

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

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## Abstract

Introduction-The Indian diasporic writings designate the multi-cultural space of immigrants and extend a genre of a divergent Indian cultural discourse which depicts their struggles. The concept of rootlessness, dislocation, fragmented thoughts and memories of homeland and their longing to go back to their motherland all could be the theme of diasporic writings. The diasporic writers or immigrant writers stand in-between two cultural scenarios in the process of moving from one culture to another and the same dual culture drives a wedge between the nation and the self. Even though they are profoundly associated with their hereditary customs, traditions, language and religion, they also focus on alienation, hybridisation, marginalization and local community life from the margins. The diasporic writers are trapped in-between two cultures, and the readers of both Western and Indian contemplate the west-centric vision and cultural validity of India respectively in the present scenario of literary narratives in the existence. The complexity in the dislocations of immigrant writers contemplating their memories of their mother land, the breakup of their family relationship, their homelessness, cultural myths intensified the question of identity in their life which they continued living in an alien environment.

*Index terms—*

## 1 Introduction

The Indian diasporic writings designate the multicultural space of immigrants and extend a genre of a divergent Indian cultural discourse which depicts their struggles. The concept of rootlessness, dislocation, fragmented thoughts and memories of homeland and their longing to go back to their motherland all could be the theme of diasporic writings.

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

## 2 NAIPAUL PRESENTS HIM:

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 2 Naipaul presents him:

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

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

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

### 3 Naipaul comments:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In his 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. (71) Obviously, Naipaul designates the house as not only as a shelter, but also as something that signifies solidity and consistency that existed for the engraving of a veritable selfhood. Owad also assimilates himself into the wider society of Trinidad when he starts private practice in San Francisco. A perfect and authentic carving of the character in the novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the impact of colonization in Trinidad under the silhouette of Hanuman House and the principles of traditional family system are the major aspects to the development of an individual.

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

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

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

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

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

## 4 Bibliography

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