



SEARCH FOR SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS IN V.S. NAIPAUL'S A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS

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ABSTRACT

V.S.Naipaul is, beyond doubt, a great master of fiction and literary device, a craftsman of style and imagery. His art consists in reducing complexities to simple images and creating original descriptions that are pregnant with suggestive possibilities. The author tries constantly to understand human condition. He appears to be worried about man's inclination towards lying and self-deception in his works. In all his writings Naipaul has focused on individuals attempting to escape fate. For Naipaul, fate belongs to a world of magic, myth and ritual where only the past exists but not history. According to him, it is history that provides a sense of wholeness and belonging to both people and nation. Many of Naipaul's fictional figures are at the mercy of social and political forces and also their own personal compulsions. They remain 'unhoused' in themselves and are, therefore, located on the borderlines of fixed and shifting identities, living half-lives prescribed by the colonial and postcolonial experience.

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Naipaul always wishes to be in a state of homelessness that provides him more opportunities and amenities for 'exploration.' This is in fact a predicament of a diasporic writer. His characters represent a world not moved by love but dominated by greed, conflict and futility. It is easy to recognize that the miseries and sufferings faced by Naipaul's protagonists have natural conformity with the experiences of people all over the world, living in an alien land dominated by a colonized society. Naipaul's works show the natural process of a man's life, which is the fusion of both happiness and sorrow, rough and sublime. His world is the world of the helpless nomadic migrants making an escape route from Africa or India to the West Indies, then to England and back again. One observes that even after three hundred long years, there is no society and no system of values in which these characters can take root. It is against such an indistinct and dissolving background that they try to seize upon something to give them permanence so as to arrest the flux in their lives.

Autobiography, thus, provides the raw material for all of Naipaul's novels. This paper attempts to analyze the minds of Naipaul's characters especially in **A House For Mr. Biswas** who bears a close resemblance to his creator. It is **A House for Mr. Biswas**, his magnum opus that has given him name and fame indisputably. The novel deals primarily with the protagonist's struggle to establish himself in a hostile environment through the ownership of a house and also with the decline of Hindu culture under the impact of Westernization.

Naipaul makes no attempt to present Mr. Biswas as a conventional heroic figure. In fact, it becomes apparent that the protagonist partakes many of the traits of an existential hero. As one accompanies Biswas in the journey of his life, one realizes that Biswas is at odds with the world around him. He is like



the modern man, absolutely alienated from society, and believes that there is no room for human values in a world where each individual has to struggle and suffer. Mr. Biswas, like Joseph Conrad's Jim, and like Naipaul's own Mr. Stone, lives in perpetual fear of insignificance and alienation. He chooses, at every step, the best step available to him but soon finds that he has been living in a world of illusion. And though he endeavours to find reality, it always eludes him. Biswas's perpetual quest for a house as home, conceptualizes the challenges and anxieties experienced by the diaspora. A house of his own, in this sense, constitutes for him a sense of belonging. This disturbing sense of exile, alienation and uprootedness are the malaise originally experienced by exiles like Naipaul and his father. In an extended sense, the feeling presages the many journeys undertaken by Naipaul himself and his arrivals at no fixed destinations.

The house in the novel stands for what life has denied to its lowborn hero in a poverty-stricken colony. Throughout the narrative, Mr. Biswas is presented as being haunted by the feeling of instability and oppression since his childhood as he is rendered homeless and frustrated by the accidental death of his father, Raghu. Naipaul gauges the personality of Biswas carefully and minutely. He is irascible and high-strung in disposition, often at fault in his quarrels with his wife Shama and her family. But he is also brave and tenacious and his wit generates a play of humour, which pervades the novel. Though the whole story is comical, it is of a different cast from Naipaul's early books.

