

# Diasporic Consciousness of the Descendents of Indentured laborers in Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*

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**Abstract-** The concept of ethnicity has been used in recent discourses to map cultural, social, political and national identities in the colonized world. V.S. Naipaul, a 20<sup>th</sup> century writer, is engaged in the exploration of the colonial experience through various realities of life. V.S. Naipaul is a multi-layered international writer and his grandparents were part of the huge dispersal of Indians to provide indentured labor for the British empire after the abolition of slavery. Naipaul himself is in self-imposed exile from Trinidad, his birth place, living in England but claiming never to feel at home anywhere. Naipaul's novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) focuses on the descendants of indentured laborers to achieve success for themselves and their children. *A House for Mr. Biswas* focuses on the literature of Diaspora, and shows the dislocation of an individual or a race and then the consequent alienation which leads to a sense of loss. The paper focuses on the life in Trinidad and identity in the context of Post-colonialism and displacement.

**Keywords-** colonized, dispersal, indentured, abolition, self-imposed, descendants, displacement.

The concept of Diaspora emerged in 1990s and it is as old as post colonial theory. In the domain of post-colonialism, different ethnic groups, based on their different original cultural heritages, have their ethnic cultural and historical specificities. The diasporic writing which is known as 'immigrant writing' experiences the clash of two cultures and/or the racial discrimination they undergo. Immigration proves a pleasant experience only to a few immigrants who succeed in assimilating themselves with the new geographical, cultural, social and psychological environment. To most of the diasporic writers, immigration is not a pleasant experience. The feeling of nostalgia, a sense of loss and anxiety to reinvent home obsess them, which finds an expression, consciously or unconsciously in their writings. Naipaul feels the necessity to define a personal identity in various ways. Hence, the condition of the dislocated and dispossessed is especially poignant and complicated because they cannot find a 'home' of their own. V. S. Naipaul himself experienced and repeatedly describes in his fiction, this particular urge. Throughout his life he has desired a place to identify with. From genealogical mining, especially in his homeland (the Caribbean), through the quest of his cultural roots (India), and finally to his place of education (England), he has attempted to search for his own identity. Being an Indian by ancestry, a

Trinidadian by birth, and Englishmen by education, V. S. Naipaul possesses a multi-cultural background.

V.S. Naipaul's journey from unnoticed birth in 1932 in a marginalized immigrant community in a colony which was "just a dot on the map of the world", to knighthood in 1993 and Nobel Prize in 2001, is just the kind of success story that Mr. Biswas reads so wistfully in his Samuel Smiles volumes. Mr. Biswas's own story, however, is not one of success but of continued struggle against circumstances that stifle ambition and crush the spirit. But, perhaps, viewed in the context of this limiting society, even Biswas's story becomes a success story of sorts.

The effects of the displacement of people, their forced migration, their deportation, their voluntary immigration can be witnessed in many of Naipaul's works. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the theme of diasporic concept is there and it runs throughout his writing. This novel displays a unique affection for the homeland of his birth. It deals with the historical period of colonialism and indenture and the experience of migration and displacement with respect to Trinidad. As a colonial, he has always needed to locate his place in the world through writing. Prolific and critical in both fiction and non-fiction, he presents colonial anxieties in his quest for self identity.

Naipaul frequently presents man's awareness of and links with the vegetation around him as reflected in his relationship with the land. At *The Chase*, Biswas "had not thought it worthwhile to plant trees that would bear flowers or fruits in two or three years", But in *Mrs. Tulsi's Port of Spain house*, so he does as he begins to think of the house as his own that "he made a garden and acquired new possessions." One afternoon he comes home to find his rose garden completely destroyed. The rose garden embodies the same aspirations as the doll's house and like the shattered doll's house the description of the ruined garden reflects Mr. Biswas's personal anguish. The pain is made worse by Seth's bitter reminder of his insignificance - present and past: "your father is a damn funny sort of man" he says to the children. "Behaving as though he owned the place. Let me tell you that when you children were born your father couldn't feed you". The family always remains vulnerable to such barbs. Some years later, when Anand asks Ajodha, Tara's husband, for a contribution to a charity fund, Ajodha says: you are a funny sort of a family. Father collecting money for destitute. You collecting for Polish refugees. Who collecting for you?"

*A House for Mr. Biswas* tells the story of a man's lifelong battle, with its ups and downs and his efforts to rise above a superstitious, conservative Hindu family, and the Creole society marked by poverty and chaos. Naipaul fictionalized his own history and regenerated his Caribbean society in a truly remarkable manner. Naipaul says: "At first I looked for this release in humour, but as the horizon of writing expanded. I sought to reconstruct my disintegrated society, to impose order on the world, to seek patterns, to tell myself-this is what happens when people are weak, I had to find the degree of intellectual comfort, or would have gone mad." Kenneth Ramchand notes, *A House for Mr. Biswas* "is the west Indian novel of rootlessness par excellence"

(<http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/40653186>), Naipaul's excellence is displayed when this theme of this can be applied to a number of subject and at different levels simultaneously.

The Hanuman House is described as a place where people live but instead of comfort, it reminds us more of a military barrack than a sweet home. "Hanuman House stood like an alien white fortress..... Bulky impregnable and blank.....the side walls were windowless." Mr. Biswas's fate took him to many different places, but he remained dependent on others for most of his life: "For the next thirty five years he was to be a wanderer with no place he would call his own, with no family except that which he was to attempt to create out of the engulfing world of the Tulsi. (40)

The novel points 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. The life of Mr. Biswas resemble the life of Naipaul himself, whose series of experience of exile and alienation while living in Trinidad seem to be portrayed through Mr. Biswas relentless struggle against the force 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 imaginary homeland.

