

Cultural Displacement in V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*

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Abstract

This paper examines the literary text A House for Mr. Biswas in order to explore psychological, geographical, cultural and social alienation and displacement of the migrant people. It makes exploration of how the central character, Mohan Biswas makes the search for identity based on cultural root. Displacement gives birth to the feeling of rootness. Biswas is displaced again and again exclusively as well as inclusively. The people who migrate to other countries for any reason feel the nostalgia for their homeland left behind and a feeling of fear on the strange land that gives birth to the feeling of homelessness. The text explains the difficulties and psychological anguish which create the feeling of alienation and fragmentation within a person in the colonial world. The novel attempts to reveal the hardships of the postcolonial people, endure in their search for self-identity and self-esteem in Caribbean society. V.S. Naipaul presents his experience of dislocation through the central character, who struggles for survival and feels alienated, fragmented, dislocated, and rootless. So, this research paper explores Naipaul's experience of displacement and the struggle of the protagonist in the postcolonial milieu.

Keywords: displacement, alienation, rootlessness, homelessness, nostalgia, post-colonialism

Introduction

Displacement is a term that indicates some sort of key shift in space or time. Displacement gives birth to the feeling of rootlessness. The term displacement is a state of being out of one's own place. The displaced subject feels devoid of his roots as he has lost his original language, culture, beliefs, traditions and religion. Displacement is the sense of being in between of two or more cultures. A homeless person does not have the feeling of belonging since he / she is in a psychological limbo which generally ends in some psychological, geographical, identity disorders and cultural displacement. Alienation is also related with displacement. It refers to feeling of separation or isolation which results problems stemmed from rapid social changes such as industrialization and urbanization.

Displacement began as a topical movement or shift of meanings and then in the mid-1950s. It began with the end of Second World War, because due to the war many people were displaced in different corner of the world. Displacement entered the sociopolitical discourse that feeds postcolonial studies in the sense of the forced geographical removal of individuals from their home or home regions; the people thus removed become displaced persons, also known as forced migrants or refugees.

This paper deals with Biswas's psychological, geographical, cultural, and social displacement, the central character of V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*. It makes an exploration of how Biswas makes a search for identity based on cultural root. Moreover how he has become displace of cultural root, education, values, religion, customs, language and place in the postcolonial milieu of Trinidad. Biswas finds himself completely dislocated spatially, psychologically, linguistically, and culturally. V.S. Naipaul presents his experience of dislocation through the central character, who struggles for survival and feels alienated, fragmented, dislocated, and rootless. So this research paper explores Naipaul's experience of displacement the struggle of the protagonist in the novel.

Displacement gives birth to the feeling of rootlessness. The term displacement is a state of being out of one's own place. The displaced subject feels devoid of his roots as he has lost his original language, culture, beliefs, traditions and religion. John McLeod claims that "they can be deemed not to belong there and disqualified from thinking of the new land as their home" (212). In this novel, the central character feels, he is not to belong into the new land and new culture. People who have flown and tried to settle over the distant territories of the world for various reasons have always found themselves in dual conditions in the process of settling down. They don't get away from the settled assurance of home and they cannot allow their roots being blown over into garments of uncertainty and insecurities on foreign land. Mostly the migrants suffer from the pain of being far off from their homes and the memories of their motherland prick the minds of migrants.

Displacement occurs, according to Bill Ashcraft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, "When persons more away voluntary or by compulsion from their native country to another. As they more, they get dislocated psychologically but the memory of the native country always haunts them. They are also socially, linguistically, and culturally dislocated"(65). In this text, Biswas himself dislocated geographically and psychologically. In fact, he is confused where he belongs to, that is reflected on Naipaul's life as well. He happens to be with the break of his family after the death of his father and lives a life an outcast in his childhood. He lives strangers and is deprived of

his mother's affection. In this regards he is immigrated by compulsion not voluntarily. He is taught English language, culture and history in Canadian Mission School and he gets formal education accordingly. But he is not satisfied with it and he feels nostalgic about his native culture and language; Hindi and Hindu culture. Therefore, he goes to pandit Jairam and works as assistant. He starts to learn Hindi language and practice Hindu culture. Here, it clearly shows that he is culturally, linguistically dislocated, where he belongs to. V.S. Naipaul himself displaced from his native culture and root, in this senses this novel is taken his own experience that he has shared his sense of separation and displacement through the central character, Biswas. Based on the review, this paper has been conducted to fulfill major two objectives: to deal the concept of displacement and how the native people displaced in new place, culture and society; and to analyze Biswas's psychological, geographical, cultural, and social displacement in postcolonial milieu.

