Identity Crisis in V.S. Naipaul’s

*A House for Mr. Biswas*

*Kumar Parag*

Fragmentation, alienation, and exile are common terms associated with post-colonial literature. Needless to say, imperialism played a key role in bringing a sense of alienation and disorder to the countries where imperialists ruled.

One of the best-known writers in English today is Vidyadhar Suraj Prasad Naipaul, himself a product of post-imperialist society. To some, he might be better known for the controversial material in his travelogues than for his novels. But this does not undermine his acclaim as a novelist. Naipaul is an expatriate from Trinidad whose primary business as a novelist is to project carefully the complex fate of individuals in a cross-cultural society. He has written extensively about different aspects of post-colonial society, but knowingly or unknowingly, whether he is writing a travelogue or a novel, he tends to end up dealing with the identity crisis of an individual. In an interview with Roland Bryden in 1973, Naipaul remarked, “all my works are really one. I am really writing one big book. I come to the conclusion that, considering the nature of the society I came from, considering the nature of the world I have stepped into and the world I have to look at, I could not be a professional novelist in the old sense” (367-70).

V.S. Naipaul’s magnum opus, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, can rightly be called a work of art that deals with the problems of isolation, frustration and negation of an individual. *A House for Mr. Biswas* tells the story of its protagonist, Mr. Biswas from birth to death, each section dealing with different phases of Mr. Biswas’s life. Here, Naipaul has a more subjective approach towards the problems of identity crisis than the objective one a reader finds in his travelogues, especially on India.

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. Speaking about the writings of Afro-Caribbean women in the US, Carol Boyce Davis identifies the urge among migratory writers particularly writers like V.S. Naipaul:
Migration creates desire for home, which in turn produces the rewriting of home. Homesickness or homelessness, the rejection of home or longing for home become motivating factors in this rewriting. Home can only have meaning once on experience a level of displacement from it (113).

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. While countless other novelists have depicted identity crises in established
societies, Naipaul has depicted a protagonist in a society that is pandemonic and lacking in ideas and creativity.

“Pastorals,” the first section of the novel, describes the birth and early childhood of Mr. Biswas. In this section, Hindu way of life with its customs, traditions, rituals, and philosophy of the people receives full expression in the small Indian world created by indentured Indian labourers in an artificially created colonial society of Trinidad. But here, too, it is the superstitious beliefs, the faith and reliance on pundits which cover the initial pages of the novel. Mr. Biswas has six fingers, a symbol of bad luck for his father and family, and this plays a decisive role in Mohun’s life. Mohun is an alien even in his own family as from the very beginning he is declared unlucky in his horoscope, too, something that makes him an outsider in his own Indian world. He becomes a lonely individual who is trying to get a new social role but fails to find it. Naipaul portrays the complexity of the relationship between a man and his origins and his inability to escape from it. Aware of his loneliness and dilemma, Mr. Biswas tells his son, “I am just somebody. Nobody at all” (279). Unlike his father and brothers who have inherited the social identity of labourers, this cannot be claimed by Mr. Biswas. Mr. Biswas is looking after his uncle’s shop while his brothers are working as labourers. After leaving his uncle’s store, he takes up a job as sign-painter where he meets Shama, a daughter of the Tulsis (an affluent family of the island), whom he later marries. His marriage makes him realize that life, even after a love-marriage, is not romance, but an act of responsibility. Without money and without a dowry from the Tulsis, Mr. Biswas has no choice but to move in at Hanuman House. He develops a mental complex due to the disagreeable family atmosphere. To Mr. Biswas, it is a typical joint family which functions on the same pattern as the British empire in West Indies. Hanuman House provides shelter to Mr. Biswas but wants total dilution of his identity in return. In a novel dominated by the house metaphor, Hanuman House is described as follows:

an alien white fortress. The concrete walls looked as thick as they were and when the narrow doors of the Tulsi Store on the ground floor were closed the House became bulky, impregnable and blank. The side walls were windowless and on the upper floors the windows were mere slits in the facade. The balustrade which hedged the flat roof was crowned with a concrete statue of the benevolent Monkey God Hanuman. (80-81)

When Mr. Biswas finds out that men are only needed as husbands and labourers or that they are non-existent in the Tulsi family, his inner self rebels. He finds himself unwanted in Hanuman House which he sees as a communal organization where “he was treated with indifference rather than hostility” (188). Although he tries to win acceptance in the family—he “held his tongue and tried to win favour” (188), this does not mean that he is willing
to lose his freedom and independence. When Govind, one of Tulsi sons-in-law, suggests that he leave sign-painting and become a driver for the Tulsi estate, Mr. Biswas immediately voices his dissent: “Give up sign-painting? And my independence? No, boy. My motto is: paddle your own canoe?” (107). It seems that for Mr. Biswas, sign-painting, taken up by him voluntarily, has become a part of his identity. He refuses to adopt a profession which is associated with the Tulsis, and he is not ready to merge himself to insignificance like other son-in-laws, some of whose names are even forgotten in the Tulsi family.

