

**A STUDY OF GERONTOLOGY AND ALIENATION IN V. S. NAIPAUL'S  
A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS**

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**Abstract**

Rohinton Mistry's enthralling novel "*Family Matters*" is a traditionally set work which focuses on a major conception of the old age anxiety of meagerness. His novel urges on the idea of the sufferings of an old aged man Nariman Vakeel, aged seventy nine who is a retired English Professor. He suffers with the Parkinsons disease and also has some issues on family relationships. Nariman is affected psychologically all through his life. Mistry instigates to know about 'gerontology' which is rising to be a prominent one; a person needs to have the knowledge about. The word "Gerontology" defines not only the observation and the study made on the old aged people, but also the mode of aging, and particular consequence they face regarding health issues. The field of gerontology has three major aspect of the changes that happen in an old aged person that include, physical change with regard to their enfeeblement, mental change that denotes their own thoughts and memories, societal changes which affect their interaction with the people in the society.

**Keywords:** old age, meagerness, gerontology, suffering, anxiety, psychological aspect.

**Introduction:**

The novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* was meant to be his first novel to earn worldwide acclaim. The term alienation refers to an extraordinary variety of psycho-social disorders, including loss of self, anxiety states, anomie, despair, depersonalization, rootlessness, apathy, social disorganisation, powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, pessimism, and the loss of belief or values. Thus alienation is the very process of experiencing the feeling of loneliness. All these elements are present in the life of Mohun Biswas- the chief protagonist in *A House for Mr. Biswas* who strives hard to obtain self-identity and sense of belongingness.

The concept of alienation in V.S.Naipaul's works reflect the nomadic feelings of the author, who despite his long stay of twenty seven years at Wiltshire Cottage in London, feels himself an alien and an outsider there. Naipaul's writings and interviews have always

focused on the loneliness, sense of exile, the perpetual disturbance, the hollow in his heart. Though Indian by origin, he was born and brought up in Trinidad. *A House for Mr. Biswas* delineates with the theme of alienation. Through his protagonist, Naipaul tries to communicate the painful and traumatic experiences of an immigrant. The indefinite article 'A' used in the title indicates intensity of his desire to belong somewhere, to feel at home, to get rid of alienation. The theme is modelled on his father Seepersad Naipaul and it depicts his poignant struggle to become a writer. Naipaul who himself referred to his father as a failure narrates the tale of an outsider in an alien country.

*A House for Mr. Biswas*, one of the first masterpieces from the prolific pen of Mr. Naipaul. The novel manifests itself as the microcosm of the immigrant life depicting the life long struggle of an individual to erect a home for him in the ambience which pulls down every aspiration and hope of an outsider striving to stabilise himself. The uniqueness of the novel lies in presenting the dilemmas of a diasporic subject effected by the margin /centre dialectics not exactly between two cultures but within one ethnic group of diaspora where the dominant culture is represented by the diasporal subject assuming colonial postures.

Through the disavowed character of Mr. Biswas, Naipaul has tried to limn an immigrant's search for identity and home that gets rejected from everywhere. The chief character, Mr. Biswas, is born as an unlucky child who would spell doom for himself and his family. He is at the mercy of his "colonial" benefactors – his in-laws, who treat him as an unwanted weed and exploit him to the hilt. Mr. Biswas wriggles to unshackle himself from the feudalistic family to own a house of his own. His longing for a piece of a land, a portion of the earth which could be called his own, lands him into much anguish but he doesn't die unheard. His movement from one place to another with a heavy heart to forge a path for himself and his relentless efforts fructify and he dies the death of an owner of a house.

His marginalization started with his birth, he was born in reverse position and had six fingers in his hand and due to these signs; Pundit Sitaram who made his horoscope predicted that he would be a spendthrift and a lecher with an unlucky sneeze. He also predicted that Mohun would be responsible for the death of his parents, that he would "eat up his father and mother", and warned that his father should not see his face until twenty-one days of his birth. Later in his life, he was often reminded of this prediction made by Pundit, and it always increased the bitterness that already pervaded his heart and made him feel more miserable. It further aggravated his sense of loneliness. While he was only a boy, his brothers, Pratap and Prasad used to enjoy themselves by roaming around in the village, swimming into the ponds and rivers while he was compelled to stay at home, where the only option for him was to play with his sister Dehuti. This he was alienated even from his family. Often he used to crave to see the outside world, to roam freely like others. But for him "life was unpleasant only because the Pundit had forbidden him to go near ponds and rivers" (18). After the death of his father he was

admitted to a school but here he was regularly flogged by his teacher Mr. Lal, who once “ordered him to write I am an ass on the blackboard” (46).

