

A Quest for Security and Identity in V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*

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Abstract

V.S. Naipaul's novel *A House for Mr Biswas* traces the titular protagonist's life in Trinidad from birth to death, documenting his journey through temporary homes, unsatisfying jobs, and frustrating family relationships before he finds an eventual, if fleeting, sense of freedom in his own home. This quest to find security, identity and independence—from family, drudgery, and fate—is the crux of Mr Biswas's struggles, and his need to find a sense of belonging in a place and social group drives his quest for his own house. This paper aims to bring out the dimension of caricaturing individuality and a sense of security in the protagonist's struggle in the novel.

Keywords: Security, Identity, Society, Individual, Belonging.

A House for Mr. Biswas is V.S. Naipaul's unforgettable fourth book and an early masterpiece of his career (completed the text when he was merely twenty-eight). The novel takes its readers on a ride full of soulful journey of a man in quest of security, of carving out his identity , of undescrivable emotions brought to a magical coherence and we see the character of Mohun Biswas coming to life . 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 analysing the sense of alienation and the pangs of exile experienced by the characters. The life of the protagonist Mohan Biswas reflects the dilemma of a detached immigrant whose entire life passes in a desire to find his roots and to attain an authentic identity in the society. The life of Mr. Biswas also replicates the life of Naipaul, whose experience of exile reflects the unquenched need of identity. In the name of Mr. Biswas, author gets a way to trace his experiences of nonidentity.

The prologue of novel reflects the truth of Mr. Biswas's life:

How terrible it would have been, at this time, to be without it: to have died among the Tulsis, amid the squalor of that large, disintegrating and different family; to have left Shama and children among them, in one room; worse, to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one's portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated (HMB 8).

The words clearly suggest that the text is about to prove an individual's self that matters in the society within life and after death.

In Mr. Biswas, this quest to prove himself among family and Tulsi-estate remains continue from birth to death. The novel begins with the description of the unlucky birth of Mr. Biswas, who unusually born with six fingers in one hand and becomes a victim of traditional beliefs. Unlike a child, he does not receive affection of family but his childlike activities are restricted at home as pundit predicts his unlucky charm for the family and mainly for father. Thus, an "ominous child" becomes his first identity that made him a confined self within a family. This is the fate that the prediction by the pundit proves when in searching of Mr. Biswas, his father Raghu dives into the pool and died. His second identity comes in the society as a boy who, ". . . has eaten up his own father" (28). This stigma becomes the identity of Mr. Biswas that drives his mind in different directions and shapes his despairing sensibility which, ". . . carry about them the mark in their attitudes sensibilities, and convictions of the slave, the unnecessary man" (Walsh VSN 71). After being sold the house to the neighbor, Dhari under compulsions, the family moves to his mother's sister Tara's muddy hut in where, "For the next thirty-five years he was to be a wanderer with no place he could call his own, with no family . . ." (38).

In the childhood, Mr. Biswas lives in his mother's sister Tara house and later moves to Tulsi house in Arwacas as a sign painter. There he meets Shama, falls in love, and marries her. This is the first real phase in Biswas's life from where his actual search for identity and security begins. He has to live in Tulsi-dom with others sons in laws", where he, ". . . felt trapped" (92). This perpetual feeling of aloofness arouses a sense of ,quest for identity, while this ,trap compels his soul to find way to emancipate from Tulsi's estate. He becomes an unwanted insider in Tulsi family and confined by its powerful social and economic strata, "in the High Street at Arwacas, Hanuman House stood like an alien White fortress" (81). In Hanuman House, he finds himself, ". . . indifference rather than hostility" (195). Tulsi family is rich and powerful which provides Mr. Biswas jobs and opportunities but his un-belongingness makes him unable to normalize with them as he is an unwanted outsider for Tulsi family; his living style and family condition was quite differing than that of Tulsis". This is the constant dilemma in Mr. Biswas's life, that a world, where he enters, ". . . everything beyond its gate was foreign and unimportant" (195). He feels inferior among family members and, ". . . when everyone worked with energy and joy enthusiasm reacting upon enthusiasm in him he remains aloof" (195). In the life of Mr. Biswas, House" is the entrenched wish and symbol of identity as it is in Naipaul's life too. The search of protagonist to get a house is the chief motif in the novel that reflects the primal wish of every individual for a safe haven in form of a house. This search of Mr. Biswas for house also symbolizes the fulfillment of belongingness and a prerequisite for a social identity. This is why, "The House in this novel is a symbol not for rootedness but for freedom from slavery and oppression" (Das 102). From birth Biswas lacks his own house and other houses where he moved on, were, ". . . bare, spacious, unpainted wooden house . . ." (49).

The image of the house is a central, unifying and integrating metaphor around which the life of Mr. Biswas revolves. Delineated in compassionate tones, for Mr. Biswas the house represents a search for emancipation from dependence. 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 an 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 the problem of identity crisis, a theme found also in Naipaul's other novels. Instead, Naipaul addresses the problem of alienation, exile and displacement with a positive approach. 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.

Naipaul describes *A House for Mr. Biswas* in his non-fiction book, *Finding the Center*, saying that it was "very much my father's book. It was written out of his journalism and stories, out of his knowledge he had got from the way of looking MacGowen had trained him in. It was written out of his writing" (Naipaul, *A House for Mr. Biswas* xiii). Similarly, in his Nobel Award ceremony acceptance speech, Naipaul alludes to *A House for Mr. Biswas*, saying that "intuition led me to a large book about our family life." Even though Naipaul is revisiting his own past imaginatively throughout *A House for Mr. Biswas*, his novel cannot be seen a family biography, however, and the novelist keeps reasonable distance to the protagonist despite his personal attachment to the book. From the very beginning, Mohun Biswas is depicted as a marginalized individual who is constantly on the move to identify his place in the limited world of Trinidad. In fact, the character of Mr. Biswas is carved out of alienated experience as he tries to find his own roots in the socio-cultural environment around him. 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.

