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Alienation and Fragmentation in Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the issues of alienation, fragmentation, and the predicament of identity experienced by Mohun Biswas, the protagonist in V.S. Naipaul's novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, from the perspective of post-colonialism. To uncover how Naipaul grapples with issues of post-colonialism such as dislocation, identity crisis, and longing for a sense of belonging in an alien world, the research tool taken for the investigation is post-colonialism, with special reference to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, and Leela Gandhi. The research design used for the analysis is textual analysis. The principal finding is that Mr. Biswas, a representative of the novelist's voice, resides in an alienated situation within his own community, despite the fact that he is physically residing with them. The paper focuses on key terms of postcolonial literature such as dislocation, identity crisis, and diaspora to diagnose the character's attitudes towards the alienated lifestyle. The readers and scholars interested in researching diaspora literature in future are expected to take the paper as a reference.

Keywords: diaspora, displaced, identity crisis, resistance

Introduction

Postcolonial literature often records racism, including slavery, dislocation, alienation, and exile experienced by the people who were formerly colonized (Masood, 2019). The chief focus of this research paper is to observe certain post-colonial issues of dislocation, and loss of identity addressed in V.S. Naipaul's novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Boehmer (1995) marked V.S. Naipaul as the founding figure of the old diaspora and Salman Rushdie as the representative of the modern diaspora. Naipaul's writings have been taken as the best representative of the problems of

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people living a nomadic life. Naipaul is noted for his dark novels of alienation and his vigilant narrative of life and travels (Barnouw, 2003; Dooley, 2006; Ray, 2005). Although Naipaul's had lineage, he was born and brought up in the multicultural society of Trinidad where he felt as if he were an alien in the midst of other aliens (Chakroberty, 2005). Despite living in London for twenty-seven years, Naipaul felt as an outsider there and depicted the autobiographical experiences in his novels. He sensed being an Indian in the West Indies, and a West Indian in England (Ray, 2005). Naipaul's third novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*, published in 1961, is about a Trinidadian Hindu whose greatest desire is to own his own home. The novel is mainly concerned with Naipaul's journey in quest of the personal community beyond the alienating effects of colonialism (Garebian, 1984; Kumar, 2002). It is replete with the life story of the author's father, and hence, some biographical elements from.

The story of *A House for Mr. Biswas* (*AHMB*) rotates around the continuous struggle of Mohun Biswas, a Hindu Indo-Trinidadian, who is married into the dominating Tulsi family, finally sets into the mission of owning his own house (Hayward, 2002). Naipaul attempts to record the sentimental and traumatic adventures of an immigrant through the protagonist (Kukreti, 2007; Ray, 2005). The novel depicts the struggle of Naipaul to become a writer. The use of the indefinite article, "'A' in the title, *A House for Mr. Biswas* indicates the intensity of his desire to belong somewhere, to feel at home, to get rid of alienation" (Kukreti, 2007, para. 1). A researcher intends to ask why his characters in the novel are obsessed with the idea of escaping the dreary intolerable environment of the Caribbean, why his characters feel as if they have lost their identity, and they are certified as mere slaves of Western cultural imperialism. The rationale of the paper lies in the researcher's attempt to mark the loss of identity and other post-colonial traits in the fiction.

Literature Review

There are several works carried out on Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* that shed light on Naipaul's characterization, narrative, theme, and purpose of writing this novel. Chinnam (2014) made a critical analysis of Naipaul's characters and found the central character, Biswas undergoing the process of articulation and socialization.

