

## A Postcolonial Reading of V S Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*

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### Abstract

V.S Naipul's magnum opus *A House for Mr Biswas* can be considered as a postcolonial novel that deals with the problems of alienation, isolation and dislocation. The novel can be seen as an attempt to set Naipaul's destroyed roots afresh focusing mainly on the theme of 'not in search of roots but in search of rootlessness'. It heavily mocks the Indian way of life, that is, living life secluded in a shell, barricaded by norms and conventions set forth by society. The paper attempts to examine *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) as a true product of Postcolonialism and Biswas as a colonial man uprooted from his past, having no place in the future and his struggle to build a home as a way of achieving meaningfulness in the world which is a colony.

**KEYWORDS:** post colonialism, identity crisis, alienation, displacement, colonizer, colonized

### Introduction

Postcolonialism, a phenomenon of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a legacy of the colonial rule. Imposing a culture upon a community has many an impact often negative ones. Being subjugated for long under a superior power, the cultural identity of the colonized is in question. Traditionally the factors that help in molding the identity of an individual are his past, education and socio-cultural environment. We position ourselves in the surrounding society and this is possible because of our ancestry or lineage. But when this ancestry erodes under us and when our foothold weakens, we start to question ourselves.

We all have experienced a crisis in identity in one or the other stages of our life. Thus we can say that it is something universal. Everything universal comes under the limelight of literature and here under the genre of post colonial literature, as the crisis of identity is fundamental to postcolonialism. Post colonial writings voices out the internal dilemma, conflicting cultural background and the psyche of the colonized people. It focuses on race relations, the effects of racism and a sense of a need for place leading to relationship between 'self' and the 'place' as in the case of displacement.

In the post colonial era today, the concept of home has become extremely complicated. The sense of homelessness creates in the mind of the people alienation and dislocation

stimulating a quest for identity and a search for the self. The colonies of West Indies consisting of displaced people living in a hostile environment, uprooted from their homeland are one such example.

V S Naipaul who has had firsthand experience of the life of the people of West Indies has fictionalized all this in his writings thereby reinventing his visions of the third world. The reason for Naipaul being a critic of the third world is that since birth he has been caught up between the two worlds, both of which were reluctant to claim him, his identity therein becoming ambiguous. Many like Edward Said state that he does not have sympathy for the oppressed or the marginalized whereas some others claim that he has an objective view regarding the colonized and his true portrayal helps the readers in confronting the realities of the developing world. *A House for Mr. Biswas*, one of Naipaul's finest achievements is the story of a man who aspires for individual freedom and recognition, and the theme being universal strikes a great chord with the readers.

### **Biswas and Colonialism**

The culture of the third world countries are redefined by the process of colonization. The colonial nations while reinforcing their culture upon us in a way leads to clash or conflict between cultures. The pressure exerted by the colonial culture suppresses and distorts one's identity. The novel is optimistic about its approach on dislocation. It deals with East Indians quest for a self in the new world and into the individual's psyche that craves for individuality.

The work, *A House for Mr. Biswas* is an autobiographical reminiscence. Biswas like Naipaul's grandfather in his childhood is subjected to slavery. His very survival is obstructed by the superstitious norms of the society. It is the physical surroundings around him that gives him the tendency to survive. But with colonization a person's self is wiped off and here in the novel, the same fate occurs to Biswas, his foe being the community in which he lives.

The disintegration of the family is also a reality concerning various families in the aftermath of colonialism. Like slaves of the colonial masters, Biswas during the early stage of his life do not have a free will and is pushed around and abused by others. He is unable to make choices regarding his own life. He does not have a past or future to look up to and continues to live in an unending loop. He is not the one who decides his fate. It is decided by others. After six years of school education, he is pulled out of the school upon Tara's insistence and is sent to Pundit Jayaram to teach him Hindu rites and practices even though he is basically a non believer. Here Naipaul disapproves the colonial system of education and also Tara's attitude thereby criticizing the colonizer and the colonized.

