

## **Diaspora and Discern in V.S. Naipul's *A House for Mr. Biswas***

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### **Abstract**

This paper deals with V.S. Naipul's novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* that deals with various themes like house, isolation, alienation, frustration, identity crisis, negation and colonialism, in a house and society that becomes brutal and heartless to Mr. Biswas. The novel reveals the story of its major protagonist, Mr. Mohun Biswas, dealing with all stages of his life, from his birth till death. The novel also deals with various kinds of clashes like culture, race, generation and human psychosis. It is partly autobiographical in the sense that it reflects Naipul's experience of alienation and spiritual crisis that resulted in his attitude of disliking the Trinidadian society where he was born and migrated to London where again he felt isolated and alienated. *HMB* depicts Naipul's notion about individuals who get affected by the deterioration and degradation of their self and their culture in an alien land. In their struggle, trials and tribulations to achieve recognition, success and identity in a postcolonial contentious society, broken individuals trapped in a multi-racial society, undergo physical and mental torture and torment as they become suspicious of losing their existence.

**Keywords:** *Alienation, Culture, Colonialism, Diaspora, Discern, Identity crisis, Psychosis, Quest*

## Introduction

Carol Boyce Davis identifies the longing in a migrated writer like V.S. Naipaul and writes:

Migration creates desire for home, which in turn produces the rewriting of home. Homesickness or homelessness, the rejection of home or longing for home becomes motivating factors in this rewriting. Home can only have meaning once on experience a level of displacement from it (113).

The novel portrays a heart-rending image of Mr. Biswas as he strives to protect, preserve and perpetuate his self identity in an alien milieu and seeks to find a genuine and veritable selfhood which he sees possible only through having a house of his own. In *HMB*, the encounters and episodes of advent is explored in the context of the arrival of the Indian indentured labourers in Trinidad. Indians were shifted from their homelands across the sea to work in the sugarcane and rubber plantations in Trinidad. Naipaul, in *A Way in the World*, describes the homelessness of Trinidadian Indians: "These people were without money, job, without anything like a family, without the English language; without any kind of representation. They were utterly destitute" (19). Also, in *Finding the Centre*, Naipul expresses the same concern and writes: "Many Indians, after they had served out their indenture, had found themselves destitute and homeless. Such people, even within my memory, slept at night in the Port of Spain squares" (53).

Mr. Biswas was born in a village and his birth is believed unpropitious and inauspicious since he was born with an extra finger, "six-fingered, and born in the wrong way" (*A House for Mr. Biswas*. 15). Also a pundit predicts that the newly born boy Biswas will 'eat up his mother and father' which means the birth of Biswas will bring death of either his father or mother, "Whatever you do, this boy will eat up his own mother and father" (*A House for Mr. Biswas*. 5). His father dies after few years and the family is scattered. Mr. Biswas along with his mother and two older brothers goes to live with their relatives while his sister is shifted to the house of their wealthy aunt and uncle, Tara and Ajodha. Mr. Biswas is removed from school. He was put under a pundit to learn to be a Hindu priest, but he failed. He was then put under the supervision of Ajodha's alcoholic and abusive brother Bhandat to work in a rum shop. This arrangement even became disastrous and ended with bad result. Mr. Biswas now growing towards a young man resolves to establish his own fortune. He discovered his talent for lettering that he had in his school days and thus becomes a sign-writer. This business leads him to the home of the Tulsis, Hanuman House where he is tricked and trapped to marry the sixteen-year-old Shama, daughter of Mrs. Tulsi. Naipul expresses: "this domineering matriarch and her unruly household [who] stand ready to swallow up the dreams and individually of the young Mr. Biwas" (*A House for Mr. Biswas*, 57). He was not offered any dowry and then is gradually forced to

work on the land with the other husbands of the sisters of Shama. Naipul writes:

... under Seth's supervision, worked on the Tulsi land, looked after the Tulsi animals, and served in the store. In return they were given food, shelter and a little money; their children were looked after; and they were treated with respect by people outside because they were connected with the Tulsi family. Their names were forgotten; they became Tulsis (*A House for Mr. Biswas*. 97).

Though he agitates, but his destitution and deprivation compels him to take shelter on the Tulsi household. Naipul writes: "For the next thirty-five years he was to be a wanderer with no place he would call his own, with no family except that which he was to attempt to create out of the engulfing world of the Tulsis" (*A House for Mr. Biswas*. 40). Because of his agitation and perturbation in the Tulsi household Mr. Biswas was shifted to a rural village to work as a manager of the Tulsi food shop. The shop constantly lost its profit and his growing family started spending maximum time at Hanuman House. At last he joined Shama and his children at Hanuman house. He was then shifted to Green Vale to take over as overseer for Mrs. Tulsi's powerful brother-in-law. He was entirely inappropriate for the position and work system there and thus feels pestered and victimized by the labourers serving under him. He experiences a mental collapse and was impelled to return to Hanuman House. Naipul describes the dilemma of Biswas and writes:

Then biting his nails one evening, he broke off a piece of a tooth. He took the piece out of his mouth and placed it on his palm. It was yellow and quite dead, quite unimportant; he could hardly recognize it as part of a tooth: if it were dropped on the ground it would never be found: a part of himself that would never grow again. He thought he would keep it. Then he walked to the window and threw it out (*HMB* 271).