Thieme (1996), a critic inseparably associated with Naipaul, wrote about the use of the central trope of the house and Biswas's struggle to become a householder. This idea is recorded after his own experience of visiting the houses of the settlers in a foreign land when he was working on Naipaul. The real-life experience on which the novel is based was transformed into fiction (Kukreti 2007; Thieme, 1996). Another critic Dooliy (2006) embarked on an academic pilgrimage. He notices an Indian standpoint, and while doing so he engages in a new exploration of the trope of

the house and home. In the process, he had a vision of Naipaul's successive homes, especially the two Naipaul inhabited in the formative early years. Mr. Biswas lives in a comic position because he is unfamiliar to the familiar world (Garebian, 1984; Hayward, 2002; Kumar, 2002). *A House for Mr. Biswas* projects the struggle of the settlers through the lens of creolization, a process of settling by establishing control over the indigenous people of an area-to gain a better understanding of Biswas's characterization. Khan (1998) noted Naipaul's emphasis is on the linguistic hybridity and cultural amalgamation which is part of Trinidad identity formation. According to Tas (2011), Naipaul depicts a real fighter who is "in all his littleness, and still preserve a sense of man's inner dignity" (p.117). Levy (1995) observes the language of Naipaul in this novel and finds that his narrative technique is characterized by simplicity. In this way, critics like Khan and Tas marked simple language, rather than the ornate with the use of literary devices in the novel.

The critics' reviews on the text *A House for Mr. Biswas* from various perspectives signify that they have noticed the problems of settlement and unsettlement confronted by the central characters of the novel. But the critics have not noticed the predicament of identity and fragmentation and their impacts on the lives of the chief characters in the text. Therefore, this article attempts to address the research gap. It is oriented to survey the causes and impacts of the loss of identity, fragmentation, alienation, and exile connected to the protagonist of the novel, Mr. Biswas.

Methods and Procedures

The paper made an analysis of the primary resource, that is, the text, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, by V. S. Naipaul applying a discursive, qualitative approach itself from a theoretical modality based on postcolonial theories of Leela Gandhi, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha. And the secondary resources such as literature from journals, and commentaries on the text given through websites were surveyed to note the research gap. The delimitation of the paper primarily lies in focusing on the attempt of the characters of the novel to find their identity in an alien world.

Postcolonial literature is the literature created and narrated by the people from the countries formerly colonized (Raja, 2019). It addresses the problems and consequences of decolonization of a country, and issues related to the political and cultural independence of formerly subjugated people. Hybridity, dislocation, mimicry, third-space, and ambivalence are the key aspects of postcolonial literature (Bhabha, 1994). Postcolonial literature is typically characterized by its revolt against the colonization by the colonizers. All postcolonial writing is resistance writing

(Bhabha, 1994; Gandhi, 1998). When the colonizer gets encountered with the colonized, both cultures get affected (Bhabha, 1994). The colonizer intends to deter the colonized by developing specific behavior of suppression. Spivak (1988) marked the exploitation of subalterns like that of the colonized by the colonizers in the post-colonial discourse.

The Post-colonial approaches of the theorists mentioned above are key research tools used to examine how the sense of dislocation and anonymity are experienced by Mr. Biswas in Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Results and Discussion

The central concern of the paper is to observe how V. S. Naipaul raises the issues of identity crisis, dislocation, and indifference towards an individual leading to alienation and fragmentation in his celebrated work *A House for Mr. Biswas*. From the very beginning of the fiction, the novelist portrays a desperate picture of the leading character. Mr. Biswas is struggling to preserve his identity and build an authentic selfhood in a bizarre environment. Bhabha (1994) argued that migrant subjects suffer from “a doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once which makes it impossible...to accept the invitation to identity” (pp. 112-113). A researcher notices how Mohun Biswas is sketched as an individual losing his identity in the very first chapter of the novel. Even an astrologer, Pundit Sitaram studied the birth details of Mohun Biswas consulting his astrological almanac and remarked, “The boy will be a lecher and a spendthrift. Possibly a liar as well” (p. 16). The six fingers of Mr. Biswas, for Pundit Sitaram, symbolize bad fortune for his family. Hence, Mohun's predicament of identity begins from his home. It is the ruling ideology that makes the elites to discriminate against the non-elites (Gandhi, 1998; Spivak, 1988). Pundit Sitaram stands for the elite who create space for the marginalization of Mr. Biswas. Mohun experiences alienation in his house because the family priest has interpreted his horoscope and declared him to be ominous. Such judgments make him feel as if he was an outsider in his Indian community. His journey to find a home is his attempt to acquire his social role and identity.