Even at the house of Tulsi's, he is victimized. On going for a job as a sight painter his bargain for the payment regarding the job is cut down by Seth:

Seth had beaten down Mr Biswas's price and said that Mr Biswas was getting the job only because he was an Indian; he had beaten it down a little further and said that Mr Biswas could count himself lucky to be a Hindu; he had beaten it down yet further and said that signs were not really needed but were being commissioned from Mr Biswas only because he was a Brahmin. (81-82)

The irony here is that, what should have been proven as an advantage for Mr. Biswas for being an Indian, Hindu and a Brahmin all at once is turned into a disadvantage by a fellow colonized sufferer. Mr. Biswas is unaware that he is being forced into marriage and does not

have the strength to rebel and yields to the wishes of the Tulsi household. He tries to gain allegiances with the other brother-in-laws like Govind in rebellion against the Tulsis's but is greatly disappointed as he finds himself alone in his battle. This is indicative of the nature of Indians who were devoted to the British like slaves who found that their best interest vested with the colonial masters.

One can say that Hanuman House is an embodiment of slave society. The house like the British Empire is run smoothly and efficiently:

Though Hanuman House had at first seemed chaotic, it was not long before Mr Biswas had seen that in reality it was ordered, with degrees of precedence all the way down, with Chinta below Padma, Shama below Chinta, Savi below Shama, and himself far below Savi. With no child of his own, he had wondered how the children survived. Now he saw that, in this communal organization children were regarded as assets, a source of future wealth and influence. (188)

The Son- in-laws of the house like Biswas are expected to work and earn for the members of the household. The marriages without bringing in any dowry are claimed as an advantage to Biswas. Naipaul here is mocking the Indian society with its caste system that looks down upon fellow human and says that we are no better than the whites.

In the novel, the focus of satire is not on Mr. Biswas but on the immediate community around him. Mr. Lal, Biswas's teacher reminds us of the famous Minutes of Macaulay which strived for making men who were Indian in color and blood but, English in manner and taste. Lal who converted from Hinduism to Presbyterianism who belonged to a low caste feels contempt for all unconverted Hindus including Biswas. Through Lal, Naipaul portrays how Indians have low self esteem to his brethren and how Indians invariably tries to mimic the ways of the colonizers but fails to do so.

The power structure of the Tulsi household is clearly depicted through the novel. After Seth leaves the family following a quarrel, the companionship among the members of the household begins to disintegrate and disputes becomes frequent. Everyone tries to make use of the opportunities available to them as each have to fight for himself in the new world order. But even there, Biswas is exploited by his homelessness. Geographically and ideologically he lives in the limits drawn by the Tulsis's. He loses his identity and merely becomes a son-in-law of the Tulsis's, like the innumerable faceless colonized ones.

Unlike his other brother-in-laws, within him there is a need for embracing his individuality. Like them he is not ready to be assimilated into nothingness. The house that he finally builds is a symbolic place in the world of placelessness. He rebels against the master slave atmosphere of the Tulsis's:

Naipaul is highly critical of the colonized than the colonizers. To indicate this, Biswas being the colonized is victimized throughout the novel. According to him it is the victim in his act of helplessness who victimizes himself rather than finding ways to come out of the situation. He, lamenting over his fate and subjecting himself to be a victim does not evoke sympathy from the author. One such instance is when Biswas crying says: "You see Ma. I have no father to look after me and people can treat me how they want" (67). But it may be because dislocating an orphan like Biswas to a far and strange off land can make him feel victimized and unprotected.

The house he attains in the end is not merely a material possession but a symbol of achievement. The colonial subjects after years of suppression attains freedom and once they revel in its glory, is confused as to what they should do next. This same fate confronts Biswas when he leaves the Tulsi's and setup a shop by himself and his confusion thereafter as what to make of his life becomes acute. Here Hanuman house can be seen as a temporary refugee camp. He does not wish to break himself free from all relationships and ties, instead he wants to be the authoritative figure of the family and not to take orders from others, pushed and abused. The house he attains in the end becomes his legacy which he can bequeath to his children.