Literature Review

Displacement leads into dilemmatic feelings about their own identity since they cannot decide which one they are in; in the original native culture and identity or in the new one which get in the new land. Here, Biswas is in between condition on the one hand he practices new culture on the other hand he cannot forget his native culture and religion. It means he lives into dilemmatic situation. What, Homi K Bhabha calls double consciousness. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Naipaul shows double consciousness through the psychological condition of Biswas the main character who becomes the victim of as an Indian Diaspora.

Biswas learns to reciprocate the feeling of love. This situation Madhsudana Rao explains:

In his own house, which is incomplete like his own syncopated individuality, he has come to respect the feeling of love, - that state of consciousness which recognizes the value of gifting one's self away to meet another's human need. In a sense, Mr. Biswas has at last arrived. (99)

Here Naipaul makes it clear that for displaced people like the Biswas, owning a house does not just mean having a shelter; it means the imposition of an order into their chaotic and pattern less existence; it signifies stability and coherence, which are the pre-requisites for the carving of an authentic self-hood.

The text presents Biswas's lifelong pain for being displaced and rootless in the Caribbean island away from his ancestral native land, India. Homi K Bhabha states it as "separation from origins and essences with always a sense of unhomeliness" (120).

Mohan Biswas is displaced again and again exclusively as well as inclusively. He has inherited displacement from his native country as his parents bear the stamp of indentured. Nandan describes this situation as "Out of placements" (85). He has to run from post to pillar to find his identity and find a place of his own on the earth. S. Leela describes the condition of Biswas, "[I]n search of his own identity, Mohan Biswas shifts from village to town and from joint family to nuclear family but fails to find his own roots amidst socio-cultural change" (36). After this he goes to Port of Spain and lives with his family as a tenant of Mrs. Tulsi. He builds a house in Tulsi Estate in Short hills. But he again feels displaced as the house gets destroyed in a fire. Again he shifts into Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain. Here again he has to vacate the rooms he was living in to the other room as Owad has to live in those rooms. Naipaul deals with shifting identities, roots, homes and changing realities of migrants. Amitava Kumar argues, "after the decolonization process of Trinidad the expatriates struggle for survival. But they suffer from the traumas of displacement, rootlessness, alienation, ambivalence, hybridity and frustration in course of their search for belonging, adjustment and autonomous existence" (26).

Naipaul, the sense of fragmentation comes across his deep and unshakable sense of loss, of being perpetual outside. Naipaul's belief in a new form of autonomy for the human is liberating. Through his novel Naipaul encourages to migrant people continually to question, to write about the world with the freedom of a person with no home, no country, and no affiliations. He describes the people who had to abandon their own countries and found themselves in strange places, without friends with few loyalties and with the feeling that they are trespassing. Worse, their lives have been totally altered, for them there is no going back; they have fled, each to his separate limbo and their existence is like that of souls in a classical underworld. For Naipaul, the West Indies consists of races that have been uprooted from their original societies and have not produced a new culture, to replace, to replace what was lost. In the novel Biswas's existence is limbo between the two cultures and double consciousness.

As diasporic character Biswas experiences double consciousness, in a sense physically he is an Indian. However, culturally he lives in Trinidad. In Trinidad he has to new culture that is really different from native culture. So, he is confused about his authentic identity. What Homi K Bhabha advocates that, "double consciousness relates to the practice of cultural displacement" (7). What exactly happens in Naipaul's novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Further Bhabha states that, "In that displacement the border between home and world become confused and uncannily the private and public become a part of each other, forcing up on us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting"(9). The double consciousness that is experienced by the character as a result he is

psychologically, geographically and culturally displaced. In this regards he is in deep dilemmatic situation.