Mr. Biswas realizes that the crisis in identity arises due to the ambivalence state. Ambivalence refers to “a simultaneous attraction toward and repulsion from an object, person or action” (Young, 1995, p. 161), or a continual fluctuation between wanting one thing and wanting its opposite. Naipaul portrays the ambivalence and 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” (*AHMB*, p. 279). Unlike his father and brothers who have inherited the social identity of laborers, this cannot be claimed by Mr. Biswas.

Alienation is viewed as an emblem of personal dissatisfaction with certain structural components of modern society (Lystad, 1972; Silva, 2017). Mr. Biswas first looks after his uncle's shop; then he finds work as sign-painter. While doing the job of the sign-painter, he encounters Shama, the Tulsis' daughter, and later on, marries her. His life after marriage is a symbol of the third space. The alienated people struggle to find their identity in the third space (Bhabha, 1994; Oversveen, 2021). The married life makes Mr. Biswas feel that life opens no room for not romance, but increases responsibility.

When no money and dowry were received from the Tulsis, Mr. Biswas has no alternative but to shift into the Hanuman House. Bhabha (1994) contended that home is not home but it signifies a mode of living taken as "a metaphor of survival" (p. 113). But this metaphor does not work for Mr. Biswas. The unfriendly family atmosphere heightens his mental complexity. To Mr. Biswas, it is a typical joint family which functions on the same pattern as "the British Empire in the West Indies" (p. 112). Hanuman House provides shelter to Mr. Biswas but loses his identity in return. Hanuman House, another metaphorical representation, is depicted as follows:

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 balustrade which hedged the flat roof was crowned with a concrete statue of the benevolent Monkey God Hanuman. (p. 186)

This description signifies how the concrete wall of the house appeared narrow and how the House looked bulky for a struggling settler like Mr. Biswas in an alien world.

Mr. Biswas finds his condition ambivalent day after day. Ambivalence is a complicated state of repulsion and attraction marked in the link between the colonizer and the colonized (Bhabha, 194). Mr. Biswas observes that men are required to do labor work in the Tulsi family, no matter whether they are husbands or not. He realizes that he is not welcomed in Hanuman House where "he was treated with indifference rather than hostility" (*AHMB*, p. 187). This realization builds his ambivalent character. However, he "held his tongue and tried to win favor" (p. 188). He has a strong faith in gaining his freedom and independence. He keeps on attempting to rediscover his identity. Govind, one of Tulsi sons-in-law, advises Mr. Biswas to quit sign-painting and be a driver of the Tulsi estate. Mr. Biswas retorts his disapproval: "Give up sign-painting? And my independence? No, boy. My motto is: paddle your own canoe" (p. 107). It seems that for Mr. Biswas sign-painting displays his identity. He disagrees to adopt any profession connected to the Tulsis.

Moreover, he does not intend to get himself identified by the insignificant son-in-law, in the Tulsi family. This demonstrates his attempt to create his own identity from the ambivalent state.

Mr. Biswas looks bewildered in the hybrid state. Hybridity is a postcolonial trait highlighted by Homi K. Bhabha. Hybridity commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization (Bhabha, 1994). Mr. Biswas attempts to gain his freedom in Hanuman House. He tries to be closer to the Aryans, the so-called protestant Hindu communities from India. His voice for the eradication of the caste system, child marriage, and idol worship doctrines making the Tulsis ferocious. Like the colonized, Mr. Biswas struggles without any proper job, income, and a house of his own in his identity predicament. This is shown in the text:

The future he feared was upon him. He was falling into the void, and that terror known only in dreams, was with him as he lay awake at nights, hearing the snores and creaks and the occasional cries of babies from the other rooms. The relief that morning brought steadily diminished. Food and tobacco were tasteless. He was always tired and always restless. (AHMB, p. 227)

The fragmented life makes his world dark. He apprehends life without solace and comfort.

