel exposes the trauma of cultural alienation and the central character's fruitless efforts to establish his belongings. Moreover, the novel highlights the pain, the plight, and the predicament of Mr. Biswas struggling to acquire a house of his own, which is the potent symbol of his autonomous existence. His fluctuation from one job to another further portrays his futile attempts to avoid the sense of his displaced and dislocated psyche in the face of colonial disaster. He tries to adopt the lifestyle of both the west and the east but cannot assimilate himself with either side of them. Mr. Biswas not only works as a Pundit in the Eastern sense but also as a sign painter in the Western sense. Slowly and gradually, his inability to identify himself with the people of Trinidad or India makes him a psychopath. A heart-rendering journey for Mr. Biswas involves a new job, a new psychosis, an ephemeral house, and a constant push and pull struggle with the more perverse pursuits of his dreams. He is trying to find a homestead, strike a place out on the frontier, and prove his independence by building a house of his own.

The problem of identity crisis can be seen in Mr. Biswas's desperate struggle to acquire his own house, which is the potent symbol of his autonomous existence.

His fluctuation from one job to another and his inability to hold any job permanently make him alienated and dissatisfied throughout his life. The problem of adjustment, assimilation, and belongingness is evident in his involvement in the jobs like an apprentice to Pundit Jayaram, a sign painter at Tulsi store at Hanuman House, a supervisor at Green Vale, a journalist on Trinidad Sentinel, and a community welfare officer in the government department. None of these jobs can give relief and solace to Mr. Biswas.

The description of the novel goes on to unravel the life of Mr. Mohun Biswas bit by bit. He feels very much alienated from the society in which he lives. He has no feeling of being a part of that society. During the house blessing ceremony and amidst the nagging of his wife Sharma:

Mr. Biswas found himself a stranger in his own yard. But was it his own? Mrs. Tulsi and Shusila did not appear to think so. The villagers did not think so. They had always called the shop the Tulsi shop even after he had painted a sign and hung it above the door. (Naipaul, p. 151)

Here, Mr. Biswas becomes the stranger in his own house. He does not possess any happiness and enthusiasm that could make him a man of his own. He even switches himself between Hindi and broken English, indicating a hybrid nature of Trinidadian society and its colonial history. At one point, “Mr. Biswas did not want to talk to Mrs. Tulsi in Hindi, but the Hindi words came out” (Naipaul, p.200). Thus, his wishes to assimilate with Western values get shattered due to his strong inclination to his past.

Nostalgia remains at the thematic core of the story of A House for Mr. Biswas. A real portrait of the original land gets manifested in the novel. A sense of placelessness creates a diasporic situation that results in nostalgia and memory in the heart of the people who are cut off from their homeland culturally and geographically. The sense of dislocation can be observed in the given paragraph:

They could not speak English and were not interested in the land where they lived; it was a place where they had come for a short time and stayed longer than they expected. They continually talked of going back to India, but when the opportunity came, many refused, afraid of the unknown, afraid to leave the familiar temporariness. And every evening they came to the arcade of the solid friendly house, smoked, told stories, and continued to talk of India (Naipaul, p.194).

Here, the characters get displaced from their homeland, India. Their incessant talk about India best expresses their identity crisis in the new world. Their discussion of India and familiar temporariness shows their constant repulsion and attraction to both worlds.

Mr. Biswas's move from one job to another, one kind of habitation to another, reduces his being into a passive victim of circumstances. A stage comes when he is on the verge of disintegrating altogether. Objects lose their neutrality for him and become a source of menace. People and figures frighten him. His 'self' faces total dissolution.

Alienated from his job, he desperately longs for a house of his own to overcome his feelings of loneliness and isolation, but he is aware of his imminent homelessness. He expresses the "hope that living in a new house in the New Year might bring about a new state of mind" (Naipaul, p. 282). Mr. Biswas possesses a beautiful dream of living in a new house that will be his own and provide him a sense of freedom and security. His dreams, dilemmas, alienation, and rootlessness are all reflected in his character:

Sometimes his hero had a Hindi name, then he was short and unattractive and poor, and surrounded by ugliness, which was anatomized in bitter detail. Sometimes, his hero had a western name; he was then faceless, but tall and broad shouldered; he was a reporter and moved in a world derived from the novels Mr. Biswas had read and the films he had seen (Naipaul, p. 344).

So, Mr. Biswas portrays his dangling self in his characters. He does not find his appropriate place and position, leading to frustration and failure to assert his autonomous identity.

In the present novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Naipaul presents the Indian immigrant's cultural dilemma more realistically. The novel describes the plight and the predicament of Indian immigrants experiencing colonial disaster in Trinidad. The moving story of Mohun Biswas portrays the most crucial modern problem of the identity crisis. His painful struggle for accommodation and belongingness in an unwelcome environment is his ancestors' legacy, which results in the distortion of identity and autonomous existence. Thus, Naipaul observes the individuals who migrate to the British colony do not escape dislocation and displacement, though their condition is manifested in different ways. It is interesting to recall how passionately Mr. Biswas attends to various details of the house building.

Mr. Biswas's desperate efforts to build up his house, which he ultimately does is his struggle for identity, have been thwarted due to his sudden death without paying the debt borrowed from Ajodha. Thus, his persistent desire to understand life and assert his identity in a chaotic world remains unfulfilled. Persons like him cannot be allowed the luxury of stability, autonomy, and identity. He is not unaware of his ambivalent position. He tells his son that he is somebody, nobody at all. He is simply a man having no permanent belonging. His present state is the fate of a man like Mr. Biswas, who is culturally displaced and has the misfortune of living in a

derelict land. The society offers very few possibilities to each of them, and he has no option but to balance his inadequacies with again contradiction of existence itself. Moreover, his attempts to own his house present the painful condition of rootlessness and displacement of the people caught in the process of diaspora.

Conclusion

V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* explores the protagonist, Mr. Biswas's endless struggle to assert his identity and independence in the society of colonial Trinidad. He lives in a materially prosperous land but constantly gets psychologically drawn toward his root culture. He can neither happily live in Trinidad nor return to India because of his different cultural ties. He faces the problems of dislocation and displacement, which ultimately results in his crisis of identity.

Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* represents dislocation, displacement, cultural identity, mimicry, and hybridity under Indian diasporic discourse. The novel presents a crisis of identity due to cultural displacement. Mr. Biswas struggles to get rid of the crippling sense of dislocation and displacement as well as his psychological and physical sufferings. He spends the entire period of his life with the constant struggle of pull and push to build up his own house in order to define his individuality in the colonial setting. Therefore, the novel echoes a diasporic taste overshadowing cultural identity and freedom at the core of this novel. Thus, the novel realistically presents Mr. Biswas's constant repulsion and attraction to the customs and values of the West and the East. The study explores the central character's traumatic experience of cultural alienation and his lifelong efforts to acquire a house of his own to establish his autonomous existence.

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