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ORIGINAL ARTICLE





ROOTLESSNESS AND CRISIS OF IDENTITY IN NAIPAUL'S A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS

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Abstract:

A House for Mr.Biswas(1961),by V. S. Naipaul (b. 1932),portrays an individual's rootlessness, crisis of identity chiefly lying behind the desperate affirmation of traditional culture. Here the longing for house by the protagonist, Mr. MohunBiswas, is an object of desire created by the unhoused state of Seepersad Naipaul, long homeless under the roof of his wife's extended family. "Naipaul explores landscape in order to provide characters with a real home, a true place of belonging so that they will not continue to be homeless wonders, unsure of themselves and their fates. But the mythology of the land is tinged with embarrassment, nervousness, hysteria and pessimism, all products in some way of Naipaul's own history as a colonial with an ambiguous identity" (Keith, 23).

KEYWORDS:

Rootlessness, novel commences, homeless wonders, Indian view.

INTRODUCTION:

The novel commences with MohunBiswas, a sacked journalist breathing his last at the age of forty six in his irretrievable mortgaged house. He hails from a sugarcane workers' family in a village at midnight, an inauspicious hour and in the wrong way round, "a scrawny, pot-bellied baby with six fingers, one of which fell off when he had hardly yet got under way" (*A House*,14). The mid-wife said that the boy will eat up his own mother and father and the Pundit warned "That's [the six fingers] a shocking sing of course. The only that I can advise is to keep him away from trees and water. Particularly water"(A House,16).

Naipaul's way of projection of the concept of identity is, in many ways, Indian. He relates it with A House in this novel and weaves a beautiful carpet of symbols, thoughts, aspirations as well as realities. Naipaul is essentially carried by his Indian view of home as an institution of absorbing sentiment of a comprehensive personal character to include the best of all human values, best captured in living together in spite of its apparent contradictions and conflicts. He makes a comic drama of those contradictions and conflicts, and suggests the tragic failure of those struggling values, in Mr. Biswas living with the Tulsis striving hard to come out and live in his own home.

Shama is Mr. Biswas's oasis in the desert of the Hanuman House, though yet the oasis may have become itself also a part of the desert. Inspite of the clash of culture in Tulsidom, Mr. Biswas struggled for asserting his identity. The Hanuman House's occupants consist of the dozen daughters of Mrs. Tulsi and the husbands of the daughters and their children who rely upon the feedings of Mrs. Tulsi and have no identity

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of their own except being part of 'Tulsidom'. Their sense of self-pride and dignity is merged in the animal like existence, sustaining themselves on food, shelter and clothes given out to them by the central authority: "In return they were given good, shelter and a little money ... their names were forgotten; they became Tulsis" (A House,97). The colonial rule of the Tulsis had only one aim to absorb the identities of the inmates of the house with least dissent and rule. But the advent of Mr. Biswas in the Hanuman House brings in the contagion of rebellion which starts the epic journey of Mr. Biswas on the road of self-assertion and an identity of his own among the bovines of the Tulsidom.

The unwanted and unnecessary man, Mohun becomes an alien insider in the family and its establishment. The TulsiFortess, Hanuman House, symbolizes the traditional and the conventional Hindu world abounding in all sorts of ritualistic vagaries and superstitious hypocrisies. It is an abode of sham and pretension which is no better than a trap. The unromantic picture etched in Mr. Biswas's mind is symptomatic of the migrant's realization of the bitter truth about the pitfalls of such a life. All the hopes and aspirations seem to dash down.

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. But the old Hindu culture as typified by the Tulsi clan is by no means sacrosanct or inviolable. Mr. Biswas is nothing for them except another slave at the mercy of the Tulsi clan. He avoids everybody's company and decides to remain aloof from the uproar of the Tulsis and builds up an anxiety to liberate himself from the shackles but in vain. He tries to rebel against the authority but is suppressed with a heavy hand. When Govind, one of the brothers-in-law of Shama, advises Mr. Biswas to give up the present job of a sign-painter for becoming a driver, he retorts back: "Give up sign-painting? And my independence? No boy. My motto is : paddle your own canoe" (A House, 107). He tries to assert his independence and is beaten for his protesting against the rule. Vexed by his constant criticism, Mrs. Tulsi and Seth dispatch Mr. Biswas to the Chase, a cluster of mud huts in the heart of sugarcane area. He is supposed to establish a grocery shop there. Though this arrangement is of great humiliation to Mr. Biswas, he is elated for the time being because he has enough freedom to live with his family where meal is "prepared in the house which was his own" (A House, 146).