Mr. Biswas is disappointed that nobody loves him, nobody knows him, rather everybody ridicules at his condition (Levy, 1995). Mr. Biswas experiences bitter stillness around him in the evenings as long as he is locked into the room.

Mr. Biswas is a subaltern who acts in an absurd way in many situations. The crisis of identity, the rootlessness, and the feeling of subaltern force man to act in an absurd way (Spivak, 1988). Mr. Biswas performs several absurd activities to highlight his individuality and to get acknowledged, such as his revenge on Bhandat (spitting in his rum) or giving various nicknames to the Tulsis. For example, ‘the old hen’, ‘the old queen’, ‘the old cow’ intended to Mrs. Tulsi, and ‘the big boss’ for Seth, or ‘the two Gods’ for Tulsi’s sons. The narrator finds himself so troubled that he says “he could not be trusted” (AHMB, p. 102). Even when Mr. Biswas’s daughter is born, Seth and Hari decide to name her Savi without consulting Mr. Biswas. To register his protest, Mr. Biswas writes on the birth certificate: “Real calling name: Lakshmi. Signed by Mohun Biswas, father. Below that was the date” (p. 163). This signifies the ceaseless attempt of Mr. Biswas to assert his identity in the post-colonial world.

Mr. Biswas goes through the creolization. Creolization is mostly used to refer to those “post-colonial societies whose present ethnically or racially mixed populations are a product of European colonization” (Ashcroft et al., 2000, p. 51). In another section, named, ‘The Chase’, Mr. Biswas begins to live independent life with Sharma. Nevertheless, he has a bitter feeling that he is an inessential and unwanted person. For Mr. Biswas, “Chase was a pause, a preparation” (AHMB, p. 147). Mr. Biswas’s desire to own his own house signals the problem of identity crisis among displaced people. Spivak (1988) believed that the dispossessed attempt to establish their identity, voice, and collective locus. At Chase, Mr. Biswas marks that “the Hanuman House was the world, more real than the Chase, and less exposed; everything beyond its gates was foreign and unimportant” (AHMB, p. 188). Mr. Biswas expects to get his identity discovered in Chase. But wherever he shifts, he experiences a sense of fragmentation and alienation looming before him. He finds himself as the dispossessed and keeps on attempting to establish his identity. It is the perception of economic inequality that intensifies the affliction of alienation (Oversveen, 2021; Silva, 2017). Mr. Biswas keeps on striving to regain his own identity among the migrated East Indians in Trinidad.

Mr. Biswas suffers in his attempt to imitate the English colonizers. Mimicry is a key term associated with post-colonialism and marked in the novel. Bhabha (1994) defined mimicry as exaggerated copying of language, culture, manners, and ideas. Pundit Jairum tries to teach Mr. Biswas the Ramayana and other traditional lessons. But he ignores reading them. Instead, he reads philosophical books like Bell’s Standard Elocutionist. Reading philosophical books and fiction, Mr. Biswas realizes that the people of his community have no valuable history. Mr. Biswas regards that the romance which he notices reading Bell’s Standard Elocutionist is unachievable in this land. This idea is recorded in these lines: “He read the novels of Hall Caine and Marie Corelli. They introduced him to intoxicating worlds” (AHMB, p. 74). His disappointment intensifies his inferiority complex. Seth questions Mr. Biswas about his father at the very first encounter with the Tulsis, but Mr. Biswas evades the question and says, “I am the nephew of Ajodha Pagotes” (p. 85). He admits this because his inheritance and his identity in Trinidad are not safe, and he cannot be totally free from suffering. Life, for Mr. Biswas, is futile without Sharma, without his children, and even without the Tulsis. Garebian (1984) found Mr. Biswas a grotesque character ridiculed by his state of dislocation. Mr. Biswas visits Hanuman House more frequently in bewilderment and to seek his identity.

