

Diasporic Sensibility and Naipaul: A Critical Study of *A House for Mr. Biswas*

BARUN KUMAR MISHRA

Department of English, Rajdhani College, University of Delhi
New Delhi (India)

ABSTRACT

Diasporic authors can find redemption and a permanent place in the hearts and thoughts of their readers by writing from a place of exile and estrangement. *A House for Mr. Biswas* tells the story of Mr. Biswas's efforts to end his "homelessness." The protagonist is a passive bystander in the author's eyes. The most famous book by a Caribbean author writing in English is perhaps V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*, which deals with the universal themes of homelessness and alienation characteristic of diasporic literature. Even though the locations of his works range from small, backward rural communities to huge cities, his themes of rootlessness and alienation remain consistent throughout. The paper examines how the novel illustrates social spaces' dynamic and fluid character, demonstrating how they are continually negotiated and hybridized.

Key Words : *A House of Mr. Biswas*, Culture, Diaspora, Hybridity, Indian, Naipaul

Diaspora is a "metaphoric designation" for people who have left their home countries. The diasporic community members all share a common yearning for "the center," or the place from which they or their ancestors were uprooted, whether by force or by their own free will. This yearning persists even if the motivation to return to the nation of origin shifts over time. As a result, diasporic individuals and communities rarely have a single, unchanging identity; instead, they are constantly in flux, existing in an "in-between culture" where they miss their homeland but also seek to assimilate into the culture of their new home. As a result, they create "imaginary homelands" in their original and unique countries. This homeland is not a fixed, static concept but a fluid zone that changes as the nomadic group does. It would be unfair to lump persons in a diasporic scenario into a single cultural experience because they do not all have the same life circumstances. Everyone's experience in a diasporic context is different.

V. S. Naipaul is a writer who always tries to fit in with his surroundings but has yet to succeed. He

represents the archetypal postcolonial contemporary exile adjusting to life in a diaspora. Naipaul's first novel to receive international attention was *A House of M. Biswas*, and throughout his career, he has sought to depict the diasporic sensitivities he experiences in various settings. Mohun Biswas is the protagonist, a hardworking Indo-Trinidadian. He marries the Tulsi family, only to be oppressed by them, and eventually resolves to achieve his lifelong dream of home ownership. Mohun Biswas has spent the last 46 years fighting for his freedom. After his father's death, he has been moved from house to house, and all he wants is a permanent place to call his own. He married into the oppressive Tulsi family, but he eventually rebelled and took on a series of jobs to break free. Naipaul's father provides some inspiration for the book. However, otherwise, it is a keenly observed look at life through the lens of postcolonial ideas, focusing on a long-gone colonial era. This novel was written by Naipaul and given to his wife as a thank-you for all her support throughout his life and work.

"The substance of the novel has to do with the

transformation of Mr. Biswas, a slave to place, history and biography, into a free man, the sign and realization of that emancipation being his house” (Walsh 31-32).

The above comment by William Walsh captures the essence of Mr. Biswas, the protagonist of V. S. Naipaul’s most famous work, *A House of Mr. Biswas*. Mr. Biswas, like other diasporic individuals, struggles throughout the novel to find his place in his adoptive country. He does this by comparing himself to his own culture to establish his identity in light of his new surroundings.

It is important to realize, as has been alluded to previously, that a diasporic person is constantly adjusting themselves against the land of their adoption to feel at home there. Since the diasporic person cannot abandon his own culture (the culture of the place from which he originally belongs), nor can he ignore the culture of his adopted land (among which he must live and survive), the adaptation process continues indefinitely.

Hybridity, as described by Homi Bhabha, is “not one, yet double,” referring to the internal conflict resulting from diasporic individuals’ membership in two cultures simultaneously. In this alien environment, the exiled guy looks at his sense of self for comfort and stability. V. S. Naipaul’s *A House of Mr. Biswas* is one of the best novels written in the twentieth century because of the author’s masterful portrayal of the protagonist, Mr. Biswas.

At the beginning of the story, Mr. Biswas is a marginal man like practically all diasporic folks, and throughout the narrative, he strives for greatness but falls short time and time again. The tale is remarkable because he tries to live his life with the pride of a free man throughout. His portrayal as a henpecked spouse and a sign writer seeking humorously to establish himself throughout his life’s journey lends the novel comedy moments. However, Naipaul’s ironic assertion gives the novel “a vision of the abyss.”

A House for Mr. Biswas has a predominantly Indian atmosphere. The majority of characters in the novels have Indian names and dress traditionally. One of the most influential novels of Indian writing in English, it makes its context and the reader’s awareness of it very clear, making it stand out as uniquely Indian. It is also quite diasporic because it takes place in a foreign country and depicts Indians and their cultural concerns. The characters are at pains to show their diasporic sensibility by continually reiterating their Indianness.