A shift from Hanuman House to the Chase is a sort of homing for a man who bartered away his liberty by marriage, a marriage that made him a part of the Tulsi establishment at a heavy cost of his freedom of mind and choice. The Indian concept of homing began drawing on their shift from Hanuman House to the Chase. The Chase is not really Mr. Biswas'schoice, it is Hanuman House's choice to keep a troublesome son-in-law apart from the home Republic. Mr. Biswas accepts it as a first step to freedom and an opportunity to live an intimate life with Shama. Mr. Biswas considers his stay at this place only as "a pause, a preparation", a prelude to a better future. The immediate problem for him is that the shop business is not thriving upto his expectations; the villagers want things on credit without any urgency for returning the balance. Subsequently, his venture as a grocery shop owner also yields fruitless results and he is forced by Mr. Seth to burn the shop to claim at least the insurance money. Yet, he has the unconquerable wish "that some nobler purpose awaited him, even in this limited society" (A House, 182). The sense of utter identity crisis deepens further when his first child is born at the Hanuman House. He wants to name his daughter in his own affectionate way as Sarojini, Lakshmi or Kamala. But his request is turned down by the Tulsi household and the baby is named simply Savio Not only that, further humiliation is added to his status because Mr. Seth writes the occupation of the father on the birth certificate as labourer. Even while at Green Vale, the thought of his own house is never out of his mind and keeps on pestering him every now and then. The desire for his own home is parallel to the insatiable desire of the immigrant to possess a habitation amidst the ambivalent discourse of colonialism, a way to-self-determination and self-rule.

Mr. Biswas's gift to Savi is not entertained by others as it evokes their jealousies and finally it is broken; however, this event persuades him to leave his family behind at Arwacas and run away to the capital city of Trinidad, Port of Spain. For the first time after his marriage, he completely frees himself from the Tulsi household and musters up enough courage to make his life worthwhile with his own space: "He was going out into the world, to test it for its power to frighten. The past was counterfeited, a series of cheating accidents. Real life, and its especial sweetness, awaited, he was still beginning" (A House,305). In the streets of that city, an intensely fresh awakening dawns on him, so far, he has seen only a cluster or a group of people living together in Hanuman House without any identity, but now "he saw the city a made up of individuals, each of whom had his place in it" (A House,316). In port of Spain, he wants to give a free play to his creativity by becoming a sign-painter again. This job leads him to the office of the Sentinel and a desire for writing, suppressed for long suddenly sprouts in his soul. Mr. Biswas is appointed a reporter with the sentinel. His humorous pieces and caricatures, along with his photograph, appear frequently in the paper and he becomes suddenly well-known. After this new found status, Mr. Biswas wants to "recover his family from Mrs. Tulsi" (A House,327). There, then, is a compromise that Shama and children would go to Mr. Biswas who has to live in the town house of Mrs. Tulsi paying her a rent of eight dollars. In addition, Shama

has' to collect rents from the other tenants too. This change in the life of Mr. Biswas has also recovered some of his lost self, that is evident even in the behaviour of Shama, who is showing "a wifely interest even in the clothes worn by him" (A, House,330). This new found glory gives further fillip to his writing; sentence generates sentence in quick succession, one good paragraph leads to another better one, resulting into a powerful journalistic mastery. He is, therefore, promoted to the rank of an investigator of the destitutes and the downtrodden, which is stepped In Irony considering his own situation as a destitute. N. ShardaIyer points out the following fact in this regard:

For Naipaul, the West Indies races that have been uprooted form their original societies have not produced a new culture, to replace what was lost. They have been abandoned In Trinidad, with little in common and without the various resources needed to create an energetic new society. Naipaul is interested in what happens to an individual, in colonial ethos In the psychology of circumscribed individuals. His concern is mainly with how men and women respond and react to their environment and how in doing so they project a sense of themselves. The displaced Indian finds himself in a complicated colonial situation where the act of living is precarious and uncertain and the individual is assailed constantly by the worst fear of being left behind.(133)

In many ways Mr. Biswas is an archetypal figure. He is described as stranger, visitor and wanderer. Weak and frequently absurd, he is recognized in Hanuman House as a buffoon, and his role of the fool is one which he at times accepts in humiliation. Nevertheless, he is bitterly opposed to the idea. He is an artist and his art is the only aspect of him that the Tulsis really admire, not realizing that it is the expression of the very personality they detest. Whenever Mr. Biswas is attacked by the sense of life as meaningless void, he immediately turns to his paint brushes and tries to create something against the emptiness. He is an unimportant man who in many ways, is even petty, but the complete story of his life turns out to be greater than the sum of its mundane parts. Gordon Rohler detects universal implications in terms of his highly personal struggle:

Biswas is Everyman, 'wavening between identity and non-entity, and claiming his acquaintance with the rest of them....If Biswas represents all the things I feel he does, it is because he is fully presented as a person whose very 'quick and idiosyncrasy we know, in a world whose every sight, sound and smell is recorded with fidelity and precision.(84)

His natural reaction to stress is to escape; when he fears insecurity he runs to the rigidly structured Tulsi's house; when he feels his individual identity threatened by the communal pressures there, he returns to the uncertainties of the disorganized world outside. It is not that he is indecisive, he just equivocates because he cannot find a satisfactory middle ground between the extremes. The protagonist is full of hope, however, he is not sure of his luck; as it deluded him during his habitatingShorthills. Fire destroys most of the structure and Mr. Biswas is again from where he had started, a nowhere man: a man with a wife and four children but without a roof of their own on their heads.

For, Mr. Biswas the course of owning a house of his own, even at this moment of time, does not run straight. Mr. Biswas has to again gravitate towards the house at Port of Spain owing to the return of Owad, the younger Tulsi son from England. Owad, with his intellectual pretentions, tries to dictate over Mohun and his family. In one such enterprise, he humiliates Anand, Mohun's son. Anand being a sensitive and emotional boy, feels subdued and scorned. The incident fans the flames of rebellion in Mohun again and he goes for his house again. He borrows money from Ajodha at eight percent interest and buys a house in Sikkim Street for five thousand dollars from a solicitor's clerk. He is sold a fragile house by the solicitor's clerk, but Mr. Biswas does not bother much and as an ingrained optimist he, despite being burdened by loan and dogged by poor health, feels elated. He seems to show the outside world, his triumph in finding a centre transitioning from the margIN. Here, Naipaul gets an opportunity to comment upon the diasporic subject's occasional fulfillment and sense of victory at the acquisition of a habitation and identity. This identity, always eluding, finally dawns upon him after numerous struggles and the conscious realization of his agoruizing social past. Mr. Biswas is stirred little bit at the flimsy condition of the house in which: "The staircase was dangerous; the upper floor sagged; there was no back door, most of the windows didn't close; one door could not open...." (A House, 12). But Mr. Biswas's petty renovations and self-designed changes of the house never hide the exultation of his ultimate victory.

Naipaul's work is of utmost relevance in a world in which we are all in a sense exiles. He has explored with great sensitivity the predicament of the exile- the pain of homlessness and loss of roots. His ruthless adherence to his own dark vision, his refusal to pretend to an optimism he cannot feel, gives a compelling persuasive power to his depressing fictional world. He has no comforting message, only the bleak knowledge that in today's rapidly changing world, the yearning for permanence can never be more than an unfulfilled ache - "everyone is far from home". The exile's basic response to his condition is a search for identity, his writing is a process of self-discovery. Cut off from his home he uses words to rebuild the lost home in fictional terms. The poetic tinge of the description facilitates the blissful mental state of Mr.

Biswas. Even on his death bed, he feels relieved to think that he was breathing his last in his own house:

_.. he was struck again by the wonder of being in his own house... Instead of being condemned, as before, to

retire the moment, he got home to the crowded room in one or the other of Mrs. Tulsi's houses, crowded with Shama's sisters, their husbands, their children. As a boy, he had moved from one house of strangers to another; And now at the end he found himself in his own house, on the half-lot of land, his own portion of the earth. That he should have been responsible for this seemed to him, in these last months, stupendous. (A House,02)

The yearning for home, for roots and stability is deeply embedded in the human psyche and it is not easy to turn one's back to the past. His early works are to a large extent an attempt at defining his own situation and seeking an answer to the problem that hampered him at the start "I didn't know who I was and how I came to be on this tiny island to Trinidad" (Nobel Lecture). From this position of total deracination, he turned his attention to other lost individuals in the half definition too. That is why to Mr. Biswas nothing would have ached more than to die without having claimed to die on his own portion of earth:

How terrible it would have been, at this time, to be without it (house): to have died among Tulsis, amid 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 earth; to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccomodated.(08)

His wife and children start valuing him and he feels highly relieved at the time of his death. The novel, ending with the acquisition of a house by Mr. Biswas finally, after numerous trials and tribulations confirms the efforts and courage displayed by an ordinary man to strike a rapport with his hostile environs. The situation, which had never been conducive to Mr. Biswas and which had always stymied him, finally quench his thirst for the simulation of his own country. The country, here by connotes the place of retreat and possessive reverberations. The novel speaks of the yearnings and anxieties, which beleaguer any migrant and which alter the premises of the earliest conceived notions of homes and abroad. Thus, the owning of the house transforms itself into a victory over the colonial rule and the assertion of one's individuality. Gamini Salgado's observation is that