Biswas and the Tulsi's symbolize the West Indian culture. Like the West Indies who has a colonized past Biswas has historylessness, is culturally dislocated and alienated, has been looted and plundered of his identity, but has emerged successful in the battle through both dormant and active resistance like the colonizers. There are various reasons for the collapse of the Tulsi Empire. One such reason was the imparting of European mode of education at schools and Port of Spain paving way for urbanization, leading to the questioning of inherent traditionalist values of the Tulsi's. Thus the novel is not just about an individual named Mohun Biswas, but is also about the people of third world countries doomed for long under the oppressive chains of colonialism and imperialism in search of roots.

#### **Identity crisis in *A House for Mr Biswas***

Alienation, a product of identity crisis dealt in *A House for Mr Biswas* is associated with the minority, oppressed, enslaved etc who are on the periphery and does not have the power or capacity to fight back. But despite being alienated, Biswas is successful in fighting back against the shackles that ties him down, sometimes succumbing to it and sometimes in overcoming the greater powers.

Biswas is a man of troubled unhappy past. Going back to the past is not a safe haven to him. He is a lonely individual in his own family. But just as Naipaul finds a voice in the lost crowd, his hero Biswas too assert his individuality by evading alienation and building a house of his own. His attempt to own a house can be seen as his desire to prove himself to the Tulsi's who is of wealthier relations. At the same time, it is also to keep at bay the insecurities and dependence on others.

Throughout his life, Biswas does not have a role model to look up to. His father, Raghu, Bhandat and Ajodha are men who have abandoned their responsibilities. By becoming one of the Tulsi's he too loses his identity. He tries to overcome the limitations by trying to suppress the forces that challenge his individuality. He is stuck between Hanuman House and his individuality. His dreadful existence at the Chase is painfully expressed by Savi watching the signs painted by her father years ago: "Savi knew and was proud that the signs had been done by her father. But their gaiety puzzled her; she couldn't associate them with the morose man she went to see in the dingy barrack-room and who sometimes came to see her" (212).

The Hanuman House and its surroundings signify the colonial world. Biswas's struggle against the norms of the household can be seen as a battle for liberation and for the attainment of personality. Even though Biswas is provided for, he feels suffocated by the laws of the household which he considers as a prison: "now he was married. Nothing in the world except death could change that" (92). He often feels that Shama is a stranger to him and her indifference intensified his alienation.

Biswas's attempt to forge an identity is often challenged by forces unknown to him or what one might call fate. Unlike Naipaul's other novels, *A House for Mr Biswas* remains highly optimistic. Despite his tiresome struggle he in the end succeeds in building a house that he can call his own, thereby gaining an identity and selfhood that the author is unable to attain.

In the first section of the novel 'Pastorals', the early childhood of Biswas is portrayed. The Hindu community created by the author even though with shades of imagination is a ridicule in the face of India's religious customs and practices. Mohan Biswas born with an extra finger is considered as an alien by his own family members. His horoscope declares him to be unlucky thus casting him out of the Indian community. He is blamed for the accidental death of his father. During the burial of his father, Tara has to translate Hindi into English for the photographer to understand what she is speaking about, indicating the intrusion of the alien environment. This is felt more when instead of cremating the dead; Raghu is buried signifying the change that has come over the Trinidadian Hindus as a result of uprooting that weakens the conventional culture. The disintegration of the family, with the death of Raghu is significant that it symbolizes the fragmentation of Biswas's life:

"And so Biswas came to leave the only house 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, with no family except that which he was to attempt to create out of the engulfing world of the Tulsis. For with his mother's parents dead, his father dead, his brothers on the estate at 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 quote alone"(40).

The lack of love from any of his relation develops a kind of animosity in the attitude of Biswas, which gradually isolate him from all other people. His actions were no longer decided by his mother, but by Tara. He solely becomes detached from his relations. This is clearly portrayed by Naipaul when years later, after the death of Bipti, Biswas longing to feel grief, but only had jealousy in his mind seeing that the body of Bipti belonged to the strangers who came to see her and not to him. Nobody in the house cares about his existence. His thoughts are: "He had lived in many houses. And how easy it was to think of those houses without him!" (131). "In none of these places he was being missed because in none of these places had he ever been more than a visitor, an up setter of routine." and "Beyond that a void. There was nothing to speak of him" (132).

