

Search for Identity and Independence in *A House for Mr. Biswas*

- Swarupananda Chatterjee

Abstract: This article tries to explore the different struggles of the protagonist, in Naipaul's *The House for Mr. Biswas* to achieve his aim in a diasporic world of West Indies.

Keywords: Diasporic fiction, Identity, colonization.

Among the issues, then, treated in *A House for Mr. Biswas* is the problem of geographical uprooting of peoples and the results of culture contact. Each uprooting brings a farther weakening of traditional forces- a problem faced by all racial groups in the west Indies and which raises the constant dilemma of identity -Maureen Warner Lewis (102)

V.S. Naipaul was born in an age the principle doctrine of which was composed of dislocation and rootlessness. The works of many famous writers of that age was prevailed by a sense of alienation, isolation and the crisis of identity. V.S. Naipaul was a descendant of an Indian emigrant to Trinidad. He had a strong revulsion towards the multiracial character of the society of Trinidad and as well as to his caste-ridden Hindu heritage. So he had a destabilized ethnic-identity and simultaneously the subconscious anxiety of enslavement of the family of an indentured labour. This created in his pen a strong desire for a stable identity and independence. The protagonist of his *magnum opus A House for Mr. Biswas* -Mr. Mohun Biswas-suffers from spiritual and existential colonization and his character portrays a rebel's struggle for freedom and a dignified identity. This article tries to explore the different struggles of the protagonist to achieve his aim in a diasporic world of West Indies.

Mr. Biswas was born in an unpropitious moment with a deformity of being six-fingered. His desire for a secure, private space called home leads him to a life-long struggle. He is actually an ugly, Comic, improper yet venerable, jeopardized yet undaunted man. But in spite of these he becomes the unusual hero of *A House for Mr. Biswas* mainly for his being the quintessential 'everyman'. He has limited capabilities and resources nevertheless with his indomitable spirit he fights his best to establish his dignity and identity. His struggle to achieve a permanent home is an exposure of his search for freedom and identity to retain his individuality. Mr. Biswas's sense of homelessness and subserviency, the subject of this paper, is inherited by him from his preceding generations who had migrated from India to the West Indian World of Trinidad. He lost his father in his early childhood. So he had to live a life of dishonor and his self-respect as well as his identity is threatened at every moment from his first encounter with the outside world of adversity up to his premature death with a burden of debt. Yet finally he gains a house of his own though

insufficient. Mr. Biswas' heartrending childhood is very much painful. His unwashed body is left muddy and soiled. His physical growth is impeded by malnutrition and one can see his feeble limbs, shallow chest and rising belly. Mohun's grandfather was an indentured labourer on a Trinidad sugar estate who immigrated to the Caribbean island between 1838 and 1924. Though his father was also an indentured labourer, yet his position is little better than his grandfather. In this way Mohun and his siblings inherit the social identity of a poor indenture worker. Following this his brothers carry on to work on sugar estate and he is sent to look after his uncle's shop. So his infancy as well his boyhood is completely engulfed by poverty. So he always has within him a desired for freedom- freedom from poverty. Society has a constant pressure upon the inner spirit of Mr. Biswas. It appears just like a manacle to him. Mr. Biswas is just like a prufrockian man whose whole life is a series of minor disasters, each of which can be observed as his angry refutation of an inapt society which depletes him in early middle age. He has a strong desire to get rid of the obligations created by the circumstantial necessities. He half-willingly marries shama, a girl of Hanuman House the dwellers of which are Tulsis. This incident, rather I should say accident, tries to acculturize and socialize him and for the rest of his life Mr. Biswas attempts, more or less in vain, to escape from it. Mr. Biswas is now trapped in the clutches of Tulsidom. Hanuman House is run on the grievous form of reciprocation system. This household is controlled by an authoritarian matriarch Mrs. Tulsi whose key principle is serve and survive:

The organization of the Tulsi house was simple. Mrs. Tulsi had only one servant, a Negro woman who was called Blackie by Seth and Mrs. Tulsi, and Miss Blackie by everyone else. Miss Blackie's duties were vague. The daughters and their children swept and washed and cooked and served in the store. The husbands, under Seth's supervision, worked under 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. (Naipaul 98)