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
Life at Green Vale is a more distressing experience. After the spacious accommodation in Chase, the single room into which he moves with family and furniture leaves him feeling suffocated. Although Green Vale gives him a sense of freedom and importance (specially on Saturdays when wages were distributed), his actions in Green Vale are motivated by excessive insecurity both physically and mentally. Here, his dream to build a house begins to shape into reality. It is not that he wants a spacious place for himself, but he wants to be recognized as the father of his children, specially by his son, Anand. For Mr. Biswas, “Anand belonged completely to Tulsi” (216). Mr. Biswas’ first attempt to claim a portion of the earth fails. This dream to build a house meets the same result as the doll’s house had given to Savi, daughter of Mr. Biswas, on her birthday. Shama, his wife, had to break the house in order to quell the anger of the Tulsi and to satisfy their egos. Somehow, he starts building his house in Green Vale, but it is nowhere near the house of his dreams. Mr. Biswas moves into the finished rooms of his house thinking that the house is going to bring a changed state of mind, but the intensity of alienation and displacement continues and here, too, he fails to gain acceptance as an individual.

The second part of the novel focuses on Port of Spain, a place that opens new avenues for Mr. Biswas. The city provides him with opportunities to establish himself professionally, something he has long searched for. He becomes a reporter for the Trinidad Sentinel, with a salary of fifteen dollars a month, a job that helps him earn some respect from the Tulsi, too. Now he is not a troublemaker anymore to Mrs. Tulsi. When she offers him two rooms in her house in Port of Spain, he readily accepts. He is not a non-entity anymore. Shama, on her visits to Hanuman House, is able to assert proudly that the “children are afraid of him” (340). Mr. Biswas, too, never feels what he used to feel when Shama is pregnant for the fourth time, “one child claimed; one still hostile, one unknown. And now another” (227). His relations with Mrs. Tulsi gradually improve. There is no hostility from either side. For the time being, he forgets his wish to have a space of his own and enjoys his success and family life. His happiness, however, is short-lived. The takeover of the Trinidad Sentinel by new authorities, Seth’s break-up with Tulsi, and Mrs. Tulsi’s decision to live in Shorthills, all come as a blow upsetting the family hierarchy upon which the Tulsi family has used to run.

Through the family hierarchy of the Tulsi, Naipaul, in my view, tries to portray the typical Indian joint families where the authority of senior members are absolute. The absence of this authority means disintegration of the family. Here, too, in the Tulsi family, the disturbance of this hierarchy (due to the absence of Seth and Mrs. Tulsi) leads to dissension and disunity in the family. Instead of co-operation, a competition between Mr. Biswas’s son,
Anand, and Govind’s son, Vidiyadhar, follows. Mr. Biswas’ ambition to have a house re-surfaces after his shift to Shorthills. He has exhausted all his savings to build the house there. But the house is not conveniently situated. Shama has to walk a mile daily for shopping and there is also a problem of transportation. The children, too, want to return to Port of Spain. Even though the house is not the house of his dreams, it helps him realise his responsibility as a father and husband. The house for Mr. Biswas is more of a prison as it is situated far from the city. For Mr. Biswas “could not simply leave the house in Shorthills. He had to be released from it” (432). Thus, when Mrs. Tulsi offers him two rooms in Port of Spain he readily accepts the offer knowing that he has to share the house with Govind and Tuttle. After coming back to Port of Spain he finds people in a better economic position. Their money is shown in Tuttle and Govind’s suite, for example. But for Mr. Biswas, his fortune remains the same. The domestic situation also improves after the return of Owad, a calm that remains short-lived. Owad slaps Anand for answering him back and in humiliation Anand urges his father that “[they] must move. [He] cannot bear to live here another day” (551). Mr. Biswas, who has himself faced such humiliation innumerable times during his childhood, is deeply moved by his son’s appeal. He tells Shama that he is going to vacate the house very soon.

The reader may find a change in Mr. Biswas’ attitude towards having a house. Earlier the house was expected to lead to a discovery of his authentic selfhood and a proclamation of his identity. This time, owning a house comes out of the humiliation inflicted on his son and Mr. Biswas’s helplessness to protect his family. At that point, the house will be on a piece of land where he and his family can live with self-respect and dignity. Even his wife, Shama, agrees to leave the house although she earlier advocated living with the Tulsi family, saying, “I do not want anything bigger. This is just right for me. Something small and nice” (580).

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.
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). The language of the novel is simple and unaffected by literary fashion. The novel is part of Naipaul’s early phase as a novelist when he, through his novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*, seems to search for his own identity so that he can understand his own place in the world. In Naipaul’s own words, “Most imaginative writers discover themselves, and their word, through their work” (Naipaul, *Return* 211).
Works Cited


———. *Nobel Award ceremony acceptance speech*. In <http://www.kaleidoscope.caribseek.com/VS_Naipaul/Two_Worlds/index-print.shtml>