Biswas's ideology is very different from that of the Tulsi's. Even as he tries hard to fit into the puzzle of the household he remains unwanted and dejected. His sole ambition was to rise in life or to rise above the Tulsi's and to prove himself worthy of their reverence. But in the Tulsi household there existed a kind of barter system, that is, independence of an individual was bartered in place of food, security and submissiveness. In the fast pacing world Biswas tries to assert his identity from village to town and from joint family to nuclear family, but all proving unsuccessful.

Biswas is unable to escape from the identity branded upon him by the family even though he desperately tries to. He aware of his loneliness that he is in tells to his son Anand: "I am just somebody. Nobody at all" (279). Even when his brothers gain identity as labourers. Biswas does not have luxury to call himself so, as he is looking after his uncle's shop. He always



finds himself to be in places he never wants to be. His marriage with Shama of the Tulsi household burdens him with responsibilities. His marital status without the acquisition of dowries and lack of any financial support force him to live with his in-laws. Here he develops a mental complex. His inner self rebels when he understands that the brother-in-laws in Tulsi Household are mere laborers and husbands. Their role is insignificant. And among the members of the household: “he was treated with indifference rather than hostility” (188).

Biswas too does not have any regard for his in-laws. Even when one of the brother-in-laws, Govind asks him to give up his sikh painting job, he thoroughly opposes saying that he is not ready to give up his independence. He does not in any way want to associate with the Tulsis’s and engage in some insignificant job assigned by them. Instead he wishes to stand on his own feet, to affirm his individual freedom.

His free thinking helps him to rebel, leading him to join the Aryans, a group of protestant Hindu missionaries from India. He joins in their venture to abolish caste system, idol worship etc, not because he is a fervent believer, but to show that he hated and ignored everything that Tulsi’s stood for. His rebellion is also expressed in the form of language that he uses, that is Creole English unlike the Hindi spoken by other members of the house. The comical dimension of the novel is witnessed when Biswas nicknames the Tulsi’s such as “old queen”, “old hen” etc for Mrs Tulsi, “the big boss” for Seth, “the two gods” for Tulsi’s sons etc. This mimicking can be seen as his longing for attention in the household. Biswas even resents the food that he is provided for, indicating cultural disruption. Even during the birth of Biswas’s daughter, the father is not given any importance. The baby is instead named by other members of the family. For to the Tulsi’s: “he was troublesome and disloyal, and could not be trusted. He was weak and therefore contemptible” (104).

Money is something that has gained significance inconspicuously in the novel and Biswas suffers as he is penniless. Biswas believing that his marriage to Shama would be an advantage is surprised when after marriage both Mrs Tulsi and Seth becomes unapproachable. Even Shama does so little to make him feel at ease at her house. The world according to her was that of the Tulsi’s and she couldn’t comprehend anything without it or beyond it. Her attempts to bring Biswas and her family together remain futile as Biswas feels that he is an outsider. It is only when Anand is beaten by Owad that she finally agrees to move away from her family and to settle wholeheartedly in a house with her husband and children. Biswas can be considered as the wife here as it is he who is married to Shama and lives with his in-laws. He married not only Shama but her entire family, the Tulsi’s.

His uprooting to Chase makes him independent of the Tulsi’s in the beginning. But there too he doesn’t feel a sense of belonging and feels estranged among the dislocated people. He feels that “real life was to begin for them soon and elsewhere” (147) and that “Chase was a pause, a preparation” (147). Here he starts to think of a house of his own. We also witness a change in his attitude towards Hanuman House:

“The house was a world, more real than the chase, and less explored; everything beyond its gates was foreign and unimportant and could be ignored. He needed such a sanctuary. And in time the House became to him what Tara’s had been when he was a boy. He

could go to Hanuman House whenever he wished and become lost in the crowd, since he was treated with indifference rather than hostility. And he went there more often, held his tongue and tried to win favor. It was an effort, and even at times of great festivity, when everyone worked with energy and joy, enthusiasm reacting upon enthusiasm, in himself he remained aloof” (188).