The story points to the tragedy of a man who wears himself out, trying to fight against and finally adjust himself to the profound changes in his society and in his personal outlook and, who, before he is forty, considers his career closed and rests his ambition on his children. Mr. Biswas himself achieves little but his success lies in the fact that he leaves his children in a better position to go on and carve a place for them in a changing society. He is the first generation casualty of the tremendous transition in his immediate culture and environment. He begins with nothing and achieves only a little. Mr. Biswas, it seems, is persistent in his desire to comprehend the meaning of existence and make sense of his milieu. It is significant to note that here for the first time, Naipaul illustrates the rebellion of a weak, mediocre man, because writing about the West Indian society Naipaul has always undervalued the quality of rebellion in a world that he rejects as mediocre. Rebellion in Mr. Biswas is defined by his condition as a cultural, psychological and social orphan. Biswas assumes that because he is oppressed, he can be justified in his actions. This assumption enables him to justify some of the less pleasant aspects of his revolt such as kicking the pregnant Shama in the belly as he sees each new child as another trap. In fact he develops nausea at the idea of birth itself. "Almost immediately he began to hate her. Her pregnancy was grotesque; he hated the way she sat down: [. . .]. He hated it when she puffed and fanned and sweated in her pregnant way" (274). This nausea never quite abandons him. Once when he threw out Shama, he tells her, "Take your children and go away" (277).

Biswas's struggle with society in the form of the Tulsi family continues till the end and is never really resolved. The close communal life of the traditional Hindu family is remarkably conveyed by the author, along with Mr. Biswas's struggle against it. Fights, arguments and reconciliation abound in all detail as the Tulsi family-life is intricately analyzed. It is a life based on established rituals and sentiments. The hypocrisy and mercenary outlook of the Tulsis, antagonize Mr. Biswas because to accept the Hanuman House and its rule would be to have the soul of a servant and to acquiesce to slavery. The character of Mohan Biswas, the puny, insignificant hero with his all consuming and towering aspiration to own a house, and his pitiable



background impart the striking success to the novel. Biswas's complex and insightful story is the story of the community he belongs to. The novel is said to have a direct bearing upon the important modern problem of the "Crisis of identity". The crisis originates from the excruciating historical experience of slavery of various kinds. The novel explores the consciousness of the people who constitute a destitute culture and "carry about them the mark in their attitudes and sensibilities and convictions of the slave, the unnecessary man" (Walsh 71). It is clear that Mr. Biswas's persistent desire to understand life and to assert his identity in a chaotic world have been repeatedly thwarted. Persons like him are not allowed the luxury of stability and identity in the world they inhabit. It may be noted that Biswas himself is aware of his ambivalent position. He tells his son: "I am just somebody. Nobody at all. I am just a man, you know" (279).

This, then, obviously is the fate of men like Mr. Biswas, who are historically displaced and have the misfortune of living in a derelict land. Society offers very little possibilities to each one of them and he has therefore no option but "to balance his personal inadequacies against the contradictions of existence itself" (White 92). His elaborate poses, day-dreams, assertion of self and evasion of responsibility are the result of the cultural, social and psychological nowhere-ness produced by his position as an untalented second generation Hindu in the poverty-stricken colonial Trinidad. He is most appropriately an orphan. Beneath his self-laceration, play-acting and the assumption of the grotesque mask, lies a fear of the future and of objects and people. "The future he feared was upon him. He was falling into a void and that terror, known only in dreams, was with him as he lay awake at nights [. . .]" (227).

Biswas's rebellion may be of the small and the weak but his quest is none-the-less worthwhile. He tries to convince people like Govind that his fight is really theirs and his revolt is actually the one they should be making by and for themselves. The purity of motive, truth, instinct and necessity marks Biswas's struggle against an apparently indestructible system as phenomenal and makes his rebellion an affirmation of universal value. No one can deny the danger of regarding Biswas as a figure representing the Caribbean predicament. He is strongly individualistic and his limitations quite grave because he has been created by a writer who has a more contemporary sense of the themes of void, loneliness and absurdity, quite prevalent in modern European literature. Biswas tries to overcome the limitations imposed on him by putting up a relentless struggle against the forces that try to suppress his individuality. His struggle is a long and traumatic one but he is successful in his negotiation for space and finally fulfills his dream of having a house of his own – a stupendous achievement for a man of such limited and mediocre circumstances. As against the heroes and anti-heroes of Naipaul's novels, who finally reject their society, Mr. Biswas represents the multitudes who endure and make it home almost.

His protagonists and their experiences, Naipaul claims, are intensely personal to him. They are the outcome of his effort to come to terms with his own displacement and to understand his place in the world. Naipaul's heroes are men who, armed only with a flair for eccentricity and an extra dimension of sensitivity, feel incapable of reconciling themselves to the world in which they are born. Naipaul's novels, like his heroes, are the comic and tragic aspects of the search for identity and wholeness. His characters, therefore, naturally reflect V.S. Naipaul, the man, in many ways.



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