Thus the constant humiliation and physical and mental abuse casted negative impact on his personality and gradually he developed a kind of animosity towards people and became more isolated and lonely. After studying here for six years, Biswas was sent to Pundit Jairam to learn religious scriptures and to get training for the profession of a pundit. His sense of self-respect got hurt when he was flogged and ill-treated by Pundit Jairam. While expelling him from his house, Pundit spoke in a very harsh and cruel manner “you will never make a pundit. I was talking the other day to Sitaram who read your horoscope. You killed your father. I don’t want you to do that to me”(55).

Mohum Biswas’ chance marriage to Shama made him a son-in-law of Tulsis. It was a large, very large joint family. Here he was expected to merge his personal identity with Tulsis in exchange to food and shelter that he receives. But this was not an easy task for him. He felt trapped. His instant reaction “Now he was married. Nothing in the world except death could change that” (92) explain his mental state. The joint family of Tulsis, with its at least two hundred members used to live under one roof. By the virtue of his marriage with Shama, Biswas automatically became a member of this family. Immediately after his marriage he realized that this marriage would not give him any happiness. Under the influence of this belief, he could not develop healthy marital relationship with his wife Shama, even when he was a newly married groom, “following his policy of caution, he had not attempted to establish any relation with her” (92). Later he returned to his house in Pagots. Then his aunt Tara visited Hanuman house and after her return, Biswas asked for whether she liked Shama, her reply that it was none of her business to decide that, hurt Mr. Biswas, for it “emphasized his loneliness” (103).

As he had no other option he returned to Hanuman House but here everybody except Shama was a stranger to him and often he would feel depressed as “it was a strain, living in a house full of people and talking to one person alone” (107). Thus all these incidents made Biswas feel more and more lonely. While all other Tulsi son-in-laws have accepted this situation, throughout his life Biswas made serious efforts to revolt against it. Their differences of opinion and ideology created wide gap between them and he used to feel himself all alone in that large family-even Sharma intensified his alienation. Once, when he was brutally beaten by Govind, in the presence of Shama, she neither tried to intervene nor consoled him after the incident, rather “she maintained her martyr’s attitude throughout...” (138).

Every effort of Mr. Biswas to become self-dependent was curbed down mercilessly. When he revealed his heart to Govind, another son-in-law that he would like to earn for himself, “to paddle his own canoe” (108), he immediately revealed it to Seth and it antagonized everybody in the family against him.

Seth rebuked him in the presence of everybody:

We want somebody to work on the estate. It's nice to keep these things in the family. And what you say? You want to paddle your own canoe. 'Look at him!' Seth said to the hall 'Biswas the peddler. It runs in the family.' Seth said, 'they tell me your father was a great diver. But where has all these peddling got you so far?(112)

He was criticized and humiliated publicly but nobody tried to defend him and naturally he felt that in the entire Tulsi family, he had not a single soul to sympathize with him. Biswas was then, compelled to work at the estate at Green Vale. Away from his family it was a kind of exile for Mohun Biswas who had to stay here in the company of antagonized labourers. Here he remained in such a pathetic condition that at times he undergoes a strange mindset and once at the time of his fury, when his wife Shama sent a message that she was bringing the children there for a few days, he immediately indulged in all kinds of negative thoughts.

As Kenneth Ramchand notes, *A House for Mr. Biswas* is the West Indian novel of rootlessness par excellence and part of Naipaul's re-achievement is that these theme work at a number of levels for various subjects simultaneously (Ramchand 1996:102). Naipaul presents a space in which his characters move and feel a sense of unease, a sense of not belonging at home or in the vocabulary of novel a "familiar temporariness" (Naipaul 2003:201). He found them haunted by the indenture syndrome of ancestors of "unnecessary and unaccommodated" (Naipaul 2003:8). Similarly, his characters inherit a kind of 'neurosis' of the past insecurity, madness, anguish, out of placement, defeat and rootlessness (Clemens 1982: 71).

Naipaul presents this vicious circuit in *A House for Mr. Biswas* as "self-disgust led to anger, shouts, tears something to add to the concentrated hubbub of the evening, the nerve torn helplessness" (Naipaul 2003:463). The condition of Mr. Biswas is too pitiable, who finds himself totally dipped into the ditch of frustration and disgust:

Everything he now saw become sullied by his fear, every field, every house, every tree, every turn in the road [. . .] so that by merely, looking at the world, he was progressively destroying his present and his past.(Naipaul 2003: 281)

The house of course is the most powerful symbol in the novel and it represents unobtrusively the need for physical and spiritual "shelter". The "need of shelter is shared as much by the Hindus and Creole society as by Mr. Biswas himself" (Ramchand 1996:60). Delineated in compassionate tones of Mr. Biswas, the house represents a search for emancipation from dependence. A "house" might well be a metaphor of the existentialist journey through life as well as a symbol of the fatalistic Indian philosophy (Para 2008:136). Therefore, Mr. Biswas relentless fight to process his own house and steer clear of the grip of the Tulsi's household is seen to parallel man's need to develop a way of life which is uniquely his (Cooke 1980:73).