Even at Chase he is not able to continue his quest of self discovery. The power structure of the family repressed the individualism callously. Marriage to Shama makes him feel trapped both physically and emotionally. Once moving to Chase he stops his struggle with the Tulsi’s instead he begins to fight with the world outside. The obsession of building a house becomes so rooted in his mind that the gift he presents Savi during Christmas is a doll house, a miniature model of the house of his dreams. When he finds out that Shama has broken it, he is unable to comprehend the reason behind it and is in a rage. The members of the house instantly resent the gift symbolizing their animosity towards personhood as they see everything in its collective identity. But here the readers come to the realization that it is not just the Tulsi’s alone that Biswas detest but the demon within himself. He now considers his life at Hanuman House a blessing:

He wanted to comfort her. But he needed comfort himself. How lonely the shop ! And how frightening! He had never thought it would be like this when he found himself in an establishment of his own. It was late afternoon; Hanuman House would be warm and noisy with activity. Here he was afraid to disturb the silence, afraid to open the door of the shop, to step into the light. (145)

At Chase, his first independent venture ends in failure leading him to think about the priorities of life. Here Naipaul portrays a confused, alienated man who has forgotten his way in the world. He thus makes frequent visits to Hanuman House to overcome the loneliness he feels. For men like Biswas family is essential for their sustenance as they lose their face in vast human incognito. While looking himself over the mirror he says that: “I don’t look like anything at all. Shopkeeper, lawyer, doctor, laborer, overseer-I don’t look like any of them” (159).

Moving to Green valley where he is allocated only a room makes Biswas feel suffocated. He feels both mentally and physically insecure. He longs for recognition from his son, Anand. There in an instance when he tells to Anand : I am not your father. God is your father...I am just somebody. Nobody at all. I am just a man you know.”(291) indicating that he is afraid to claim his own son. Regarding his four children, he feels that: “one child claimed, one still hostile, one unknown and now another” (227). He feels alienated from his own family. Even during Bipti’s death, the grieving which should have brought him closer to his family is not there. Instead he distances himself from them:

He would have liked to be alone, to commune with this feeling. But time was short, and always there was the sight of Shama and the children, alien growth, alien affections, which fed on him and called him away from that part of him which yet remained purely himself, That part which had for long been submerged and was now to disappear (480).

While at Chase he builds a house partly and moves into it but it does not provide the mental comfort that he hoped to achieve. The intensity of the alienation is at its zenith here, and

one believes that it would drive him to become a lunatic. He fails to grasp the realities and often live in a state of perpetual fear:

And always the thought, the fear about the future. The future wasn't the next day or the next week or even the next year, times within his comprehension and therefore without dread. The future he feared could not be thought of in terms of time. It was blankness, a void like those in dreams, into which, past tomorrow and next week and next year, he was falling (190).

Moving to Port of Spain which is in contrast to the places he had lived so far helps him in his professional front to become a reporter of the Trinidad Sentinel thereby gaining the respect of the Tulsi's that he inwardly craved for. He no longer is a non entity. We witness the affirmation of identity on Biswas. His relationship with Mrs Tulsi gradually improves and his quest for a house is forgotten for some time as he reveal in the new lime light of attention. But all this is short lived, when new authorities take over the newspaper, Seth's quarrel with the Tulsi's, Tulsi's deciding to move to Short Hills etc.

With the absence of Seth, the supreme authority, the family slowly disintegrates leading to the question of balance of power. Here Naipaul portrays the typical joint families of India where the absolute power is vested with the eldest member of the family. The tiff between the elder members of the family leads to quarrel and competition between the children and the children developing hostility towards other members of the household. Biswas's sense of depression is clearly depicted when with the Tulsi's, he feels that "He never wished to know the time: it would be too early or too late. The house was full of sound: with renter, readers and learners upstairs and downstairs, the house snored. The world was without colour; it awaited no one's awakening" (469).

Unable to bear the atmosphere with the Tulsi's, Biswas and family on moving to a house in Shorthills find the house incomplete to live in. The house hated by Biswas, his wife and by his children became a prison to them alienating them from the rest of the world as it was situated too far away from the city. Biswas "could not simply leave the house in Shorthills. He had to be released from it" (432). Thus they again goes back to live at Port of Spain despite having to share the house with two other in-laws and their families. On hearing that Owad, son of Tulsi, slapped Anant, Biswas decides to leave the house eventually with his family. Having received similar experiences from his childhood, Biswas was not ready to expose his son to such cruelty and gives way to Anand's request to leave the house.

