

Review

Nostalgia through Diasporic Perception in V.S Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*

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The writings of V.S. Naipaul deal with shifting identities, roots, homes and changing realities of migrants. The rootlessness is a prominent theme found in almost all of Naipaul's writings. It generates from alienation brought about by exile; physical, psychological or social. He is a writer who encourages us continually to question, to write about the world with the freedom of a person with no home, no country, and no affiliations. The concept of "home" and "homelessness" has always been a recurring theme of Diaspora literature, especially, the literature of the Caribbean. The historical dislocation of the Islands combined with the cultural and ethnic diversity of the area has been instrumental to give rise to what can be referred to as a plural society. The point is clear that we have a formless, casual society with puzzled standards and the emergence of the confused, unassimilated man. The disintegrated nature of the society gives the West Indian an acute sense of "homelessness" and is best described as paradoxical since it insists on roots and rootlessness; "home" and "homelessness" at the same time. The writer describes the people who had to abandon their own countries and shifted themselves in strange places without friend with little loyalties and with the feeling that they are trespassing. In the present paper, efforts have been made to establish the motif of "home" and "homelessness"; the dilemma of the nomadic society and individual, the wanderer in space and time who can find no anchorage in Naipaul's famous work *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Key words: Diaspora, nostalgia, migration, identity crisis, motif, home and homelessness.

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INTRODUCTION

V.S. Naipaul has emerged as the most important contemporary English diaspora writer. His position reaffirmed by the 2001 Nobel Prize for literature. Of Indian descent, born in Trinidad and educated in England, Naipaul has been placed as the quintessential exile figure, a drifting nomad in the cultural world, always on a voyage to find his identity. His fiction has reinforced

the metaphor of exile in diverse ways.

V. S. Naipaul's magnum opus, *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) can rightly be called a work of creative art that deals with the problems of isolation, frustration, anguish, negation of an individual as well as the exploration for identity. *A House for Mr. Biswas* is Naipaul's unforgettable third novel, often regarded as his

masterpiece, which tells the tragic comic story of a search for independence and identity of a Brahmin Indian living in Trinidad. The protagonist Mohun Biswas has been unlucky from his birth but all he wants of his own- it is the solid basis of his existence. Each section deals with different phases of Mr. Biswas's life, follows his struggle in variety of Jobs, from sign painter to journalist.

The novel deals Naipaul's quest for a sense of identity and an urgent need to establish a past as a foundation on which the present can properly stand. From an idea of the past as a wound, Naipaul carries three incompatible components in his personality of being a Trinidad colonial, an English metropolitan, and a person of Indian ancestry. He thus moves in his self-exploration towards a renovation and vision of wholeness. In this work Naipaul visualizes India a more whole world than mere country. There is a growing consideration and a wish to comprehend that is stronger in Naipaul's writing now. This compassionate narrative vision enables Naipaul to capture the theme of India collapsing, mutinying, and reaching after a final integration which remains a significant aspect of writing.

This novel is beautiful work dealing with the theme of isolation, frustration and negation in colonized society—a society that becomes cruel and callous to the aspiration of the protagonist, Mr. Mohun Biswas. The novel also deals with a number of physical or spiritual maladies, e.g., the clash of culture between the old and the new in a multi-racial society, a quest for identity in a conservative framework and, above all, the protagonist's dry and monotonous journey full of many jerks and jolts.

It would be appropriate to explore some modern novels which fall under the group of the concept of "Diaspora" regarding the longing or the feelings of reminiscence while you are living abroad and searching identity. The analysis necessarily involves a close look at the figure of the migrant and the world. The condition of migrancy is seen as a state of indeterminacy, of tentativeness, of "in-betweenness" as Homi Bhabha would call it in one of his book. "The migrant is seen as the critical participant-observer into his/her own condition, enabling powerful insights to be made into the insider-outsider dichotomy and the real lived experiences of migration" (King xiii). He is defined by a "separation from origins and essences", a sense of "un-home-lines", occupying an indeterminate zone or "place of hybridity", leading to a necessary "creolisation" of identity (*The Location of Culture* 120).

The idea of an authentic and irreducible identity is intimately tied up with the possibility of achieving one's full potential in the "landscapes hymned by one's ancestors." However, history, or more specially, the history of colonization, has always undermined that dream of wholeness, leaving behind a "deep disorder" (*The Mimic Men* 32), a legacy of cultural violation and corruption. This leads, then to a deep-rooted concern with the issues of mimicry and authenticity and

assimilation that face a self-caught on a cultural border.