Compulsion to earn his living shifts him again from the Tulsis to his married sister's house in Port of Spain. He works there as a journalist on the *Sentinel* newspaper and this leads to reconciliation of his disturbed relationship with the Tulsis where he lives with his family until Owad his son is sent abroad to study medicine. Mr. Biswas develops interest in the education of his son Anand and their relationship grows stronger and intimate between them. Meanwhile the Tulsi family starts to disintegrate because of changing social and economic forces which forces Mr. Biswas to build and move to his own house in Sikkim Street. Mr. Biswas says: "I am going to get a job on my own and I am going to get my own house too" (*HMB* 67). He is given a government post in a Social Welfare Department. He starts piling hopes and his focus centres on Anand his son since he wins an exhibition in the prestigious Queen's College in the city.

But it seemed that misfortune did not stop chasing Biswas and his house in Sikkim Street leads

him into heavy debt, but still he is ecstatic for having a land and house of his own. The government department where he was working gets dissolved and he comes back to join *Sentinel* on half-pay where he develops heart-trouble and finally gets dismissed. Anand in the meanwhile was studying at a university in England and does not come home during his father's illness, whereas his daughter, Savi, comes and stays with them. Mr. Biswas dies suddenly and a traditional Hindu cremation is done. After his death, his wife and children returns to the empty house built by Biswas. Naipul writes:

Mr. Biswas was forty-six, and had four children. He had no money. His wife Shama had no money. On the house in Sikkim Street Mr. Biswas owed, to and had been owning for four years three thousand dollars. The interest on this, at eight per cent, came to twenty dollars a month the ground rent was ten dollars. (*A House for Mr. Biswas*. 7)

*A House for Mr. Biswas* is Naipaul's most intense and ardent venture to magnify his own antiquity where he reproduces his shattered and fragmented self. He confesses:

At first I looked for this release in humour, but as the horizon of my writing expended, I sought to reconstruct my disintegrated society, to impose under on the world, to seek patterns, to tell myself ... this is what happens when people are strong; this is what happens when people are weak. I had to find that degree of intellectual and comfort, or I would have gone mad. (*Transition* 59)

*A House for Mr. Biswas* is an ascetic novel which projects an image of life lasting a period of about fifty years in Trinidad; staging the plot against a challenging and changing socio-cultural background along with the description of the growth of its characters. The core of the novel has always been the character Mr. Biswas and the concepts and concerns closely linked and revolving with him. Even if he is a common person with no exceptional features, Naipaul triumphs in giving him a heroic position gaining the attention and sympathy of the readers for his struggles, success and defeat. In this way, he represents an archetypal universal figure and personifies a universal issue - the quest for self-identity and purpose in life. Naipaul in *The Middle Passage* describes:

Living by themselves in villages, the Indian were able to have a complete community life. It was a world eaten up with jealousies and family feuds and village feuds, but it was world of its own a community within the colonial society, without responsibility, with authority doubly and trebly removed. (88- 89)

The tale of Mr. Biswas resembles the life of Naipaul as the sequences of experiences, encounters and occurrences of diaspora, exile, isolation and struggle for selfhood during his living in Trinidad appears to be delineated through the character of his title role Mr. Biswas. He projects Mr. Biswas' persistent

wrestle against the vehemence that attempts to defeat and suppress his individuality. His battle is prolong, wearisome, stressful and prosaic. Naipul writes: "He didn't feel like a small man, but the clothes which hung so despairingly from the rail on the mud wall were definitely the clothes of a small man, comic, make believe clothes" (*A House for Mr. Biswas*. 157).

From the opening of the novel, Mr. Biswas has been rendered as a marginalized person persistently on shifts and movements to discern his space, position and freedom in the confined sphere of Trinidad. In the quest of his own identity, Mr. Biswas shifts from village to town, shifts from his own family with mother and sisters to the house of relatives and from there to the house of Tulsis, and from there to his own house in Sikkim Street to find his own roots. His search for a home was a search for self-identity and also a necessity to restore and reestablish himself within the affectionate, affable and integrated bond of a family that he missed since childhood after the death of his father. Quite sensible of his uncertain status, he tells his son, "I am just somebody. Nobody at all. I am just a man like you know" (*A House for Mr. Biswas*. 279). Actual execution and accomplishment in this novel is in the title 'house' depicting the eloquent and expressive symbol in the novel as it represents the exigency for shelter- physical and spiritual. Naipul writes: "As soon as he saw the barracks Mr. Biswas decided that the time had come for him to build his own house by whatever means" (*A House for Mr. Biswas*. 206). *A House for Mr. Biswas* depicts not only individual but also communities being migrated and modeled by large socio-cultural forces. The story of Mr. Biswas is the story of the Indian immigrant's predicament and plight. This predicament is stiffened and fortified by the fact that he had to fight against a legacy of his parents - a history of homelessness. Nayak writes:

Naipaul locates the circumstances, socio-cultural and historical in character, that go into the making of Biswas' experience of a community caught somewhere in the larger process. Mr. Biswas makes humanly interesting and completing the immediate existential and socio-cultural themes in a transparent and natural style (Nayak 50-51).