Here one can see the changing metaphor regarding the house. Once it stood for Biswas's self hood and individuality, now it became a necessity to help his son overcome a humiliation. Shama too despite her earlier protest yields to the wishes of Biswas to move into a new house for the sake of their children.

During the later part of the novel, Biswas tries to connect with his son Anand. But on countless occasions he is unable to confront Anand's question. Once Anand loses temper with his father and says: "When I get to your age I don't want to be like you" (465). Both displaying weakness at times tries to become significant through the other person's weakness.

Biswas finally manages a house of his own in the end and despite its various flaws is content due to the fulfillment of his wish: "The Sun went through the home and laid dazzling strips on the exposed staircase" (572). The triumph of claiming a house with its numerous flaws



overwhelms him when he thinks about “the wonder of being in his own house, the audacity of it, to walk into his own front gate, to bar entry to whoever he wishes, to close his doors and windows every night, to hear no noise except those of his family”(4). “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 indifferent family, worse, to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one’s portion of the earth, to have lived and died as one who had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated”(4). He becomes independent and self reliant, no longer needing the support of the Tulsi’s. For men like Biswas owning a house is not merely the attainment of shelter and comfort but asserting one’s identity in the heterogeneous world.

Thus one of the main themes that Naipaul deals with in *A House for Mr Biswas*, a tragicomic novel, is the universalizing of the themes of alienation and identity crisis, fragmentation, frustration and exile. Biswas engages in a constant fight for space leading him to a nervous breakdown. This anti climax of his rebellion brings him back to the Tulsi household. And starting afresh from here, Biswas begins his journey to achieve stability and identity.

### Conclusion

*A House for Mr. Biswas (1961)* is a highly satirical work which uses a post colonial perspective that views a world far removed from colonialism but with its lingering impacts. The novel can be read in multiple ways. It is a meditation on family life and relationships. While living in a joint family, everyone tries to get into the good books of the patriarch or matriarch leading to competition and backstabbing and jealousy among members. It is also about an individual as well as everyman. It’s also about a father son relationship. As it is a patriarchal family Biswas’s hope lays on Anant rather than his daughters. But it becomes a paradox when during his old age he only has his girl children beside him. It can also be seen as an author’s keen search for a roof and root.

Below the layers of comedy the novel is stuffed with emotions. During the forty six years of his life Biswas had been fighting against fate to achieve facade of autonomy and despite having setbacks one after the other he is hopeful and is a zealous optimist. Along with the protagonist, Naipaul is dealing with his own past or is coming to terms with it. Biswas lives the life of a microcosm being dependent on others or being shunned. But in the end, he becomes his own master. He is finally at peace with himself and dies gracefully at his own home. His death creates a vacuum in the house indicating that he had in fact successfully found a home in the heart of his family and that his presence was felt and respected. Biswas can thus be seen as a lifelong loser while we can also impose upon him the title of a hero worthy of reverence and emulation.

The choice of the name for the protagonist is indeed curious, with Mohun meaning beloved, even though he is not and Biswas meaning trust. Naipaul has added an additional Mr to Biswas to give him a dignified status that he craves for. The use of the indefinite article A shows the intensity of desire to belong somewhere. Naipaul has titled each chapter with the name of a destination and each chapter shows Biswas moving into a new place of residency and ends with him out of it again. The house in the novel stands for his relentless search for identity.

Biswas finding an identity in the world is similar to the author’s zestful search for his identity and ultimately finding one. The dream of the protagonist is accomplished despite his long struggles against the forces of oppression and end in an encouraging note. Thus *A House for*

*M. Biswas* in all its glory is an engaging read that tells the saga of the common life of an extraordinary man. It is about growing up and attaining maturity. Identity crisis which is intrinsic to every human being is carefully depicted by Naipaul within a detailed and intricate plot. Owning a house here is not merely a desire but more than a necessity symbolizing permanence and stability. Mr Biswas and his house thus stand as a universally genuine and valid truth.

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