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## **Diasporic Sense in V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas***

**M. B. Baviskar**

Asst. Professor & Head,

Dept. of English,

Kisan Arts, Com. & Sci. College Parola,

Dist: Jalgaon. (MS).

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### **Abstract:**

Diasporic writing raises questions about home and nation. It affects to the lives of diaspora characters. V. S. Naipaul is a diaspora writer who broadens the depth of diaspora by focusing on the painful problems of immigrants in his writing. He occupies the unique place among the diaspora writers and he has given a creative direction to the diaspora writing. Naipaul presents the chaotic picture of immigrants who live in alien land. The novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* has elements of high comedy and tragic pathos which closely associated with Naipaul's own personal search for meaning in life. The present paper is a humble attempt to focus the diasporic sense of Naipaul's characters while living in an alien land.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Exile, House and Identity.

### **Introduction:**

V. S. Naipaul is the most controversial novelist of our times. The novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) is nothing but a struggling picture of East Indian people for getting a stable identity in West Indies. The novel is a struggle of a man who has a strong desire to own his house. It presents the East Indian Trinidadian society as it was before and after colonization affected them. The novel narrates the marginalized East Indian community in Trinidad. The characters in the novel have to face many struggles to establish themselves with a place to live in an alien environment. The house in this novel is a symbol not for homelessness but for freedom from slavery and injustice. Most of Naipaul's writing issue from a desire to understand his own position in the world. *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a journey towards the fulfillment of inner desire of home.

*A House for Mr. Biswas* was considered the Masterpiece of V.S. Naipaul. Mr. Biswas is the protagonist of the novel. The novelist depicts the struggles of Mr. Mohun Biswas in the process of having his own house. There is crowding and insecurity which make the possession of a private dwelling an ideal goal for an inhabitant of Trinidad. Mr. Biswas is a modern version of everyman who struggles hard to purchase his own house. His struggle against a rigid social system makes him rebellious but his struggle is adventurous with a touch of a heroic quality. The novel focuses, the inherent pathos of migrant's predicament. Fortunately or unfortunately Mr. Biswas gets trapped into the racket of the house by marrying the youngest of the Tulsis daughters, Shama. Mr. Biswas is not like other sons-in-law who only to fill their bellies. Mr. Biswas was the man of self identity. He does not like slavery and he revolts against Tulsidom. The life of Mr. Biswas leads to exile, dispossession and disillusionment. *A House for Mr. Biswas* is nothing but a story of exiled who tries to complete his goal of his own house in life. Lastly, he purchased the house though it was mortgaged, still he feels insecurity.

In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Naipaul presents fragmented characters with fragmented lives. They are isolated from the current flow of life. Mr. Biswas lives a fragmented life from his childhood. He goes to Pundit Jairam, then to Bhandat's rum shop and once more back to his mother. Rootlessness is the one of the characteristic of Naipaul's writing. The protagonist Mr. Biswas suffers a lot to find stability in his life. The novel pictures about the pathetic condition of the immigrants who have nothing more expectation but a place to live in.

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 has to attempt to create out of engulfing world of Tulsis. For with his mother's parents dead, his father dead, his brother on the estates on the 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.<sup>1</sup> (Mr. Biswas 40)

Mr. Biswas is the central character in the novel. He touches to the most important issues of East Indian society in West Indies. Biswas is a representative of the people who unwillingly forced to live in other countries and are enforced to make compromises with the situation.

The concept of home is a traumatic experience for V. S. Naipaul. He presents in his writing the problem of 'home' effectively. Naipaul presents the experience of exile and loneliness in his

fictional this novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*. He is marked as homeless wanderer who has acquired significance in our times.

Most of his writings issue from a desire to understand his own position in the world. These are identifiable with the diaspora people. Diasporic writers handle the identity problem in their works. Identities are not fixed. They are plural and partial. The migrants do suffer from the clash of two cultures. They have always ambiguous identity. So they construct imaginary homelands. *A House for Mr. Biswas* depicts the struggles of Indian immigrants towards acculturation. It depicts the exile's desire to strike roots and attain an authentic selfhood. Diaspora writing shows the strong concern with exile. Alwin Toffler said that the modern man is '*the new nomad*'<sup>2</sup> (74). He is in search of his own identity. Mr. Biswas realized the true meaning of home in his life. "And so Mr. Biswas came to live the only home 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" (40). The immigrants imitate colonizers to involve in cultural negotiation, which is called 'mimicry'. The way of mimicry takes them towards 'double consciousness.' Naipaul's writing presents problem of homelessness, rootlessness, and alienation, mimicry in the hybrid communities. As Bruce King observes, "While the novels and short stories have seldom been about himself, they have reflected the various stages of his disillusionment with Trinidad, his despair with India and his concern with being a homeless ex-colonial"<sup>3</sup>(108). One of the major themes of Naipaul's work is the colonial artist discovering his own artistic potentialities, for a West Indian writer who is disinherited by all traditions and at the same time exposed to all traditions. Mr. Biswas is a modern version of everyman. He has been regarded as an everyman. He is the representative of modern man who struggles hard to purchase his own house.

