

Examining Hybridity in VS Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas***Junti Boruah****Research Scholar****Deptt. of EFL****Tezpur University, Tezpur, Assam****Abstract:**

The postcolonial diaspora narratives demonstrate the nostalgia of diaspora for their distant homelands and their quest to retain their racial and ethnic identity in a hybridized world. As a postcolonial migrant intellectual, V.S. Naipaul deals with postcolonial displacement and homelessness resulting from diverse diasporic movements. From his own position of displacement, Naipaul turned his attention to other displaced individuals in the 'half-made' societies of the world that were searching for meaning and fixity in their disordered lives. The aim of this paper is to examine how westernization, acculturation and a continuous process of hybridization lead to crisis of identity and disintegration of the orthodox Tulsi family in VS Naipaul's novel *A House for Mr Biswas*. In this novel, Naipaul depicts the disintegration of the society of Indian immigrants in Trinidad under the influence of borrowed culture, of mimicry and hybridity. The concept of hybridity problematises boundaries. It consists of border crossings, exchanges, negotiations. It also implies an unsettling of identities. The concept of hybridity occupies a central place in postcolonial discourse. In such discourse, fixity of identity and purity of culture are always questioned through continuous process of cultural negotiation.

Keywords: Hybridity, Mimicry, Identity, Culture, Disintegration

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V.S. Naipaul's fiction deals with postcolonial displacement and homelessness resulting from diverse diasporic movements. In his novels, new cultural negotiation resulting from multicultural mixing of migrants in changed geographical and cultural space have been extensively explored. As these people are displaced from their homeland, their pasts can be revisited and realized only in partial and fragmented ways. In a diasporic situation, 'Home' and 'Abroad' are mingled in such ways that they no longer remain merely as fixed geographical locations. Diaspora is a scattering of population which leads to a loss of the sense of home; loss of roots; loss of place. In a diasporic condition, there are constant processes of cultural clash, of appropriation, exchange and negotiation that make up the diasporic subjects. It is also important to note that as only the first generation diasporas have direct experience of displacement as result of migration; the sense of alienation they encounter is more intense than their next generations. The later generations of diasporas *may* not feel the same emotional and spiritual bond with the homeland of their ancestors. Therefore, "it is more accurate to talk about 'diaspora identities' rather than 'migrant identities'; not all of those who live in a diaspora, or share an emotional connection to the 'old country' have experienced migration" (McLeod 2010: 207)

The postcolonial discourse of identity questions stable point of reference and acknowledges the destabilization and fragmentation affecting the concept of identity. In *Culture and Imperialism* Edward Said agrees upon the shifting nature of identity. Identity is always in progress, fluctuating between differences. "No one today is purely *one* thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind" (Said 1994: 407) Thus, instead of positing identity in a pure, settled and unproblematic ground, we have to challenge essential models of identity.

In the traditional societies identity was perceived as fixed, unproblematic. Such notions of identity tended to posit society and individuals as fixed. But this concept of identity has changed over time and its fixity and unproblematic nature has gradually been questioned. The postmodern notion of identity is one that decentres the individual. The decentred subject is perceived as

multifaceted and contradictory. Hence, identity is no longer viewed as singular and stable, but rather as plural and mutable. Identity is based on comparison and it is relational not absolute. It is a social construction. It is a matter of social context.

In common sense language, identification is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established in its foundation... Though not without its determinate conditions of existence, including the material and symbolic resources required to sustain it, identification is in the end conditional, lodged in contingency. (Hall in Paul du Gay *et al* Ed. 2003: 16-17)

In the postcolonial world, the concept of identity as stable and monolithic is replaced by a pluralistic and hybridised one. The concept of hybridity occupies a central place in postcolonial discourse. Hybridity “has been seen as part of the tendency of discourse analysis to de-historicise and delocate cultures from the temporal, spatial, geographical and linguistic contexts, and to lead to an abstract, globalized concept of the textual that obscures the specificities of particular cultural situations.” (Ashcroft *et al* 2007: 119-120). Homi K Bhabha posits identity as a form of liminal or in-between space. In *The Location of Culture* (1994) Bhabha argues that “it is the ‘inter’- the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space - that carries the meaning of culture.” (p. 38) It is the indeterminate spaces and in-between subject positions that disrupt and displace established patterns and hegemonic cultural practices. This space questions essentialist notions of identity and conceptualization of purity and originality in culture. This space “constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity...” (Bhabha 1994: 37) It is a space that calls into question the inherent originality or ‘purity’ of cultures and engenders new possibilities.