The power-structure of the Hanuman House has a pyramidal figure with the matriarch at the turret. Her second-in-command was Seth. Her sons Owad and she khan are also very powerful in the Tulsi structure. Her policeman is Govind—a very loyal son-in-law whose surveillance is always on the ball. They altogether enforce the law of the household. At the base of this pyramid were the daughters, sons-in-law and their children as the first two are enmarked for domestic duties while the third for farm and store duties. In this cruel power structure, the individual independence of Mr. Biswas is ruthlessly smothered as he becomes the worst victim of this colonization. He completely lost his independence and identity in this slave house. Gordon Rohlehr precisely remarks:

Hanuman House reveals itself not as a coherent reconstruction of the clan, but as a slave society, erected by Mrs. Tulsi and Seth who need

workers to help rebuild their tottering empire. They therefore exploit the homelessness and poverty of their fellow Hindus and reconstruct a mockery of the clan which functions only because they have so completely grasped the psychology of a slave system. (Rohlehr 87)

In this identity politics Naipaul also has a very keen interest as it is concerned with colonial doctrine. In his approach Naipaul sometimes becomes autobiographical. In his own practical life he himself had to encounter so many vicissitudes in order to assert this identity in a disinherited tradition. In *The Middle Passage*, he admits: "Living in a borrowed culture, the West Indian, more than most, needs writers to tell him who he is and where he stands." (*The Middle Passage* 73) One day Mr. Biswas brings a gift of a doll's house for his little daughter. But in Tulsi Rouse –hold the totalitarian force does not allow it as it is an act of distinction. So the toy for the girl is cruelly torn apart and from that day Mr. Biswas becomes aware of the encroachment upon his independence. This makes him rebellious. He protested when he is ordered to give up the job of sign painting and is asked to accept the job of a driver in the estate instead of it,

'you should give up that sign –painting,' he said one evening. . .

'Give up sign painting and my independence No, boy. My motto is: paddle your own canoe'. (Naipaul 108)

In this way Tulsis want to make him a non –entity and from now on starts his search for independence and identity. This rebellious spirit was thrust on him not only by the Tulsis, but also by the predominant and malignant forces of ritual, myth, customs and above all society. Mr. Biswas now completely realizes that he must build a house of his own to assert his own identity –a dignified identity. He abhors the Tulsis and his aversion is channeled into expressions of anger and mockery, like renaming the members of Tulsi family as Mrs. Tulsi becomes the 'old she fox', 'old hen', 'old queen' etc, Seth becomes the 'Big Boss', the two pampered sons 'the young god' and throwing food out of the window on to Owad's head. Tulsi household retaliates his non –conformism and is sent to run a Tulshi shop in Chase previously closed down. It is a kind of paradoxical independence to him. Paddling his own canoe sets about. But the locality of the shop is not viable for the business and he takes a heavy toll of it. He has to return to the security of Hanuman House with financial bankruptcy and broken heart. But his desire for independence becomes latent. Now again Hanuman House gives him the shelter. He is now in an ambivalent situation in connection with the idea of leaving Hanuman House. The opinion of N. Sharada Iyer is very relevant in the context of this helpless condition of the protagonist: "In a way, he is a representative figure caught between the security of the old world and the possibilities of a new, a man trapped in the transitional phase between two worlds." (Iyer 24) Tulsis give him a second chance of independence by sending him as a sub-overseer of the sugar estate of them at Green Vale. Drawing a handsome salary of twenty-five dollars a month, he and his wife begins to make their residence in one of the rooms of the barracks.

But here he also undergoes another off shoot of ruinous experience as the workers of the estate do not pay him due respect and he also becomes unable there to measure up to the demands of labour management. Yet this place is very important in his life as here he makes a great attempt, for the first time in his life, to build his own house to strike an independent identity. But as usual misfortune does not leave him, his fragile house cannot withstand the storm and is ultimately blown of by the wind and rain. But this futility of the attempt is not negligible for the determination employed by a feeble man. In fact the house in the novel is "Mohun Biswas' will to make a dent in the world to leave behind him something of value-in his case a house"(Kirkler270). To the protagonist of the novel, the house of his own is not only shelter or a fortress, but a declaration of independence and also the implementation of the impersonal in the service of the personal.