Expatriation relates to the feeling of rootlessness among the migrants. They have purely experienced the total collapse of a shared background in an alien land. They feel homeless among the aliens. When they migrated to the alien land, they have their own bonds with their societies, community, religion and folklore and other traditional arts. Their affection with their own country, family and their ethnic roots become fainter every passing year. It creates a sense of nostalgia among the expatriates. The sense of nostalgia becomes common to all migrants because the new country did not welcome them with proper love and equality. In the alien land they are rejected on the basis of colour and races. They got painful experience in an alien land. They tried to find home. Home plays an important role in their lives. It is not spatial identity but

a search for roots. This picture is beautifully depicted by William Walsh: "The substance of the novel has to do with the transformation of Mr. Biswas, a slave to place, history and biography into a free man, the sign and realization of that emancipation being his house"<sup>4</sup>(31-32).

Naipaul's novels explore the failures, rootlessness and valuelessness of the West Indian society. Expatriates are rootless who wander from place to place, from one country to another. Unless they adapt themselves in the alien culture they can't live happily in the new land. Major characters in the novel face fragmentation and frustration because they are rootless. They have lost their original identity and wanted to create new one. Mr. Biswas's dream was not fulfilled at the Green Vale. He had only one room ever completed where he feels inadequate, displaced and exposed. He gets nothing but a fragmented past and disordered future. Some characters have adapted themselves and they try to assimilate in the new culture .i.e. Mrs. Tulsi and her clan. Mrs. Tulsi has adopted non Hindu Trinidadian life because her Hindu culture was attacked always by Western culture. "The windows were now almost frantic to have their children educated. There was no longer a Hanuman House to protect them; everyone had to fight for himself in a newer world. The world Owad and Shekhar had entered, where education was the only protection" (436).

Naipaul voices out the post-colonial's quest for identity in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. The house stands for independence and individual freedom and personal fulfillment for him and for his children. In the alien society, he fulfils his need of purchasing a house. Naipaul admits that the Indian immigrants in Trinidad were living in ambivalent attitude. The diasporic people, being displaced, strove to regain their ordinary identity. In the process of mimicking the dominant cultures, the migrants unconsciously lose their unitary identity. They adopt the manners and life style of the alien cultures and adapt themselves to the environment. In the postcolonial state, they produce ambivalence, namely, an in-between state. Ambivalence throws him in despair and detachment. Sense of incompleteness has been with Mr. Biswas. The immigrants in alien lands feel hostile and segregated. They find themselves very difficult to adapt to new environments. They try to seek consolation in their fantasies. In spite of their presence in the unfriendly land, they live a pessimistic life. Their life and struggle becomes the basic fact of human state of loneliness and helplessness. Mr Biswas, in *A House for Mr Biswas*, is an exile in an alien society. Almost all the characters in the novel have the touch of Indian culture. Bipti, Raghu,

Mr Biswas, Dhari, Sitaram, Jairam, Tara, Padma, Chinta, Shama, Pankaj Rai, Sessile, Sumati, Savi,, Pratap, Prasad, Dehuti, Ajodha, Tulsi, Bissoonydaye, Sadhu, Lakhan, Govind, Hari, Anand and so on, are Indians. Indianness marks their dress as well as jewellery in life and even in death.

The immigrants in the postcolonial society find order in their lives. Mr. Biswas is none other than the portrayal of existential and stoic virtues of Indian community in Trinidad. He rebels and submits himself to fate and events on many occasions. He tries to seek the ways in order to get himself released from the clutches of the hegemonic forces of colonialism. Even though the colonial structure appears in colourful and tempting forms, the basic and inherent nature never changes. Mr. Biswas has understood it ever since his younger days. As he is displaced after the death of his father, he constantly looks for the stable identity of his own. Mr. Biswas belongs to the labourer class as his father left no property for him after his death. "He has no money or position. He was expected to be a Tulsi. At once he rebelled"(97).

Naipaul presents a struggle of an individual who belongs to the labour class and desires to have his own house atleast before his death. A House stands for stability, self-respect and identity. Mr. Biswas found himself marginalized at an early stage, almost an orphan who remains an outsider in the Trinidadian society and never catches up with social tone. Naipaul deals with the modern man's dilemma to keep his personality intact and to gain and maintain his integrity in the post colonial world. A House for Mr. Biswas relates to indenturedship which mirrors in the lives of Naipaul's characters. He depicts the nature of colonialism and in what way it affected the lives of the people. The people were thrown into different groups or races and they produced a hybrid society. Every individual of this hybrid society lives a deprived, rootless and a mimic life. *A House for Mr. Biswas* was written immediately after his Caribbean visit where he depicts diaspora condition of East Indian community in Trinidad. This novel presents a comedy, but it is a dark comedy of life where the protagonist presents in existential terms the struggle and survival of an individual in a world of drift. His fiction is designed to convey to the reader the experience of a particular situation in which we have a sense of expatriation and exile. His heroes are always in search of a more dignified life. This search becomes a trap for them. The spirit of the writer flows through his creation. It is reflected in each and every word that comes out from his pen and lines drawn on the paper.