Besides focusing on the dark world, the novel introduces brief glimpses of ethnic and social history, while maintaining equilibrium between Mr. Biswas's inner-self and the disinterested outer view. (74). His entrance has been described in the world as "six fingered, and born in the wrong way" (Naipaul II). He is fated to have an unlucky sneeze; he is warned never to go near water etc. Pundit also characterizes Biswas:

First of all, the features of this unfortunate boy. He will have good teeth but that will be rather wide, and there will be spaces between them. I suppose you know what that means. (Naipaul 2003:12)

These inclinations towards being different are consistently shown not to derive from any laudable qualities. Biswas is acutely aware of his lack of physical endowment and attempts to pre-empt the ridicule of other people by poking fun at himself. Mr. Biswas is not sufficiently secure psychologically to survive without a support and identity offered by a family group, yet he constantly reels against the Tulsis household.

In a novel dominated by the Hinduism, "Hanuman House" is actually described in military terms:

[ . . . ] Hanuman House stood like an alien white fortress. The walls looked as thick as they were and when the narrow doors of the Tulsis store on the ground floor were closed the House became bulky, impregnable and blank. The side walls were windowless and on the upper floor the windows were more slits in the facades. (Naipaul 2003:81)

While the "fortress" offers some protection to its older members who are incapable of dealing with the "new world" (Clemens 1982: 54), but Mr. Biswas finds out that he is unwanted in Hanuman House, where he is treated with indifference rather than hostility. As a hero, Mr. Biswas is never truly free of the Tulsis and whenever he seeks his freedom has to be bailed by members of the Tulsis clan, intensifying his subservience and sense of gratitude to them. 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 unnecessary and unwanted. But he also thinks that life in Chase will help him discover his own identity, but it's the sense of isolation that looms large and he fails to find his authentic selfhood. Mr. Biswas now feels that despite hostility, he is recognized as a mimic man in Hanuman House. At Chase, he feels 'alienated' (Parag 2008:138).

Naipaul seeks to convey that a person's social identity depends on the society to which he belongs and that the family is sustaining and stabilizing experiences for marginalized individuals like Mr. Biswas. For Mr. Biswas, life is meaningless without Shama, his children, and even the

Tulsis. So Mr. Biswas visits to Hanuman House more frequently. Life at Green Vale is more distressing experience.

Anxiety and stress make him ill and poison his relations with his family. Once he recovers from the trauma of belonging to the Tulsi tribe, he leaves the rural society of Trinidad to go to Port of Spain. Here rural norms and taboos have no efficacy and Mr Biswas encounters diverse lifestyles. His colonial education, that had been such an obstacle to him during his village years, gives him credibility in this wider society. Naipaul's situation throughout is that of one standing at an intersection, and therefore of dislocation and not belonging; every perspective he takes is immediately undermined by others and he suffers as an author and a man. His masculinity comes under stress – while in England, he feels inadequate as an Indian son who ought to take responsibility for his parents. This guilt weighs on him heavily as he is not even there when his father dies. In England he feels inadequate as a writer as a tradition to which he can relate is lacking. Like Mr Biswas, Naipaul gives an outlet to the inadequacies in his masculinity by abusing women.

V. S. Naipaul, describing his relationship with his father Naipaul's father encouraged his son to use the elder man's life story if Naipaul was ever at a loss for a theme, and that is what Naipaul did in *A House for Mr Biswas*. Naipaul has expressed a special affection for the novel. In the foreword that he wrote to the 1983 edition, he states: Of all my books, this is the one that is closest to me. It is the most personal, created out of what I saw and felt as a child. Naipaul's father, Seepersad, is the prototype for Mr. Biswas. Both the real man and the fictional Biswas were born in a village; lived with wealthy relatives; worked as a sign painter; married into a conservative, well-to-do Hindu family; held a series of jobs; and wandered from home to home. Like Mohun Biswas, Seepersad Naipaul found work on a newspaper after moving to Port of Spain.

The events in the life of Mr. Biswas's son Anand reflect those of the novel's author. Anand, like the young Naipaul, is pushed hard to excel at school and to share his father's involvement with writing. It is not difficult to imagine the character's growing up to become a world-famous novelist. Critics have praised the novelist's descriptions of nature; his colourful, eccentric characters; and his vivid portrayal of life in the unique social and cultural milieu of Trinidad. Readers have enjoyed the humour in the raucous scenes of life with the Tulsi family, in Mr. Biswas's career as a tabloid newspaper journalist, and in the language of the characters. While in his more recent books Naipaul has taken a mostly dark and unhopeful view of the future of former British colonies like Trinidad, in this earlier novel, he moderated his pessimism with comedy. Perhaps it is this comic sense more than anything else that has made *A House for Mr Biswas* a classic of world literature. Mr. Biswas's journey through life is hard, painful, and incomplete, but the reader cannot help but smile along the way.

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