Methodology

Ontological, Epistemological and Axiological position

Ontology is the starting point of research, after which one's epistemological and methodological positions logically follow. Ontology is the image of social reality upon which a theory is based. It studies what exists or what the things look like. The ontology also examines interaction between and among the existing things. An individual's ontological position answers what the nature of the social and political reality is to be investigated. Ontological assumptions are concerned with what we believe constitutes social reality. Ontology is an assumption which is impossible to refute empirically. I take constructivism perspective to deal with the issue of displacement and cultural rootlessness. This perspective is appropriate for my work as this perspective asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by the characters of the novel.

Epistemology is one of the core branches of philosophy. It concerns with theory of knowledge. The epistemology focuses on knowledge building process. For my research work, I illustrate interpretivism perspective as epistemological position. This perspective believes subjective meaning of social action. The sense of physical, psychological and cultural displacement, rootlessness and concept of identity can be analyzed not through objective reality but through subjective interactions with social phenomenon.

Axiology concerns judgments about the value. It clears role of researcher's own value on all stages of the research process. Axiology basically refers a researcher's aim. I take interpretivism as axiological position.

Textual Analysis

The people in Trinidad have lost their connection with Indian, its culture, customs and tradition. By leaving India and going to the Caribbean island, the Indians are making mimicry of their own culture. They are doomed to dislocation and isolation. As a member of an ethnic minority on the island, Biswas is obsessed with Hindu culture, customs, religions, and language, the place of his original. Wherever he gets an opportunity, he talks about Hinduism and India. For example in this novel we can find, "once when he meets Misir, the Arwacas correspondent of the *Trinidad Sentinel*, they discussed jobs, their respective families Hinduism and India" (104). It shows that physically he is in Trinidad but psychologically he is in his native country. He is very often felt displacement and identity crisis. When, Biswas, looking at the mirror, says to

his wife, "I do not look like anything at all. Shopkeeper, lawyer, doctor, labor, overseer, I do not look any of them"(232). This utterance depicts the sense of displacement and identity crisis. Though he is in Trinidad but he cannot find himself in this Caribbean society. As a result his life is fragmented, and dislocated. What Bhabha calls that "Mr. Biswas' double consciousness is caused by indentured labor that deals with displacement or separation toward the colonized from their motherland"(qtd. Sari and Saraswati14).

Throughout the text, Naipaul explores the idea of homelessness very clearly. Biswas wanders from one house to another, searching for a sense of belonging. His stay with a relative Jairam comes to a humiliating when he is thrown out for stealing bananas. He goes to his mother who offers no welcome. Now, he has to work in a rum shop where his position is not better than that of his grandfather who was an indentured laborer. Sometimes, he went to the back terrace to see his mother but there he felt unhappy and helpless. The job at the rum shop also ends on a note of disgrace. His mother can only remind Biswas of the pundit's words that he is an unlucky son. He sets off to find another job. He tries to identify himself with a tailor and then with a barber. His search to identify himself with any of the professions is representative of the wider search for roots.

A House for Mr. Biswas, metaphorically, is a miniature world which symbolizes the colonial world. Biswas's personal battle with the stronghold of the Tulsi household (the symbol of the colonial world) is a quest for existential freedom and the struggle for personality. As Singh underlines; "Mr. Biswas is the unaccommodated man representing the outcast's symbolic quest for a place in the hostile universe" (126). The house is the most powerful symbol and metaphor in the novel and it represents unobtrusively the need for physical and spiritual "shelter". Santos Chakarbharti argues, "need of shelter is shared as much by the Hindus and Creole society as by Mr. Biswas himself" (60).

The central figure in the text is Mohan Biswas, a man aware of the void of his own future and the obscurity of his origin, desperately attempting to make a place for himself in the world. The search of the protagonist in the novel for a home is a symbol of Naipaul's own search for roots. Naipaul himself dislocated and he is roaming in different countries to search his identity. So here in this novel both Biswas and Naipaul are haunted by the same sense of rootlessness and dislocated. Not only Mohan Biswas, there are other characters in the novel who have been separated from their roots and they experience the "sense of displacement" (Leela 36). Such characters are Seth, Mrs. Tulsi, Govind, W.C. Tuttle, widows of Hanuman House, Raghu, Bipti, Tara, etc. All these characters are uprooted as they are away from their own original homeland, India.

