

1 Identity Crisis: An Analysis of V. S Naipaul's A House for Mr.
2 Biswas

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7 **Abstract**

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11 longing to go back to their motherland all could be the theme of disporic writings. The
12 diasporic writers or immigrant writers stand in-between two cultural scenarios in the process
13 of moving from one culture to another and the same dual culture drives a wedge between the
14 nation and the self. Even though they are profoundly associated with their hereditary
15 customs, traditions, language and religion, they also focus on alienation, hybridisation,
16 marginalization and local community life from the margins. The diasporic writers are trapped
17 in-between two cultures, and the readers of both Western and Indian contemplate the
18 west-centric vision and cultural validity of India respectively in the present scenario of literary
19 narratives in the existence. The complexity in the dislocations of immigrant writers
20 contemplating their memories of their mother land, the breakup of their family relationship,
21 their homelessness, cultural myths intensified the question of identity in their life which they
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23

24 *Index terms—*

25 **1 Introduction**

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37 of their mother land, the breakup of their family relationship, their homelessness, cultural myths intensified the
38 question of identity in their life which they continued living in an alien environment.

39 In the novel A House for Mr. Biswas, Mr. Biswas reminiscences the miseries of community life of Trinidad.
40 The events and people of his childhood memories in the novel A House for Mr. Biswas, coincide after the marriage
41 of Mr. Biswas to the Tulsi family and that transforms his life into an allegory on bourgeois modernity and its
42 values. Mr. Biswas endeavours to blow out claustrophobic hold of the inclinations of the Tulsi family by building
43 his own home, but in vain, since it scared to him incessantly.

2 NAIPAUL PRESENTS HIM:

44 Mr. Biswas got a new job as a journalist which permitted him to come out of his personal disabilities,
45 invigorated him to write and read more books and to share his bookish knowledge among own children. The
46 same attitude to reading and writing benefitted his children, inspiring them to go abroad and study further on the
47 basis of scholarship. Naipaul portrays the character of Mr. Biswas living on the margins, following the demands
48 of Tulsi family. As a good father he tried to create comfortable surroundings for his children as well as for his
49 wife.

50 The pitch and toss in the life of Mr. Biswas and the tragedy inflicted on him by the debts, and his long wait for
51 his son, Anand to return home causes his untimely death. In the novel, A House for Mr. Biswas, Naipaul vividly
52 delineates the struggle of East Indians in their quest for identity. The gendered analysis of the protagonist of the
53 story in the colonial land highlights discomfort which would cause terrible frustrations given such circumstances.
54 The colonized feel their culture and identity suppressed by the power structure. They realised that complete
55 self realization is not possible in a society that keeps oppressing them continuously. Consequently, they react
56 by surrendering the 'self' to the 'other,' and fight against the injustice. In this regard, Naipaul's novels plainly
57 portray the emanation of such an attitude where the colonized do not get a platform to flourish and achieve
58 perfect life vision through developing their full potential.

59 Later in his life Mr. Biswas felt that his life is trapped in the custom of marriage from which his life could not
60 escape. Thus, the experiences in his life manifest the identity crisis, self-assertion and selfaffirmation. Thus, the
61 gender and the identity issues of the protagonist in the novel are evident in his struggle to build his own house
62 which symbolises his yearning for the personality of his own. The novel, A House for Mr. Biswas, reveals the
63 protagonist's struggle to find his own identity. The story looks into the self of the protagonist who wanders in
64 isolation in a quest of genuine selfhood in a dispossessed land. The novel revolves round to certain limitations
65 and struggles to express individuality but later, Mr. Biswas succeeds in getting a house of his own which is a
66 dramatic achievement in his limited inadequate life. The story of Mohun Biswas is symbolic of the cultural milieu
67 of immigrant people of East Indians in Trinidad.

68 The cultural clash and ruptures of East Indian community and the whirlpool of events in his life to find
69 foothold in the New World leads the protagonist in A House for Mr. Biswas to achieve his dream to build
70 a home of his own. In the first section of the novel titled, "Pastoral," Bipti's father who came to Trinidad as
71 indentured labourer attempts to re-build a mini India according to their wish, including the Hindu way of life and
72 its customs, traditions and rituals, superstitious T Volume XXI Issue VIII Version I 15 () beliefs with their faith
73 in pundit. The discourse of India and the ill effects of superstition play a major role in the novel. Bisoondaye,
74 the grandmother, thinks that the birth of Mr. Biswas at midnight with six fingers is a bad omen. This prompts
75 her to go to next village, cut the leaves of cactus and hang it on every door. Promptly, the pundit is called
76 into the house and he declares: You must fill this brass plate with coconut oil-which by the way, you must take
77 yourself from coconuts you have collected with your own hands and in the reflection on this oil the father must
78 see his son's face. (17) Raghu, the father, gets the first sight of his son in this manner. Furthermore, the child
79 is deemed as unlucky since it is superstitiously believed that he caused his father's death. Naipaul comments on
80 the effect of superstition which becomes the part of the tradition and culture in an alien land and its impact on
81 the people and the ritual that followed after the death of Mr. Biswas's father: Bipti was bathed. Her hair, still
82 wet, was neatly parted and then filled with red henna. Then the henna was scooped out and the parting filled
83 with charcoal dust. She was now a widow forever. (32)