The concept of "Diaspora" emerged in 1990 and it is as old as post colonial theory. In the sphere of postcolonial literature, different ethnic groups, based on their different original cultural heritages, have their ethnic, cultural, and historical specificities ; hence, the condition of the dislocated and dispossessed is especially poignant and complicated because they cannot find a "home" of their own. V.S. Naipaul himself experienced, and repeatedly described in his fiction, this particular heart-feeling urge. Throughout his life he has desired a place to identify with. From genealogical mining, especially in his homeland (the Caribbean), through the quest for his cultural roots (India), and finally to his place of education (England)—he has attempted to search for his own identity. Being an Indian by ancestry, a Trinidadian by birth, and an Englishman by education, V. S. Naipaul possesses a multi-cultural background. As a colonial, he has always needed to locate his place in the world through writing. Prolific and critical in both fiction and nonfiction, he presents colonial anxieties in his quest for self-identity. For him, journey is a way to understand oneself, to achieve self-knowledge. Fragmentation, alienation, and exile are common terms associated with postcolonial literature. Needless to say, "Imperialism played a key role in bringing a sense of alienation and disorder to the countries where imperialists ruled" (Parag 135).

Naipaul has converted his liability of having no tradition into an advantage. He has succeeded in making use of this freedom to acquire the intellectual freedom. It is this intellectual freedom and lack of any sense of obligation at the personal level to any particular place or culture which makes Naipaul a judge of the situations where disorder and chaos are at large. For Naipaul who has experienced colonial dislocation, the art of fiction has represented in the other ways where the lost self of man could be retrieved, clarified and restored.

Twice displaced from his ancestral homeland of India, V.S. Naipaul seems to epitomize the diasporic writer. But categorization of such an extraordinary individual is not easy, even if the categories are clearly defined, and the details of the theories of diaspora that have been developed over the years are subject to dispute. James Clifford summarizes William Safran's "main features of diaspora" as a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host. . . country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship (Clifford 305) but points out that there is little room in his definition for the principled ambivalence about physical return and attachment to land which has characterized much Jewish diasporic consciousness.(305)

The effects of the displacement of people—their forced migration, their deportation, their voluntary emigration, their movement to new lands where they made

themselves masters over others or became subjects of the masters of their new homes—reverberate down the years and are still felt today. Naipaul has also, in his many interviews and essays, made his own myth into that of the writer as a displaced person. One who does not have a side, doesn't have a country, doesn't have a community; one (who) is entirely an individual, a figure who has achieved a Brahmanical 'ideal of non-attachment' a man without a home. His most well-known protagonist, Mr. Biswas sees "manhood" as invariably linked to the ownership of a "house", a home, and therefore himself as not a man. One morning he says to his dog—"you are an animal and think that because I have a head and hands and looks as I did yesterday I am a man and deceiving you. I am not whole." (*A house for Mr. Biswas* 268). The self becomes inseparable from the house- to create the one is to achieve the other.

A House for Mr. Biswas forms the diasporic angle and the novel contains themes that run throughout his writing but it marks a distinctive period in the development of his writing and art. This novel displays a unique affection for the homeland of his birth. It deals with the historical period of colonialism and indenture and the experiences of migration and displacement with respect to Trinidad. The rawness of emotion present in the novel is missing in Naipaul's later texts which have become increasingly sophisticated in their treatment of imaginary homeland and identity. This diversity of literary expression provides the writers with the flexibility and freedom to utilize the most effective means to communicate their idea express their creativity and share their lives with their readers.

Through their effective self-exposure, these writers ultimately establish a "post-exilic discourse" and can invite their readers to visit their literary homelands. *A House for Mr. Biswas* tells the story of its protagonist, Mr. Biswas from birth to death, each section dealing with different phases of Mr. Biswas's life. Here, Naipaul has a more subjective approach towards the problems of identity crisis than the objective one a reader finds in his travelogues, especially on India. Partly autobiographical, *A House for Mr. Biswas* delineates the traumas of a tainted and troubled past and the attempts to find a purpose in life, beautifully analyzing the sense of alienation and the pangs of exile experienced by the characters.

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. The novel paints a poignant picture of Mr. Biswas as he struggles to preserve his own identity in an alien environment and tries to forge an authentic selfhood. Besides focusing on his dark world, the novel introduces brief glimpses of ethnic and social history of the marginalized East Indian community in Trinidad. The

narrative tries to maintain equilibrium between Mr. Biswas's inner self and the disinterested outer view.

The life of Mr. Biswas resembles the life of Naipaul himself, whose series of experiences of exile and alienation while living in Trinidad seem to be portrayed through the character of his protagonist, Mr. Biswas. Yet, the tone is not negative, nor does the reader find a pessimistic approach on the part of the novelist in his dealing with construction his own imaginary homeland, a theme found also in Naipaul's other novels. He presents Mr. Biswas' relentless struggle against the forces that try to subdue his individuality. His struggle is long and tiresome, but in the end he is successful in having a space he can call his own imaginary homeland. In the search of his own identity, Mohun Biswas shifts from village to town and from joint family to nuclear family but fails to find his own roots amidst socio-cultural change. Just as the individual is both a construction and a fixed entity, so the town is an imaginary place that also takes a solid place in the structure of identity.