In recent postcolonial studies, the concept of hybridity is an influential one. Frantz Fanon argues that the colonial encounter gives birth to a psychological dependency among the colonized subjects in their futile attempt to become ‘white’. They take on western values, religion and practices of the white man and reject their own culture. In Fanon’s phrase, the native puts on ‘white masks’. “However, this ‘mask’ over the black skin is not a perfect solution or fit. Fanon argues that the native experiences a schizophrenic condition as a result of this duality.” (Nayar 2011: 157-158) Like Frantz Fanon, Homi K Bhabha suggests that hybridity is the necessary attribute of the colonial condition. Bhabha offers analysis of ambivalent colonizer/colonized relations and the mutual construction of their subjectivities. He also argues that hybridity is “not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures...” (Bhabha 1994:113)

Bhabha proposes the idea of ‘mimicry’ which is connected to hybridity. In *The Location of Culture* Bhabha comments : “The effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is

profound and disturbing.” (p. 86) He further explains colonial mimicry as “the desire for a reformed, recognisable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite.*” (Bhabha 1994: 86) He also comments that:

... the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. (Bhabha 1994: 86)

Bhabha also offers analysis ,how, in the colonial encounter, the native becomes Anglicised through Western education. This Anglicised native is trained to behave like a white man. But, the native becomes a mimic man as he is never fully and truly white. This mimic man is “the effect of a flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be Anglicized is emphatically not to be English”. (Bhabha 1994: 87). Thus, mimicry is sought through western education, religion where the native people are trained in a disciplined way to imitate the white man and his culture.

The novels of Naipaul deal with plurality and diversity of ways in which dispossessed individuals live, narrate and strive to make sense of their lives. Most of the characters in his novels are heterogenous and diverse and they approach their ethnically diverse origins in the hybrid spaces of *in-between*. These spaces where these characters try to make sense of their present are in a constant process of transformation and change. These novels represent displaced individuals as those who constantly produce and reproduce themselves and problematise in different ways the spaces they inhabit and the relations they develop. In such a setting where spaces are constantly contested and negotiated, new spaces emerge that reflect fluidity and hybridity of their existing conditions. In Naipaul’s fiction, space and identity are projected as malleable categories that undergo constant processes of revision, redefinition and change. The failure of the dispossessed individuals to retain the ‘purity’ of the cultural heritages of their ancestors and the force of western influences in an alien landscape gradually lead to their adoption of hybrid identities.

Naipaul’s novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* deals with Mr Biswas’s search for identity in the multi-racial society of Trinidad and the disintegration of the Tulsi family under the impact of westernization. The novel is regarded as the best specimen of cultural conflict, assimilation and negotiation. In the novel, the story of the Tulsi household is the story of the consolidation of Indian diaspora in Trinidad, its confrontation with western culture and its final disintegration. The Tulsis had some reputation among Hindus as a “pious, conservative, landowning family” (p.81). The novel shows the dilution of Hinduism in the expatriate Indian community as a result of its contact with the surrounding creole society which imitates the Western life style, follows Christianity and speaks English. In the novel, Hanuman House stands as a symbol of the old Hindu culture. The members of the house attempt to preserve the memory of their native country

and the Hindu way of life in the new territory. The novel shows the endeavour of the first generation immigrants to preserve the Indian way of life which gradually disintegrates when the Creole world outside influences the members of the next generations. Hanuman House “stood like an alien white fortress...when the narrow doors of the Tulsi Store on the ground floor were closed the House become bulky, impregnable and blank...The sidewalls were windowless.” (p. 81) It symbolizes vain attempts of the Tulsis to keep intact the Indian culture which has become exotic in the face of modernization. Their religion has also been “reduced to rites without philosophy” (*The Middle Passage* p. 80). The windowless walls of Hanuman House implies “an enclosing self-sufficient world...a static world awaiting decay.” (*The Middle Passage* p. 79).

Cultural conflict is one of the most dominant themes of the novel. The Tulsi family and Honuman House represent Hindu culture. Gradually, coming under western influences, the orthodoxy of the Tulsi family begins to crumble. As a result of the process of assimilation and the impact of the west-oriented culture in Trinidad, certain aspects of Hindu culture take new forms that share aspects of both the cultures which ultimately lead to cultural hybridity. Mrs. Tulsi is very keen to preserve the Hindu culture. The daily puja or worship, and the various rituals prescribed by the religion are regularly performed in the house. But, under the influence of materialistic western culture the sacred Hindu religious practices gradually reduces to business and bargains. The westernized creole culture of Trinidadian society slowly weakens the traditional Hindu beliefs and customs. With the passing of time, the society moves towards the west and away from India leading to dilution of Hinduism. The Hindu rites and rituals are still practiced but the meaning has gone out of them.

For every *puja* Mrs. Tulsi tried a different pundit, since no pundit could please her as well as Hari. And, no pundit pleasing her, her faith yielded. She sent Sushila to burn candles in the Roman Catholic church; she put a crucifix in her room; and she had Pundit Tulsi's grave cleaned for All Saints' Day (p.551).

Naipaul presents the picture of hybridization and the disintegration of the orthodox Hindu rites and rituals. The younger Tulsi son, Owad worships the Hindu deities though he wears crucifix. The family Hindu deity 'Hanuman' seems to be replaced by Christ and the observance of the holy rituals has been diluted. Govind's wife Chinta uses Hindu incantations along with “a candle in one hand and a crucifix in the other” (p.446) to find out who has stolen eighty dollars from her room. This sort of religious ambiguity and disintegration is the result of the impact of west-oriented culture of multiracial Trinidad on the Tulsi family. We see how Shekhar, Mrs Tulsi's son, mixes Hindu customs with that of Christianity.