To assert his freedom in Hanuman House, Mr. Biswas joins the Aryans, a group of 'protestant' Hindu missionaries from India, and starts advocating the acceptance of conversion and women's education, on the one hand, and the abolition of the caste system, child marriage, and idol worship, on the other, knowing that these doctrines will anger the Tulsis. Similarly, in order to assert his individuality and to get acknowledged, Mr. Biswas takes up means that are as absurd as they are comic, such as his revenge on Bhandat (spitting in his rum) or giving various nicknames to the Tulsis such as "the old queen," "the old hen," "the old cow" for Mrs. Tulsi, "the big boss" for Seth, the "constipated holy man" and "holy ghost" for Hari, or "the two Gods" for Tulsi's sons. His attitude makes him "troublesome and disloyal and he could not be trusted" (102). Even when Mr. Biswas's daughter is born, it is

Seth and Hari who chose the name Savi for his daughter, not Mr. Biswas himself. To register his protest, Mr. Biswas writes on the birth certificate: “Real calling name: Lakshmi. Signed by Mohun Biswas, father. Below that was the date” (163). In the section entitled ‘The Chase’ Mr. Biswas begins his independent life with Shama. From the beginning, however, Mr. Biswas has the feeling that in Chase he is an unnecessary and unwanted man and that “real life was to begin for them soon and elsewhere”(147). To Mr. Biswas “Chase was a pause, a preparation” (147).

Here, Naipaul, identifies the desire of Mr. Biswas to have a house of his own while also acknowledging the problem of alienation among displaced people. Interestingly, after coming to Chase, Mr. Biswas’s attitude towards Hanuman House changes. Whereas he has used to think that Hanuman House is not ordered, he discovers that “the House was the world, more real than the Chase, and less exposed; everything beyond its gates was foreign and unimportant” (188). Mr. Biswas thinks that life in Chase will help him discover his own identity, but it is the sense of isolation that looms large and he fails to find his authentic selfhood. He also discovers that he wants to have his own identity among East Indians. Mr. Biswas now feels that despite hostility, he is recognized as a mimic man in Hanuman House. At Chase he feels alienated. What Naipaul seeks to convey, I think, is that a person’s social identity depends on the society to which he belongs, and that the family is sustaining and stabilizing experience for marginalized individuals like Mr. Biswas. For Mr. Biswas, life is meaningless without 139 Shama, his children and even the Tulsis. This makes Mr. Biswas’ visits to Hanuman House more frequent.

The theme of cultural disintegration receives detailed treatment in A House for Mr. Biswas, a novel describing three generations of East Indians. Naipaul’s novel succeeds in transcending the individual self by universalizing the issue of alienation. Unlike Naipaul’s earlier novels, this novel is not light-hearted, perhaps because the hero is engaged in a serious battle against the forces of oppression. The novel even grows gloomier as Biswas’s struggle with the Tulsis becomes more complex. Nevertheless, as it does not end on a tragic note, this is not a novel of despair. Ultimately, Mr. Biswas succeeds. In the end, he finally has a house of his own. The meaning of A House for Mr. Biswas is made richly clear in the Prologue:

How terrible it would have been, at this time, to be without it; to have died among the Tulsis; amid of the squalor of that large, disintegrating and indifferent family; to have left Shama and the children among them, in one room; worse, to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one’s portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated. (14)

The choice of the protagonist’s name in A House for Mr. Biswas is also interesting. Naipaul seems to have carefully chosen this name. His aim, I would argue, is not only to depict the Hindu background but also to relate it to the circumstances in which he is living. For instance, the protagonist’s first name is Mohun, which means ‘beloved’ (according to the novel), even though he is depicted as an individual who is branded as unlucky and who experiences hostility and humiliation from society. Similarly, his surname, Biswas, means

trust. While writing the novel, Naipaul seems to have decided to give the novel a happy ending, which is why he created a determined protagonist who, despite his unsuccessful attempts in the early stages, finally gains a piece of space which he can call his own. That may be the main reason why Naipaul instead of using the first name, Mohun, addresses the protagonist 'Mr. Biswas,' adding 'Mr.' to the surname to make his character dignified. According to Gordon Rohlehr, Naipaul is able to present a hero who is "in all his littleness, and still preserve a sense of man's inner dignity" (Rohlehr 190).

Mr. Biswas manages to get a loan from Ajodha and buys a house in Port of Spain. He describes his house thus: "The sun came through the open window on the ground floor and struck the kitchen wall. Wood work and frosted glass were hot to the touch. The inside brick wall was warm. The Sun went through the home and laid dazzling strips on the exposed staircase" (572). Naipaul uses words like "sun" and "dazzling" in his description of the house, words that clearly reveal Mr. Biswas's happiness and sense of fulfillment. Later, Mr. Biswas discovers many flaws in the house, but the sense of satisfaction that he owns a house is there.

To conclude, Naipaul seems to suggest that for displaced people like Mr. Biswas, owning a house is not just a matter getting a shelter from heat, cold or rain. In fact, it is both an imposition of order and a carving-out of authentic selfhood within the heterogeneous and fragmented society of Trinidad. The novel portrays Mr. Biswas as a man who stays put, struggling against the hostile environment instead of running away from it.

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