It is a novel which he created out of what he saw and felt as a child. In his famous novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, V.S. Naipaul depicts the desperate struggle of Mr. Biswas to acquire a house of his own which is symbolic of an individual's need to develop an authentic identity. Though Mr. Biswas ultimately manages to acquire, yet his premature death has a tragedy about it. The condition of Mr. Biswas is too pitiable, who finds himself totally dipped into the ditch of frustration and disgust:

Everything he now saw become sullied by his fear, every field, every house, every tree, every turn in the road . . . so that by merely, looking at the world, he was progressively destroying his present and his past. (*A House for Mr. Biswas* 281)

V. S. Naipaul satirizes the social classes realistically, such as the vivid, candid and straightforward presentation of the adherence to the level of low life. The Tulsi family and Hanuman House represents the old Hindu culture now coming under the influence of the alien western culture. The life story of Mr. Biswas shows a self-respecting individual's rebellion against tyranny, the account of Tulsi family shows the interaction of two cultures, the old Hindu culture as represented by the Tulsi family and the alien western culture as represented by the Port of Spain and by such individuals as Dorothy, the Christian girl whom Shekhar marries, and Dorothy's cousin whom Owad marries. The interaction between these two cultures is designed to show that old Hindu culture which the Indian Hindus had taken with them to Trinidad cannot long withstand the influence of the alien western culture. Of course, the old Hindu culture is not completely absorbed by the western culture, but it is

certainly weakened and undermined. In short, Hanuman House is a microcosm of the old Hindu culture.

The Tulsi family is very orthodox, but its orthodoxy begins to crumble with the onset of western influences. Mrs. Tulsi, in ruling over her family, is helped in her task by Seth, her dead husband's brother. Seth and his wife Padma also live in Hanuman House where they enjoy a status as high as that of Mrs. Tulsi herself. In this novel, Naipaul has severable emotional bond with Indian which remains for him an area of pain, an ache for which one has a great tenderness yet from which "fragmentation and rootlessness" are viewed in his works in the form of "anguish and defeat". The fragmented society "demonstrates a disorder which originates from within" (Freed 69).

He seems to move toward a clearer feeling of place, of being at "home." I thus regard Naipaul's novelistic writing as a process of identity recovery undergoing a series of transformations:

He denies or negates his Caribbean homeland, adopts a stage of mimicry in England, searches for his cultural roots in India, and finally reconstructs his identity out of his multi-cultural particularity and uniqueness. His writing career comes in four stages: (1) placelessness and alienation, (2) colonial predicament, (3) cultural heritage in India, and (4) writing for self-definition. By accepting his homelessness and statelessness, he (re)creates a new identity in exile. He makes a voice not only for himself but also for other marginalized people. Through writing, he translates his "cultural incommensurability" to the world and articulates the representation of his cultural particularity. (*The Location of Culture* 59)

Thus, diaspora literature has made a significant contribution to Indo-English literature by its rich exposure to multiculturalism. Though the sense of displacement may be an essential condition of Diaspora literature, it is not experienced precisely with the same identity by all; it differs according to time and place. The spirit of exile and alienation enriches the diaspora writers to seek rehabilitation in their writings and establish a permanent place in the minds of readers. Naipaul, in particular, consistently paints the picture of the derelict man in the desolate landscape.

A House for Mr. Biswas is, therefore, individual attempts to overcome "homelessness". The writer sees

the characters as victims of their environment. Their urgency comes from their efforts to get others to acknowledge them so as to have it validated for themselves, their human necessity. The house becomes a legacy which Mr. Biswas can bequeath to his family. Just as through his writing Naipaul attempts to salvage his own family history and the history of the Trinidadian Indian community so also the hero of his novel makes a final effort to create a new world out of nothingness, thereby leaving behind his footprint on history and escaping annihilation and attaining fulfillment.

Naipaul is best known not only in the academia but also in the whole literary world as one who gives expressions to the themes of identity crisis, rootlessness, alienation and problem of location or homelessness. Though he has some limitations and error of judgments which have been highlighted in this study, yet, he is undoubtedly one of the greatest figures in the literary diaspora.

To sum up, Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* culminates the early phase of Naipaul's artistic development. The story of Mr. Biswas is the general story of man tortured by communal pressure and threatened by an unstructured society. Every individual in the world, however low his social and economical status, desires to possess some space that could be his own, his house or home. This desire is more evident in people who, for some reason or other, are displaced from their origins and for whom homelessness is an everyday phenomenon. The realization of their rootlessness forces them to create a solid home-space even in an alien land, just as Mr. Biswas does at Port of Spain. Through him, Naipaul speaks for the displaced people all over the world

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