Naipaul is often known for talking about displacement and rootlessness. His choice of themes refers to his state of mind. Despite staying almost twenty-seven years at Wiltshire Cottage in London, he feels himself an alien and outsider there, in an interview he shares his bitter experience "London is my metropolitan centre; it is my commercial centre and yet I know that it is a kind of limbo and that I am a refugee in the sense that I am always peripheral. One's concerns are not the concerns of the local people" (Adams 84).

Biswas' unstable sense about his identity is represented in his dilemma when he wants to write a story about a superhero; his mind frequently unstable; sometimes he thinks about Indian heroes and sometimes western. In the following lines, it becomes clear:

Sometimes his hero had a Hindi name, then he was short and unattractive and poor, surrounded by ugliness; which was anatomized in better 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. (166)

His confusion about the cultural background of the hero reflects Biswas' unstable sense of about his identity; on the one hand he is distanced from the Indian culture. Yet on the other hand he is drifted in the new culture that is influenced by western colonization. In this above utterance clearly shows that he is trapped between the two cultures; one is native and another is new land. Here the hero reflects Biswas himself and he distinguishes Indian and western heroes. Another unstable sense of him to mixed culture in Trinidad that reflects when he quarrels his son Anand, when he asks him for money to go to theater. Biswas said, "when you get to my age you would not care for westerners, Anand lost his temper "when I get your age I do not want to be like you"(223). In this conversation Biswas' confusion about complicated culture that makes his identity ambiguous and unclear. These ambiguous and unclear identities make him dislocated from the society.

Rajendra P. Tiwari states "Mr. Biswas feels ambivalent towards Christmas and Christianity. When the Tulsis celebrate Christmas in their store enthusiastically, he cannot enjoy it and goes to meet his mother to avoid Christmas celebration" (349). These lines reveal out he cannot enjoy with new religion. Instead to celebrate Christmas and listen English song, he listens Hindi religious hymns. He feels irritated to listen the western music. For example, "he is irritated with Mr. W.C. Tuttle who plays American song recorded on gramophone. He likes to decorate his room with framed pictures with the religious quotations buying from Indian bookshop" (486). It reveals he could not forget native culture.

For protagonist, Biswas, the search for house becomes a search for himself, a search for what he really wants out of life, a quest for individuality and a search for a place in the flow of seamless history. In this novel searching for new house refers to searching a new history and he is seeking his inclusion of new version of history. The author, Naipaul has presented Hindu culture and practicing of rituals activities. They conduct religious ceremonies at the time of birth, marriage, funerals and like. In the Hindu community the presence of Brahmins while conducting religious ceremonies, is very important. In this novel, Naipaul narrates "The person who conducts a religious ceremony has to feed the Brahmins and reward them, when the rituals are over"(46). When Ajobha hold a religious ceremony and "he needed Brahmins to feed. . . (49). On such occasion, however ordinary food should not be served; they should be served rich and expensive food. Naipaul narrates about Hindu customs: "To be specific, when a religious ceremony is held by the orthodox Tulsī family, they thought appetizing food should be served for religious festivals. Furthermore a Brahmin is treated with respect and honor. . ." (203).

Conclusion

Naipaul reveals the pathetic condition of the Indians people who are suffering from cultural, historical problems and identity crisis in postcolonial Trinidad. Here, in this novel Biswas is the representative character of Indian people who migrate and struggle in the alien culture and place for surviving and seeking new identity. Basically they suffer from the traumas of displacement, rootlessness, alienation, ambivalence, hybridity and frustration in course of their search for belongingness. It is difficult for them either to return to root culture and place to assimilate themselves in their new place. Biswas is psychologically, culturally, linguistically, and sociologically attached to India and Hinduism but geographically dislocated. Through his novel reveals the inner reality of Indian people who are dislocated in the postcolonial milieu of Trinidad.

V.S. Naipaul deals with the colonial society in the West Indies, which is built on slavery and labor, with no political or cultural identity. The Africans and the Indians were carried to the sugarcane plantation, and left to decay, without a homeland or an identity, in an alien environment. For alienated and displaced people of the colonized countries, Naipaul seems to suggest that searching for creativity as Biswas does and never gives up relying on their own originality is one of the basic means to find their lost, alienated identity and save cultural displacement.

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