V.S. Naipaul is the diasporic writer of mixed culture i.e. Indian, Trinidadian and English. He has successfully painted the composite figure through different characters in his novel. There is a co-relation between his characterization and thematic network of his fiction. The readers strike the diaspora sensibility throughout the novel. Naipaul has skillfully dealt the diaspora theme with its elements of expatriation and exile in his work *A House for Mr. Biswas*. In the development of the thematic network characterization, plot, setting, style play their appropriate roles. Most of the characters in *A House for Mr. Biswas* are expatriates belonging to different faiths, societies, countries and religions living in alien land. Some characters try to assimilate in the mixed culture such as Shekhar and Owad. Some try to assimilate in the new culture adopting Trinidadian ways of life. Some of them keep their cultural flame alive while living in the alien society. Mrs. Tulsi plays the whites dictatorship on her own people. The diaspora theme with its elements of expatriation and exile are fully developed by the writer in this novel.

Naipaul makes an extensive use of symbols in his novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Symbolism is a technique adopted by the writers to give specific meanings to objects, places, atmosphere and action. Symbolism is substituted for reality, as mode of fictional construct. As the reality of the mother country grows remote, with their continued stay abroad, expatriate writers begin to create characters that are increasingly allegorical and symbolic. Naipaul's characters seem to be always inclined towards the preservation of their sense of exile. The expatriate Hindu's love for a home is personified in Mr. Biswas's longing for a home. It is the third world's rootlessness in general longing for an identity of home and the universal longing for an identity of home. V.S. Naipaul has triple identity, a Trinidadian Indian, a West Indian in England and a foreigner in India. The home stands for an identity for which every rootless person strives. Even the titles of the chapters have specific meanings and they suggest various stages of developments of such identity. Naipaul presents the psyche of East Indians with the psyche of the expatriates. While making homes in alien land they are frustrated and have lost their hopes. Even in adversities they struggle for the fulfillment of their incomplete dreams. Shama was not completely happy after seeing her house. She makes an adjustment with the situation. "Shama did not complain. She only said. It look as though we will have to do a few repairs before we move" (573). *A House for Mr. Biswas* symbolizes for an attempt to fulfill the incomplete dreams which is a common feature in third world literature.

Diaspora writers employ symbols distinctively. They continue to live away from their mother country they begin to feel as isolates and exiles. The pressure of the need to write self-consciously, 'with the idealization of 'nostalgia' becomes very strong almost irritable. "Despite the solidity of their establishment the Tulsis had never considered themselves settled in Arwascas or even Trinidad"(390). In an attempt to 'return home' to his racial, national world view the expatriate novelist has to recall folklore, myth, legends and customs. The presence of folklore in Third world literature has great significance as it constitutes a living paradigm for life even at a routine level in extratraditional societies.

The title, *Hanuman House* is symbolic. It is named after monkey god, Hanuman which purposes for monkey business. It is as good as prison. The people who live in this house are lifeless and disturbed. It is symbol of darkness and decay. It is the place where old Hindu rituals are performed and the real spirit is bypassed. The old Hindu culture fails to survive long due to external influences of alien cultures. They celebrate 'Christmas Day' and Christian visitors often visit the house. "Mr. Biswas said, 'Well, since I had been in this house. I begin to get the feeling that to be a good Hindu you must be a good Roman Catholic first' (125). There is another symbolic significance of barracks which relates to regimentation. Mr. Biswas purchased his own house at Sikkim Street. It is a symbol of individual liberty where he plants flowers and trees and erects a boundary. "His portion of earth"(8). The underlying tone of this novel is existential. He uses particular words, phrases, sentences and images. Words have meaning in situations and situations have involved the ability to use the language. He talks to a Negro builder, Mr. Maclean and arranges for the construction materials but Mr. Biswas could not complete the construction due to insufficient fund. Though, the house remains incomplete for want of fund and it remains incomplete forever like an unfulfilled dream to own a house in Mr. Biswas's life. Shashi Kamra writes in her book: "His was a society without heroes. It was a multiracial immigrant, slave, colonial society with the drive ' and restlessness of immigrants' it was stunted society with the forms of traditions and culture surviving but the core lost, submerged, destroyed, rendered meaningless and unimportant"<sup>5</sup> (14). The world of *A House for Mr. Biswas* deals with Naipaul's own concerns as a displaced man in a socially deprived-society who struggles to preserve his existence.

### **Conclusion:**



The Protagonist Mr. Biswas is a rootless man who desires for home in the novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*. The other characters in the novel *are* aware of their existence and identity in an alien land. They are in search of their biological and ethnic roots for creating their own identity. Throughout the novel, Mr. Biswas touches a pathetic condition diasporic life. The diasporic sense focuses on cultural crisis, rootlessness, fragmentation, frustration, and love for motherland. An idea of a house approves a positive approach to the problem of diaspora. Mr. Biswas's struggle is a long and disturbing one but he is successful in his goal by achieving his dream of having a house of his own. It is astonishing achievement for a man of his limited and mediocre existence. To Mr. Biswas a house is not simply where one lives, it is one's national, cultural and spiritual identity.

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