In 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. Just as the individual is both a construction and a fixed entity, so the town is an imaginary place in the structure of identity. It is a novel which he created out of what he saw and felt as a child. In his famous novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*, V. S. Naipaul depicts the desperate struggle of Mr. Biswas to acquire a house of his own which is symbolic of an individual's need to develop an authentic identity.

V. S. Naipaul satirizes the social classes realistically such as the vivid, candid and straightforward presentation of the adherence to the level of low life. The Tulsi family and Hanuman House represent the old Hindu culture now coming under the influence of the alien western culture. The life story of Mr. Biswas shows a self respecting individual's rebellion against tyranny, the Tulsi family shows the interaction of two cultures, the old Hindu culture as represented by the Tulsi family and the alien western culture as represented by the Port of Spain and by such individuals as Dorothy, the Christian girl whom Shekhar marries, and Dorothy's cousin whom Owad marries. The interaction between these two cultures is designed to show that old Hindu culture which the Indian Hindu had taken with them to Trinidad cannot long withstands the influence of the alien western culture. Of course the old Hindu culture is not completely absorbed by the western culture, but it is certainly weakened.

The Tulsi family is very orthodox, but its orthodoxy begins to crumble with the onset of western influences. Mrs. Tulsi, in ruling over her family, is helped in her task by Seth, her dead husband's brother. Seth and his wife Padma also live in Hanuman House where they enjoy a status as high as that of Mrs. Tulsi herself. We see how Shekhar (Tulsi's son) mixes Hindu customs with that of Christianity.

Naipaul's novel writing is a process of identity recovery undergoing a series of transformation. He does not adopt his Caribbean homeland, adopts a stage of mimicry in England, search for his cultural roots in India, and finally reconstruct his identity out of his multi-cultural uniqueness. The interaction between these two cultures designed to shows the old Hindu culture which the Indian Hindu had taken with them. Trinidad cannot long withstand the influence of the alien western culture. Of course the old Hindu culture is not completely absorbed by the western culture, but it is certainly weakened. In short Hanuman House is a microcosm of the old Hindu culture. He makes a voice not only for himself but also for other immigrated people. Cultural conflict is one of the most dominant themes of the novel.

"For every puja Mrs. Tulsi tried a different Pundit, since no pundit could please her as well as Hari. And no Pundit pleasing her, her faith yielded. She sent Sushila to burn candles in the Roman Catholic Church; she put a crucifix in her room; and she had Pundit Tulsi's grave cleaned for All Saints' day."

The first immigrant's generation attempt to hold their religious rules, but the member of the next generation mix Hindu religious rites with that of Christianity. The novel provides various instance of dilution of orthodox Hinduism. During the time of Christmas the Tulsi store becomes "a place of deep romance and endless delights..." When Pundit Hari dies, son in law of Mrs. Tulsi "ferociously Brahminical in an embroidered silk jacket, did the last rites." The organization of the Tulsi family in A House for Mr. Biswas has been critically singled out for being microcosm of a slave society. Satendra Nandan makes an extended observation of this aspect: "...Hanuman House is more immediately symbolic of the slave world. Mrs. Tulsi needs worker to build her empire. She, therefore, exploits the homeless and deprived fellow Hindus. She has grasped the psychology of the slave system. Like the Caribbean society, Tulsidom is constructed of a vast number of desperate families, gratuitously brought together by the economic need of the high caste minority. To accept Hanuman House is to acquiesce to slavery. Mrs. Tulsi, the cunning colonizer, justified her exploitation with her foxy explanation that she is really doing her subjects well. Seth, in his blucher boots, is the slave master: a brutal and brutalizing symbol. Mr. Biswas rebellion against such social and personal slavery provides the motivating thrust of the book."

He has depicted societies that are beset with the problems of neo-colonialism and portrayed the people living in the house with frightening insight. Naipaul depicts the disintegration of the society of Indian immigrants. In Trinidad under the influence of borrowed culture of mimicry and hybridity, the novel exemplifies the dynamic and fluid nature of social space by depicting such spaces as constantly being negotiated and hybridized, and also shows the articulation of social meanings and identities in a diasporic existence.

Mohun Biswas goes on struggling for his dignity against a background without standards or order. He achieves his biggest success in the late days of his life when he owns a house, with numerous flaws. The house provides not only the shelter, but also identity and the power to claim

self respect. With owning a house, his lifelong quest for an identity comes to an end. Turning full circle from the childhood scabs and sores, the badge of neglect and poverty which mark Biswas out for failure and an uncertain future to the ultimate heart problem and death by heart attack, V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* opens a window to chronicle the history of a society that is intrinsically and endemically sick.

The spirit of exile and alienation enriches the diasporic writer to seek rehabilitation in their writing and establish a permanent place in the mind of readers. Thus the novel shows the disintegration of the Hindu culture of the immigrant Indians in a multicultural space where the idea of a stable cultural identity is questioned throughout. *A House for Mr. Biswas* is therefore, individual attempt to overcome "homelessness". The writer sees the character as victims of his environment. In the diasporic literature, the theme of rootlessness and alienation is predominant and Naipaul's novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* is most prominent among the English writing Caribbean writers. His works deals with narrow perspective in small, backward rural societies to modern cities, but his theme remained unchanged which is rootlessness and alienation.

In this novel Naipaul depicts the disintegration of the society of Indian immigrants in Trinidad under the influence of borrowed culture of mimicry and hybridity. The novel exemplifies the dynamic and fluid nature of social spaces by depicting such spaces as constantly being negotiated and hybridized, and also shows the articulation of social meanings and identities in a diasporic existence.

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