The Hanuman House is a mini India and the people in the house protect, prolong and perpetuate the remembrance of their native country. They try to adopt the Indian type of life and culture to their queer situation. But eventually the socio-cultural, religious, economic and political conventions are critically affected with every new advent in the house. The house then becomes a prison and people started getting suffocated. Its members yearn for freedom and crave for space - a house of their own. Naipul writes:

Among the tumbledown timber and corrugated-iron building in the high street at Arwacas Hanuman House stood like 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

floors were the house became bulky, impregnable and blank. The side walls were window less and on the upper two floors the windows were mere slits in the facade. The balustrade which to hedge the flat roof was crowned with a concrete statue of the benevolent monkey God Hanuman. From the ground the white - was had features could scarcely be distinguished and were, if anything, slightly sinister, for death had settled on the projections and the effect was that of face lit up from below ( *HMB* 180-81).

Hanuman House was not at all a cogent reconstruction of a family rather it was a miniature of slave society build by Mr. Tulsi and Seth. They needed workers to slough in their plantations through which they can erect their empire. They trapped these homeless and jobless fellow Hindus and exploited them physically and mentally. The understood the psychology of these slaves and knew the strategy to make them completely dependent on them for food and shelter. They Hanuman house stands for the white colonial empire and Mrs. Tulsi and Seth resemble the white colonial masters. Mr. Biswas becomes uneasy in the Hanuman House. To him, the Hanuman House was a place where "when everyone worked with energy and joy... he remained aloof (*A House for Mr. Biswas*. 186). He suffers from obsession. Naipul expresses the psychological agony of Biswas:

Food and tobacco were tasteless. He was always tired, and always restless. He went often to Hanuman House; as soon as he was there he wanted to leave ...when he closed the door of his room for the night, it was like an imprisonment. (*A House for Mr. Biswas*. 227-28)

Shama typifies her mother's traditional notions and emphatic beliefs which are the foundation and pillars of the Tulsi's family. The daughters of the house are marginalized and their husbands are exploited as slaves. They are treated as second class citizens inside their own hou. Whereas Mr. Tulsi, Mrs. Tulsi, Mr. Seth, Mr. Shekhar and Owad, their sons were the first class citizens and enjoyed the high status in the family. Shamma complains Biswas: "You are getting everybody against you. You don't mind but what about me? You cannot give me anything and you want to prevent everybody else from doing anything for me?" (*A House for Mr. Biswas*, 107)

Biswas felt his worthless position in the Hanuman house and realizes that he will continue to be like that. In this kind of psychic agony and anonymity Biswas becomes demotivated and defeated. He makes fun of the various members in the Hanuman house. Mrs. Tulsi-the 'old cow,' the 'old hen', the 'old queen'; Seth-the 'Big Boss'; Owad and Vidiadhar-the 'Young gods'. He says:

"How the gods, eh?" Shama wouldn't reply. "And how the Big Boss getting on today?" That was Seth. Shama wouldn't reply. "And how the old queen?" That was

Mrs. Tulsi. "The old hen? The old cow?" "Well, nobody didn't ask you to get married into the family, you know." "Family? Family? This blasted fowlrun you calling family?" (*A House for Mr. Biswas*, 49)

He rebels and tells to Tulsi's son-in-law: "Give up sign painting? And my independence? No, boy. My motto is: Paddle your own canoe" (*A House for Mr. Biswas*, 107). For him sign-painting is the symbol of protection and preservation of his identity, source of his self-dignity.

## Conclusion

The novel thus presents a double folded story depicting the lives of a third-generation immigrant who is enslaved but finally succeeds in building his self identity by constructing a house and having an affectionate family of his own. Biswas dreams to live his life with audacity, warmth and dignity. However, his life is disappointed and he lives somewhat like a "wanderer with no place... to call his own," (*A House for Mr. Biswas*, 40). Naipaul through the character of Mr. Biswas depicted the trials and tribulation – social, economic, cultural, religious, physical and psychological- of the Trinidadian Indians in finding in search of space, freedom and identity. They are neither a part of their own world nor accepted in the new world and remains homeless, distressed exiles dependent on a foreign land and yearning for the decaying past. The novel is a tale of the disillusioned and diasporic Indians at Trinidad. It also dives into the psyche of Mr. Biswas who defies the feudal set up represented by Tulsi House and his prolonged journey and struggle to have a house of his own at the end of the novel. Though he acquires his own house and identity but it was too heavy on him and he finally dies out of stress and pain but he dies in his own house. He dies with honour, dignity and distinction.

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