The final sojourn of Mr. Biswas to Port of Spain is a single journey as he leaves his wife and children at Hanuman House. His indomitable spirit revives here. It makes his decisive journey to Port of Spain after green valedisaster a fresh start. He does not allow any kind of fear regarding failure or regarding Tulsi mockery to immobilize him. His desire of escape is naturally stunted by his social and financial handicaps. But his sensitivity to his environment and his imaginative capacity to identity with heroic characters in books make him capable of striving for independence and they also help him to overcome his crisis of identity and rootlessness. The job of a journalist in Trinidad sentinel finally gives him economic viability and prestige. His efforts at claiming his 'portion of earth' does not prove futile here like the previous journeys. After undergoing repetitive failures at his blustering endeavor at building a house for himself and his family, Mr. Mohun Biswas finally stumbles upon the house at Sikkim Street. He decides it worthy of an amount beyond his reach and takes upon his head a burden of huge debts to purchase it. After some time he finds out that he has been duped at buying an unsteady and incomplete house. However, he ,along with his wife and offspring's, tries to settle into the house only to find out later that his family has capacitated the house overlooking its defects. After a long grapple with situations and society, he tastes his first success finds "himself in his own house, on his own half-lot of land, his own portion of earth." (Naipaul 2) In this novel, the feeble protagonist represents the 'consciousness of dignity of a man' despite his poverty and so many impediments. His great of aspiration to achieve a roof above his head to assert his own identity and independence brings out a superb conflict with conservative ideas of Tulsi set-up. This conflict starts soon after his marriage with the Tulsi girl. In this way the cornerstone of this conflict is founded by the relationship and the existing contradictions in ideologies of the individuals and classes in the society. So this in actually the conflicts of ideologies between the labourers and the aristocrats. Marxist Philosopher Louis Althusser opines that:

Ideology is a Representation of the Imaginary Relationship of

Individuals to their Real Conditions of Existence. (Althusser 47)

He again writes:

What is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation to these individuals in which they live. (Althusser 50)

Bakhtin aptly views that literature's relation to reading is both positive and coherent: Literature and reality are of the same order which is ideological. However, the importance of literature is that it has a "distancing effect on the ideologies that it represents". (Jefferson 43)

This conflict of ideologies has its root in colonialism. The exploitation of the colonizers give birth to thousands of Mohun Biswas. Their struggle for independence and identity leaves a mark on the history of, West Indies. Here one can easily find the shadow of Naipaul's father on Mr. Biswas. Hence through the image of Mr. Biswas Naipaul symbolically wants to expose the Eurocentric image of power also and the proliferation of that power in distorting one's identity, independence and cultural bearings. To conclude I must quote George Lamming's statements about Naipaul:

It is the brevity of the West Indians history and the fragmentary nature of the different cultures which have fused to make some thing new; it is the absolute dependence on the values in that language of his colonizers which have given him a special relation to the world, colonialism. It is not merely a political definition; it is not merely the result of certain economic arrangements. It started as these, and grew somewhat deeper. Colonialism is the very base and structure of the West Indian cultural awareness... His reluctance in asking for complete political freedom.... Is due to the fear that he has never had to stand. A foreign or absent Mother culture has always cradled his judgment. (Lamming 15)

References :

- Althusser, Louis (2010). "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)". *Literary theory: An Introductory Reader*. Eds. Saugata Bhaduri and Simi Malhotra. New Delhi: Anthem Press.
- Iyer, Sharada N. (2005). "*A House for Mr. Biswas*: A Study in Critical Predicament". *V.S Naipaul: Critical Essays*. Ed. Mohit K. Ray. Vol- III. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors.
- Jefferson, Ann and David Robey Eds. (1986). *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction*. London: B.T. Batsford Ltd.
- Krikler, Bernard. (1964). "V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*". *The Listener*. Feb. 13.
- Lamming, George. (1960). *The Pleasures of Exile*. London: Michael Joseph.
- Lewis, Maureen Warner. (1977). "Cultural Confrontation, Disintegration and Syncretism in *A house for Mr. Biswas*". *Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul*. Ed. Robert D. Hammer. London: Heinemann.
- Naipaul, V.S. (2003). *A House for Mr. Biswas*. London: Picador.
- ---. *The Middle Passage*. London: Andre Deutsch.
- Rohler, Gordon. (1977). "Character and Rebellion in *A House for Mr. Biswas*". *Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul*. Ed. Robert D. Hammer. London: Heinemann.