Mr. Biswas is sometimes found to be performing colonial mimicry for the sake of identity. It is a violation of self in order to gain something great. Bhabha (1994) believed that “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable

other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (p. 86). Mr. Biswas admits the truth that England is the land of offering opportunity and freedom. He does not like the trend of identifying a person by his caste. He believes that “a man’s caste should be determined only by his actions” (AHMB, p. 111). Thus, his thoughts are of a modern English man, while he is really a Brahmin Indian immigrant who inherits a status as a labourer from his immigrant father.

The loneliness and depression of Mr. Biswas are the results of this incongruity which is by itself a product of his mimicry. Mimicry is not a representation of the servitude of the colonized; rather it can be considered as an attempt to change its identity (Bhabha, 1994). Mr. Biswas has a strong faith that a nobler purpose is awaiting him. The narrator reports this conviction of Mr. Biswas in these words: “Though he never ceased to feel that some nobler purpose awaited him, even in this limiting society, he gave up reading Samuel Smiles. That author depressed him acutely. He turned to religion and philosophy” (AHMB, p. 174). All the time Mr. Biswas finds himself as a man belonging to another world, quite distanced from the world he resides in. Though the books read by him are unfamiliar to his world, they offer him comfort and relief. The books provide him with solace because he lacks security in his real world. He cannot decide where to start from. Thus, living a life of mimicry throws him in a position where no one notices him. This even intensifies his feeling of humiliation. Readers can notice the paradox between Mr. Biswas’s intention and confrontation, dream and reality. Nevertheless, he intends to imitate the English so that he can disguise himself from being colonized.

Although his stay at the Green Vale provides Mr. Biswas a sense of liberty and significance, his activities in Green Vale are characterized by the physical and mental insecurity. In the Post-colonial scenario, the non-elites, the discarded fight against insecurity for their identity (Gaandhi, 1998). Here, his dream to build a house begins to shape into reality. It is not that he wants a spacious place for himself, but he wants to be recognized as the father of his children, especially by his son, Anand. For Mr. Biswas, “Anand belonged completely to Tulsis” (AHMB, p. 216). Though he begins to build his house in Green Vale, it is not exactly identical to his dream house. Bhabha (1994) delineated “mimicry repeats rather than re-presents” (p. 85). Mr. Biswas goes into the comfortable rooms of the house thinking that it will bring a change in his mind. But the feeling of alienation and dislocation lurks here too. He feels discarded like the non-elite in the world of the so-called elites.

Wherever Mr. Biswas goes, he finds entangled between mimicry and mockery. Bhabha (1994) opined that “ambivalence represents the existing fluctuating relationship between mimicry and mockery” (p. 87). Port of Spain exposes new

prospects for Mr. Biswas. The city proffers him some prospects of establishing his identity. He works as a reporter for the Trinidad Sentinel and draws a salary of fifteen dollars a month. This job helps him gain some prestige from the Tulsis as well. Mr. Biswas, too, never feels what he used to feel when Sharma is pregnant for the fourth time, “one child claimed; one still hostile, one unknown. And now another” (AHMB, p. 227). His relation with Mrs. Tulsi is gradually improved. But the tragedy is that happiness is short-lived. The hold of the Trinidad Sentinel by new authorities and Mrs. Tulsi’s verdict to live in Shorthills gives a blow to Mr. Biswas. Nevertheless, the house of Mr. Biswas is not conveniently situated. He has to walk a mile daily for shopping confronting the problem of transportation. His children also wish to go back to Port of Spain.