84 For the Hindus, in Trinidad everything happens as part of the role played by 'fate' on them and the novel
85 portrays every related aspect of the life of characters such as Bipti's unhappy marriage with Raghu and also their
86 migration from India to the sugar estate. The East Indians at Trinidad still spoke Hindi but they had to abandon
87 their custom of cremation. After Mr. Biswas's father's death the circumstances compelled him and his mother,
88 Bipti, to move to Pegotas where her well-to-dosister Tara lived. We get a different perspective of disintegration
89 as revealed by Naipaul:

90 And so Mr. Biswas came to leave the only house to which he had some right. For the next thirty-five years he
91 was to be a wanderer with no place he could call his own, with no family except that which he was to attempt to
92 create out of the engulfing world of the Tulsis. For with his mother's parents dead, his brother on the estate at
93 Felicity, Dehuti as a servant in Tara's house, and himself rapidly growing away from Bipti who, broken, became
94 increasingly useless and impenetrable, it seemed to him that he was really quite alone. (40) But at Pegotas Tara
95 had overall control of Mr. Biswas and decided to make him a pundit for which she approached Jairam who was
96 a rude, bizarre man full of negativity that creates his life more horrible and awful. He holds scandalous views
97 and is full of contradictions.

98 2 Naipaul presents him:

99 He believed in God, fervently, but claimed it was not necessary for a Hindu to do so. He attacked the custom
100 some families had of putting up a flag after a religious ceremony; but his own front garden was a veritable grove
101 of bamboo poles with red and white pennants in varying stages of decay. He ate no meat but spoke against
102 vegetarianism: when Lord Rama went hunting, did they think it was just for sport? (51) Later, Mr. Biswas was
103 thrown out of the house of the pundit for some of his disgraceful acts. He returns home, but Tara again sends him
104 to a rum-shop of Bhandat who is Tara's brother-in-law. Thus, he complained to his mother when he returned
105 about rude behaviour of Bhandat: "... Why do you keep on sending me to stay with other people. I am going

106 to get a job of my own. And am going to get my own house too. I am finished with this" (67). Unfortunately
107 Bhandat considers him as Tara's spy and accuses him of stealing a dollar.

108 Naipaul's sketch of the protagonist and the role of fate in his life as an Indian in an alien land attract an
109 attention. Thus, the protagonist Mr. Biswas declares his resolution to have his own house which might give him
110 liberation and create an identity of his own. Gradually, Mr. Biswas develops the habit of reading books including
111 those of Samuel Smiles, but his ambitions of buying new shop or buying a motor bus are not fulfilled.

112 **3 Naipaul comments:**

113 He bought the seven expensive volumes of Hawkins' Electrical Guide, made rudimentary compasses, buzzers and
114 doorbells, and learned to wind an armature. Beyond that he could not go. Experiments became more complex,
115 and he didn't know where in Trinidad he could find the equipment mentioned so causally by Hawkins. His
116 interest in electrical matters died, and he contented himself with reading about Samuel Smile's heroes in their
117 magic land. (79)

118 In various novels, Naipaul critically argued about the caste system in India, particularly, about the Brahmin
119 community which is dominant. The novel A House for Mr. Biswas explores the various occasions such as in
120 the character of Lal, a low caste Hindu who converted himself to Presbyterianism and the Hindu social order is
121 also challenged by the inter-caste marriage between Mr. Biswas's sister, Dehuti and Ramchand, who is a low
122 caste Hindu. It also reveals that the socially sanctioned marriage between Shekhar, Mrs. Tulasi's elder son,
123 and Dorothy who is allied to Presbyterian family, and the illegal and inter racial relation between Bhandat and
124 a Chinese woman are also against the social order. All these undertakings in the novel signify the breaking of
125 customs and rituals which dominated the East Indian society.

126 In the next stage of his life, Mr. Biswas encounters with the Tulsi family and he is trapped in a dowryless
127 modern marriage, but he struggles to keep his identity by taking up sign-painting. He fought against the cultural
128 dogmas of Tulsi family by joining a group of revolutionary Hindu Missionaries from India, named Aryans, which
129 espoused the education of girls, abolition of child marriage and caste system. Meanwhile, uncertain thoughts
130 haunted his memories and he promptly apprehended the absurdity of his life: Mr. Biswas regards Tulsi family
131 as a feudal world with conservative attitudes that follow rigorous and feudalistic norms in which a person like
132 Mr. Biswas cannot bear to live.

133 The life at The Chaze is a temporary shelter for Mr. Biswas who is a typical representative of the condition of
134 life of the displaced people in an alien land. Soon afterwards, his feelings of loneliness and of being a non-entity
135 at The Chaze make him recall the noisy background activities of Hanuman House. Naipaul makes an analysis of
136 a person based on his/her relation with others, and eventually Biswas's alienation leads him to psychic disorders.
137 The psychic crisis of Mr. Biswas haunts him with a sense of strong feeling of the dislocation and uncertainties of
138 his life as well as the unwanted tensions that haunt him tear him down.