People in a diaspora are torn between two competing allures: the allure of the homeland they left behind and the allure of a new home that promises better opportunities. Because of this conflicting pull, all diasporic persons are trapped in a limbo in which they can neither fully pursue their interests nor integrate fully into the culture of their new home. Because people in the diaspora often lead “hybrid” lifestyles, postcolonial scholar Homi Bhabha has some insightful things to say about the diaspora. V. S. Naipaul, too, explores the complexities of diasporic identity in his writings.

In *A House of Mr. Biswas*, almost all the characters bear Indian names - Bibi, Raghu, Mr. Biswas, Dhari, Sitaram, Jairam, Tara, Padma, Chinta, Shama, Pankaj Rai, Shivlochan, Sushila, Sumati, Savi, Moti, Seebaram, Pratap, Prasad, Dehuti, Ajodha, Mungroo, Tulsi, Bissoonydaye, Sadhu, Lakhani, Govind, Hari, Anand, etc. which suggests that Naipaul was primarily trying to deal with an Indian setting as his concern was to present the Indians in the diasporic setup. We also get the impression that their clothes and jewelry are very Indian, which suggests that even if they are now based in other countries, they are still culturally formed and set up in a manner that is broadly similar to that of India.

Because of this, they celebrate the many Indian holidays and customs with great zeal. Naipaul writes that Hari “never looked so happy as when he changed from estate clothes into a dhoti and sat... reading from some huge, ungainly Hindi book” as he introduces the character of the pundit Hari (114). Again, this implies that people who have been uprooted feel delighted whenever they can participate in homecoming celebrations, whether religious or cultural. Naipaul uses these luxuries to demonstrate the “half-life” that the people of the diaspora lead, split between two cultures (Indian and West Indian). The diaspora community constantly struggles to reconcile this seeming contradiction.

While Naipaul does celebrate the culture of the diaspora in his writings, it is essential to note that he also provides a satirical critique of the same to show how the diasporic individuals try to hold onto a culture that they have left behind in the hopes that doing so will help them maintain some semblance of a connection to the “homes” they left behind. So, when Mr. Biswas entered the world, the pundit said he would bring trouble to the Biswas household. So, the pundit suggests lessening the catastrophe -

“you must fill this brass plate with coconut oil -

which, by the way, you must make yourself from coconuts you have collected with your own hands - and in the reflection on this oil, the father must see his son's face" (17).

The author makes fun of the people's blind faith in superstitions and horoscopes since they are unscientific and irrational and ruin people's lives. Naipaul, a Westernized man with Western education, realized that these practices served only to preserve India's antiquated traditions. Therefore, making fun of them is the only option. Throughout the work, readers are confronted with pathetic and comical scenarios to drive home the point that adhering to such routines makes no sense.

By mimicking the abandoned area's customs, Naipaul gives the impression that he is poking fun at the setting. It is essential to realize that diasporic authors like Naipaul frequently engage in such parodies to help their readers see where they are going wrong while unthinkingly attempting to recreate the lives they formerly led. These traditions are observed less strictly in India than in the diaspora, highlighting their comedic potential. Naipaul utilizes parody and the ensuing derision to show the audience that these rites no longer hold any significance in the lives of the diasporic people. They believe that by keeping these traditions alive, they will always be a part of the traditional Indian community. Naipaul includes descriptions of birth and death rituals to show how the diasporic culture is practiced.

The apparent orthodoxy in these individuals reminds readers of the struggles Indian society underwent to eradicate the same orthodox traditions still held dear by Indians in the West Indies, who believe that by doing so, they are preserving a piece of their homeland's culture. This is the ironic predicament of the diasporic Indian West Indian people that Naipaul sought to highlight in his work. Let us pretend this is a part of the narrative. Since we are also told that the Tulsis "did 'puja' every day and celebrated every Hindu festival," it stands to reason that these people still adhere to Indian culture, traditions, customs, and religion to a flawless degree (244).

The diaspora continues to practice Hinduism, which calls for the daily worship of several deities. They have been West Indians for centuries, but they still manage to cling to their Indian religious identity because it gives them a feeling of who they are and where they belong culturally.

The sense of self-identity that comes from having a location to call home is crucial to functioning in the world.

Like Mr. Biswas, who objects to Tulsi's Hanuman House's practice of idol worship because he believes it demeans Hinduism, we all need a sense of community to feel secure in who we are. We are also told that Mr. Biswas had a pundit career in mind for Tara when he was younger. Some critics, including Naipaul's biographer Patrick French, have speculated that Mr. Biswas was meant to represent Naipaul's father, who had many of the same problems Biswas had in the book. It is true that Mr. Biswas is not an atheist and does not reject Hinduism on any account, despite his rejection of idol worship and many other rites of Hinduism. As a result, the Indian community in Trinidad relies heavily on a strong sense of Indian identity and Hinduism.