The elder god did wear a crucifix. It was regarded in the house as an exotic and desirable charm. The elder god wore many charms and it was thought fitting that someone so valuable should be well protected. On the Sunday before examination week he was bathed by Mrs. Tulsi in water consecrated by Hari, the soles of his feet were soaked in

lavender water, he was made to drink a glass of Guinness stout; and he left Hanuman House, a figure of awe, laden with crucifix, sacred thread and beads, a mysterious satchet, a number of curious armlets, consecrated coins, and a lime in each trouser pocket. (p.128)

Many changes came to the lives of the members in the Hanuman House. Mrs Tulsi pretends to be an orthodox Hindu, but she celebrates Christmas with her family and also allows her sons to wear crucifixes while doing Hindu puja. She leaves her daughters uneducated, but sends her sons to the Roman Catholic college in Port of Spain for their education. Mr Biswas and Shama also decide that Anand would go to college as “it would be cruel and foolish to give the boy nothing more than an elementary school education.” (p.512)

The first generation immigrants attempt to hold fast their religious rules, but the members of the next generations mix Hindu religious rites with that of Christianity. The novel provides various instances of dilution of orthodox Hinduism. During the time of Christmas the Tulsi store becomes “ a place of deep romance and endless delights...(p.221) The whole place is transformed by the playing of Gramophone; the scent of Canadian apples; “by a multitude of toys and dolls and games in boxes , new and sparkling glassware...by Japanese lacquered trays...(p.221). When pundit Hari dies, W.C. Tuttle, one of the sons in law of Mrs Tulsi, “ferociously brahminical in an embroidered silk jacket, did the last rites.” (p.438) After Hari’s death, there was none to take his place in performing duties of Pundit in religious ceremonies.

In the Tulsi family, caste plays a major role in arranging marriages, but now, Mrs Tulsi and her daughters think that “ their brother’s bride should be chosen with a more appropriate concern” (p.239) which results in a “search for an educated, beautiful and rich girl from a caste family who had been converted to Christianity and had lapsed.”(pp.239-240) At last, Mrs Tulsi’s elder son, Shekhar’s marriage is arranged with a girl in a Presbyterian family. It means that Shekhar has given up his rigid brahminical beliefs of keeping the ‘purity’ of the high caste by marrying a Brahmin girl. The marriage takes place in a registry office and after that:

...contrary to Hindu custom and the tradition of his family, he did not bring his bride home, but left Hanuman House for good, no longer talking of suicide, to look after the lorries, cinema, land and filling station of his wife’s family. (p. 240)

Shekhar's wife does not follow the custom and traditional culture of the Tulsi family. From the beginning, the relations between the sisters and Shekhar’s wife has been uneasy because “Shekhar’s wife had from the first met Tulsi patronage with arrogant Presbyterian modernity. He flaunted her education.. She wore short frocks and didn’t care that they made her look lewd and absurd...(p.385)

Owad, Mrs Tulsi's other son, comes back to Trinidad after becoming a doctor which has made him a different person. In his letters, Owad writes mainly about English flowers and the English weather.

'The February fogs have at last gone,' Owad used to write, 'depositing a thick coating of black on every window sill. The snowdrops have come and gone, but the daffodils will be here soon. I planted six daffodils in my tiny front garden. Five have grown. The sixth appears to be a failure. My only hope is that they will not turn out to be blind, as they were last year. (pp.556-557)

Owad is received like a hero by the Tulsis when he returns from England after completing his medical studies. They go to the harbor to welcome Owad who "was wearing a suit they had never known, and he had a Robert Taylor moustache. His jacket was open, his hands in his trouser pockets." (p.567) He has become a member of the elite class. Owad's educational superiority places him ahead of everyone else in the family. He has been deeply influenced by the Communist revolution in Russia and he tells of his "meeting with Motolov, of the achievements of the Red Army and the glories of Russia..." (p.571) The whole house falls under Owad's spell when he narrates his adventures in England. Chinta begins to show a great antipathy for Krishna Menon, whom Owad dislikes. One afternoon, the Tulsi family's reverence for India is shattered:

Owad disliked all Indians from India. They were a disgrace to Trinidad Indians; they were arrogant, sly and lecherous; they pronounced English in a peculiar way; they were slow and unintelligent and were given degrees only out of charity...the moment they got to England they ate meat and drank to prove their modernity... (p.570)

Owad marries Dorothy's cousin, "the Presbyterian violinist", and "left the Colonial Hospital and moved to San Fernando..." (p.618) The newly emerging society has become indifferent to the customs of their ancestors as they try to copy the lifestyle of the westerners, which they have become acquainted recently. The traditions of the Indians undergo changes in the face of modernization and "their customs and ceremonies remain quaint and even exotic" (*The Middle Passage*, p.79)

Thus, the novel shows the disintegration of the Hindu culture of the immigrant Indians in a multicultural space where the idea of a stable cultural identity is questioned throughout. The novel exemplifies the dynamic and fluid nature of social spaces by depicting such spaces as constantly being negotiated and hybridized. and also shows the articulation of social meanings and identities in a hybrid existence.

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