Mr. Biswas keeps on realizing his duties as a father and as a husband in Port of Spain. He always has double consciousness. Tyson (2006) described that the colonized have a double consciousness, that of the colonizer and indigenous community. The house stands as a prison for Mr. Biswas because it is distanced from the city. Mr. Biswas “could not simply leave the house in this place. He had to be released from it” (AHMB, p. 432). Mr. Biswas reports Sharma that he is going to leave the house very soon. He has a quest for his own house. The quest for the house signifies the quest of Mr. Biswas to obtain his identity, self-respect, and dignity. This instinct is a process of creolization of Mr. Biswas. When people are fed up with the dominant culture, they produce a totally new construct in creolization (Ashcroft et al., 2000; Oversveen, 2021). Sharma, the wife of Mr. Biswas wishes to leave the house although she had insisted on living with the Tulsi family earlier. Sharma remarks, “I do not want anything bigger. This is just right for me. Something small and nice” (p. 580). Ultimately, Mr. Biswas succeeds in getting a loan from Ajodha and purchasing a house in Port of Spain. He depicts the house in these words: “The sun came through the open window on the ground floor and struck the kitchen wall. Woodwork and frosted glass were hot to the touch. The Sun went through the home and laid dazzling strips on the exposed staircase” (p. 572). The presence of the sun in the dazzling house signifies the happiness and gratification of Mr. Biswas living in the new house.

This is the indirect representation of Naipaul’s gratification at the accomplishment of his wish. But Mr. Biswas finds many infirmities in the house later on though his sense of satisfaction for owning a house lurks there. Naipaul implies that for dislocated people like Mr. Biswas, owning a house is not just a matter of sheltering from the cold or rain but also an indication of establishing order in the heterogeneous and fragmented society of Trinidad.

Mr. Biswas is described as a determined man who is struggling against the hostile environment instead of escaping from it. One of the dominant issues of post-colonial literature is the diaspora. Ingleby (1999) regarded that diaspora includes a dispersion from one place or a center from which all the dispersed take their identity. The symbolic meaning of a house for Mr. Biswas is highlighted in the Prologue:

How terrible it would have been, at this time, to be without it; to have died among the Tulsis; amid of 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. (AHMB, p. 14)

Naipaul demonstrates the bitter situation and the lifestyle of the Indian diasporic community in Trinidad through the depiction of the hero, Mr. Biswas.

In this way, the novelist becomes successful in universalizing the issue of alienation experienced by an individual. The protagonist stands for the novelist himself who battles against the painful condition of dislocation. At times, the novel even grows darker as Biswas's battle with the Tulsis becomes complicated. Nevertheless, Mr. Biswas succeeds to possess a house of his own by the end. Naipaul seems to have carefully chosen the name of the protagonist, Mr. Biswas. He seeks to picture the problems of the Hindu living in an alien world. Therefore, the first name of Mr. Biswas, Mohun signifies 'beloved', although Mr. Biswas is portrayed as an unlucky individual struggling to trace out his identity in a hostile world. The novel depicts the activities of the Indians struggling to find their place and identity in an alien country. The predicament of identity is generated by unfamiliar language, and religious and cultural practices.

Conclusion

Thus, Naipaul's fiction, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, delineates the pathos of migrants struggling for survival in a state devoid of their identity. The life of Mr. Biswas revolves around the unifying, integrating, and central metaphor of the house. Narrated in compassionate tones, the house, for Mr. Biswas, stands for his search for independence from dependence. The novel exposes the dark outlook of the social and ethnic past of the marginalized East Indian migrants living in Trinidad. The narrative attempts to balance Mr. Biswas's inner self and the disinterested view of the outer world. The dislocated life of Mr. Biswas reflects the ambivalent life of Naipaul himself. Naipaul, like Mr. Biswas, had experienced a bitter life of fragmentation and alienation while residing in Trinidad. In the quest for his own identity, Mr. Biswas moves from village to city and from nuclear family to joint family. But, he is unable

to discover his own roots in the alienated world. The chief finding of the research is that the novel demonstrates how the dislocated Indians live a hard life in Trinidad, and how they find themselves colonized by the local people or the colonizers there. Despite being a member of the Trinidad community, he resides in a situation of anonymity. He is displaced from his ancestors' home because he has no home and land in India, neither does he have loving community in Trinidad despite he succeeds in possessing a house there. Like his forefathers, Mr. Biswas is obliged to go away from his birthplace and wander in an alien world in quest for the identity and security. Naipaul portrays struggle of Biswas in tracing out his identity in the novel. It is not just an expression of an individual but the collective attempt of the Indian diaspora that finds a place in the fiction.

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