Another noteworthy aspect of Trinidad's Indian population is that its younger generations are eager to expand their horizons. The previous generation had mistakenly believed they would only be in the West Indies for a short time, and so had stayed far longer than necessary. Mr. Biswas is caught between the old guard and the new and does not know where to turn for clarity or comfort. In his work, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, V. S. Naipaul vividly depicts the ambivalence felt by Indian Trinidadians. Extreme ambivalence prevents the older generation from visiting India, even when given the opportunity. The desire will always be just that, a desire.

Readers will also be interested that Mr. Biswas's efforts to construct a home for himself are reflected in the novel's physical setting and the protagonist's inner life. Every exile struggles with feelings of upheaval and dislocation, which they attempt to alleviate by building a new home away from their old one. When the protagonist of a novel moves to a distant country and experiences culture shock, they strive to create a home that will give them a sense of belonging in their new environment. In other words, he is trying to escape his current role as a Tulsis dependent. Rightly articulated by Gordon Rohlehr: "Biswas's ideal, which he links with his sense of self, is independence" (Rohlehr 88). On the other side, one could argue that his fixation on a home is a way out of the stifling environment of the Tulsis. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, the novel *The House of Mr. Biswas* is about "the unaccommodated man's constant attempts to locate a stable location in a ramshackle and random universe" (Mukherjee 22).

Thus, it can be understood that *A House for Mr. Biswas* tells the story of a man's ongoing struggle with himself and society, both in terms of the highs and lows

of life and his attempts to rise above his superstitious, conservative Hindu family and the poverty and chaos that characterize the Creole society that serves as the novel's setting. In the next section, we will talk about the postcolonial situation, which will show why it is essential to examine it and why we need to study it in greater depth.

The novel paints a moving portrait of Mr. Biswas as he fights to maintain his individuality in a foreign culture and searches for his true self for the first time. The relentless fight of Mr. Biswas against the force that tries to tame his personality is reminiscent of Naipaul's own life, who seems to have experienced exile and alienation while living in Trinidad. Although his fight was hard and exhausting, he finally has somewhere he can call his "imaginary homeland. Moving from a rural area to an urban center and then to a nuclear family, Mohun Biswas struggles to find his place in the world. A town is a fictitious place in the identity framework, just as the individual is both a creation and a fixed object. He used his childhood experiences as inspiration for a novel. V. S. Naipaul's satire of the socioeconomic classes is grounded in realism, as seen by his portrayal of the poor life as vivid, frank, and straightforward. The Tulsis and Hanuman House symbolize traditional Hinduism as the Western worldview gradually replaces it.

Tulsi family shows the interaction of two cultures, the old Hindu culture represented by the Tulsi family and the alien Western culture represented by the Port of Spain and such individuals as Dorothy, the Christian girl whom Shekhar marries, and Owad, Dorothy's cousin. Mr. Biswas's life story shows a self-respecting individual's rebellion against tyranny. The purpose of bringing these two cultures together is to demonstrate how the ancient Hindu traditions brought to Trinidad by Indian Hindus cannot endure the dominance of the Western foreign worldview. Traditional Hinduism is not eradicated due to contact with the West but has been significantly diminished.

The Tulsi family has deep religious convictions, but these convictions are beginning to erode in the face of increasing exposure to Western culture. Mrs. Tulsi's late husband's brother, Seth, assists her as family head. Seth and his wife Padma also reside in Hanuman House and are considered on par with Mrs. Tulsi regarding social standing. Shekhar (Tulsi's son) demonstrates how he combines Christian and Hindu practices.

In a nutshell, the Hanuman House embodies

everything traditional about Hinduism. He speaks up for himself and other immigrants like him. The narrative focuses heavily on cultural tensions. Mohun Biswas continues to fight for his honor in an environment devoid of norms and structure. In his old age, he buys a house riddled with problems and has his most tremendous success. The home is where one can feel safe, establish individuality, and assert dignity. He can finally stop searching for himself and settle in his home. From the scabs and sores of Biswas's childhood—a badge of neglect and poverty that marks him out for failure and an uncertain future—to the ultimate heart problem and death by a heart attack, V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* provides a window into the history of a society that is inherently and endemically sick.

Writing from a place of exile and alienation can help diasporic authors find redemption and a lasting place in the hearts and minds of their readers. Thus, the story depicts the Hindu culture of the immigrant Indians' dissolution in a heterogeneous world where the concept of a stable cultural identity is constantly called into question. Mr. Biswas's attempt to end his "homelessness" is chronicled in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. The author views the protagonist as a helpless victim of his circumstances. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* is the most well-known work by a Caribbean author who writes in English, and the novel deals with the universal themes of homelessness and alienation central to diasporic literature. His themes of rootlessness and alienation persist even when the settings of his works shift from small, backward rural societies to big cities. The story shows how social spaces are constantly negotiated and hybridized, highlighting their dynamic and fluid nature.

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