139 The emotional crisis grips Mr. Biswas at the crucial moment of his life. His new job as the suboverseer in one
140 of Tulsi estates at Green Vale at a low salary of twenty five dollars and the accommodation of a single room for
141 his family carry the feelings of suffocation. The thought of building a new house at Green Vale, he realises, is a
142 vain attempt because he still depends on the Tulsis for his aspirations to be fulfilled. Nevertheless, he manages
143 to construct a house but his feeling of claustrophobia increases the intensity of alienation that he experiences in
144 a foreign land. The frustration leads Mr. Biswas into ill health, and therefore, he returns to Hanuman House
145 to heal from his sickness compounded at the death of his dog. Tarzan is heinously killed by the dispossessed
146 labourers, and later, when his unfinished house has been burned down by the same people, Mr. Biswas makes
147 up his mind not to go back to Green Vale.

148 Naipaul's protagonist, Mr. Biswas keeps on at his struggles to keep his individual identity, but the role of fate
149 shatters him emotionally and his aspirations to construct a new house for himself and his family remains just a
150 dream. When Mr. Biswas vacates the room of Owad, it instils in him unhappiness and agony. His new job at
151 Trinidad Sentinel as a reporter creates a sophisticated image which brings on new changes in him. His attitude
152 was such that he thinks: "... he had won a victory?" (200). He gets onto the bus in another search for a new
153 identity as a journalist.

154 Nevertheless, he again makes an attempt to complete his dream house but his plan had to be abandoned
155 because of the inconvenience of location to follow his ambitions and aspirations. In this regard, Madhusudhana
156 Rao opines:

157 In his house, which is incomplete like his own syncopated individuality, he has come to respect the feeling of
158 love,-that state of consciousness which recognizes the value of gifting one's self away to meet another's human
159 need. In a sense, Mr. Biswas has at last arrived. (71) Obviously, Naipaul designates the house as not only as a
160 shelter, but also as something that signifies solidity and consistency that existed for the engraving of a veritable
161 selfhood. Owad also assimilates himself into the wider society of Trinidad when he starts private practice in San
162 Francisco. A perfect and authentic carving of the character in the novel A House for Mr. Biswas, the impact of
163 colonization in Trinidad under the silhouette of Hanuman House and the principles of traditional family system
164 are the major aspects to the development of an individual.

165 Naipaul places his comments on the basis of his expatriate sensibility. The caste system of India is being
166 followed in its same intensity at Trinidad, but adaptability helped to reconcile himself to the situation. The
167 homelessness and displacement of the protagonist is vividly portrayed in the novel. Hanuman House (Tulsi

168 House) in the High Street at Arwacas serve as an alien fortification that embodies the abode of Hindu culture
169 in Trinidad. The Hanuman House is a miniature India with Pundit Tulsi and thousands of other Indians who
170 had migrated from India to Trinidad. Naipaul presents Mrs. Tulsi as an ardent preserver of Hindu culture, the
171 upholder of traditional daily puja, and the orthodox religious aspects serve as a counter to the blitz of western
172 culture.

173 The novel A House for Mr. Biswas is an epic work on the life of the protagonist, Mr. Biswas and his struggles
174 to build an own house that is symbolic of his identity. The novel envisages the perplexities of protagonist, Mr.
175 Biswas whose desire to attain his own authentic selfhood in the alien land represents the struggle between his
176 desires and obligations as well as his inner motivations and circumstantial necessities.

177 The fantasy and dreams in Mr. Biswas led to the conflict between desire and necessity. Furthermore, the same
178 sort of necessity enforces him to become the part of Tulsi household, even though his existence is like that of an
179 alien. Thus, he dreams: "... real life was to begin... soon, and elsewhere" (147). The sense of humiliation of the
180 protagonist creates in him an ambition to become someone influential. He feels ashamed of his designation of an
181 indentured labourer which belongs to the lowest strata of the socio-economic order.

182 The experience of the protagonist, Mr. Biswas, reflects the experiences of minority community in the rapidly
183 changing foreign soil. His dream of a happy life embodies his unfulfilled dreams and desires and it isolated
184 him from others. Indian caste bound systems and the identity of minority groups of indentured labourers are
185 emphasised in the novel. Naipaul underlines: "... As a boy he had moved from one house of strangers to another
186 and since his marriage he felt he had lived nowhere" (8). As an alien, he lives in an in-between culture devoid of
187 traditional identity and yet unable to make a new one in post industrial society with fragmented socio-cultural
188 realities. Thus, the Indian culture, rituals, myth and customs in Trinidad create struggles to attain an identity
189 that makes the protagonist more fragile. The diasporic identity crisis and the impact of Indian culture along
190 with the issues of rootlessness in the life of Mr. Biswas render him the image of a caged bird.

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