The house represents not only a recognizable location and identity for the displaced second generation colonial out of sympathy with his Indian roots and unable to identify with his new surroundings. It also stands for the acceptance of the roles of husband, father and breadwinner which both circumstances and temperament invite Mr. Biswas to resist for so long. It is only when that resistance is abandoned that Mr. Biswas succeeds in attaining a home which survives him and can become a point of growth for the new generation of Savi and Anand.(101)

Mr. Biswas is not the only marginalized character of the novel troubled by a series of misfortunes. Even his wife Shama, though a Tulsi daughter, is also equally marginalized. She herself knows that she is "only an actor in a force and nothing else" (A House, 197). She has no authority worth the name in the Tulsi household and no affection from her husband. Mr. Biswas had married her at the spur of the impulse and nothing more. However, it is only in the end that Shama achieves some recognition in the Biswas household. Shama's widowed sisters are even worse. There is a time in his professional career when Mr. Biswas has to investigate the case of deserving destitutes. He is shocked to find Sushila and a few other widows of the Tulsi house surrounding him for a certificate of destitute so that they can get some relief. As they are relatives, Mr. Biswas cannot recommend their cases and so all are crestfallen: "The five widows were silent. For sometime they remained immobile, staring at Mr. Biswas until their eyes were blank" (A House, 472). Dehuti, the younger sister of Mr. Biswas, is another marginal character in the novel who takes a step to liberate herself from the clutches of society, but lands nowhere. Nature and luck have never been kind to her. Fatherless and daughter of a destitute mother and no charm visible on her face, she has no chance of getting a good match. An unnecessary wait would have turned her into an old maid, she runs away with Ramchand, a yard-boy of low caste working in the household of Tara. Even Ramchand gains some financial independence in Port of Spain, social acceptability still eludes him. As one of Tulsi women comments on his brashness when he comes to see ailing Mr. Biswas: "However much you wash a pig", Chinta said, "you can't turn it into a cow" (A House, 314).

Bhandat, another relative of Mr. Biswas, is yet another character who has lost his identity in the alien land. When incharge of the rum shop of Mr. Ajodha, he used to abuse and beat Mr. Biswas. But when he becomes old and lives with his Chinese mistress in a slum of the city, he has to beg Mr. Biswas for enlisting him as a deserving destitute. Although Mr. Biswas is moved by the squalor in which Bhandat resides, he is unable to recommend his name as he is his relative. There are, then, unnamed people of Indian origin, mostly farmers and workers, gathering every evening in the open space before Tulsi to share their grief. Hovering between their present predicament and their yearning to return to India, but being checked by the apprehension of the unknown, these rootless people are the most marginal characters in the novel. In fact, Mr. Naipaul has to struggle himself in life to rise above his marginal social status. Most of Naipaul's

writings issue from a desire to understand his position m the world. The unique combination of circumstances which related him to three societies, and yet left him with a deep sense of homlessness, undeniably play a pre-dominant part in shaping his sensibility and determining his writing career. The story of Mr. Biswas's career from being a fatherless, homeless child of six to becoming a father of four, established In a house of his own at the time of his death, is a story not only of Trinidadian born Indian, MohunBiswas but also the social history of the Indian community in Trinidad and by extension in the West Indies.

The sense of belonging is a pre-requisite of assuming an identity. The 'House' in this novel is a symbol not for 'rootedness' but for freedom- freedom from slavery and oppression. This much needed freedom explains the predicament of all expatriates, immigrant people who are largely dispossessed of their past. This is written with in the great tradition of humanist novel in the post-colonial era, while writing the novel, the empirical self (i.e., biographical 'self) goes extinct and the 'implied self (i.e. the point of view embodied in the work) emerges. Naipaul's father's story becomes the story of any post-colonial man displaced from his origin by chance or choice. The 'unhoused' condition creates a kind of uncertainty among the people of contemporary diaspora and hence, there is a need for overcoming this uncertainty by owning 'a house'. In spite of autobiographical design of the novel, it succeeds in transcending that individual 'self by universalizing the issue of 'alienation' and 'rootlessness' in the postcolonial world. The nuclear unit of a bourgeois ideology is materialized as a house that is remembered as a home; the reach of empire rests in the adoption of its colony into its post-imperial fold. Mr. Biswas does not revolt against established customs because of social or political beliefs. His revolt is against any value system which denies the intrinsic importance of man, denies freedom and dignity. Mr. Biswas'ss heroic struggle to attain dignity and fulfill his aspirations, as reflected in his desire to own a house becomes an allegory of the attempt to emancipate oneself from colonial, determinist dependence. To him, a house is not simply where one lives; it is one's identity - national, cultural and spiritual.

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