Cultural Conflict and Quest for Identity in Naipaul's *A House for Mr.Biswas*

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ABSTRACT

The paper studies the impediments in imprinting self-identity in V.S. Naipaul's *"A House for Mr. Biswas".* The terms self-identity and identity crisis are given special focus. This paper deals with identity crisis of the protagonist Mr. Mohun Biswas and narrates how he faces the struggles throughout his entire life so that he may gain independence and an identity of his own by building his own house. The identity crisis of a few other characters are also given focus. This paper justifies the entire idea of the theme of the quest for Identity, Alienation, Rootlessness, and freedom. In this novel, Mr. Biswas tries to overcome the restrictions imposed on him by putting up a relentless and untiring struggle against the forces that try to suppress his individuality. V.S. Naipaul has always represented a denial of the Third World sprit. Though imperialism has passed and the colonies have attained an independent status, these third world nations a lot of problems that affect economic, social and political life.

"A house for Mr. Biswas" (1961) is said to be V.S. Naipaul's masterpiece. It deals with the life and death of Mr. Mohun Biswas, an Indo-Trinidadian, whose life story has few similarities to Naipaul's own. Many of his writings are inextricably merged with his personal experiences. Though it is not an autobiographical novel, it has autobiographical elements in it. Before exploring the novel, we should have a thorough and complete knowledge of the personal struggles, sufferings, conflicts

and confrontations between V.S. Naipaul and his society, his family background and the postcolonial diasporic pluralism. It can be as a 'historical novel' or a 'West Indian novel of rootlessness', in which Mr. Mohun Biswas depicts the character of Naipaul's father and Anand represents Naipaul himself. Naipaul's life was disorderly and also directionless due to his father and their family. Naipaul is always conscious of the sense of history and his Indian roots that shaped and designed his thoughts about the country of his moorings, there by making him conscious of Postcolonialism and Diasporic hybridity, in addition to the cultural pluralism.

In this novel, Mr. Biswas by a relentless and untiring struggle against the forces that try to suppress his individuality. Though his struggle is a long one, but he is successful. Happiness for him is only temporary. After many problems and failures, he finally fulfils his dream of having a house - a great achievement for a man who has such poor prospects. This novel deals with the never-ending search of an individual for his/her own identity. Mr. Mohun Biswas was born in the village of Trinidad at midnight, in an abnormal way with six fingers. This abnormality is an unlucky sign. A Pundit prophesizes that Mr. Biswas is the first hurdle that iocks his true identity and prevents him from having a free and comfortable life.

Just after the birth of the protagonist, the family is split by circumstances. His two brothers are sent to remote places in order to earn a living. Mr. Biswas, along with his mother, go to his sister Dehuti, who has been taken care of by Tara and her husband Ajodha. From there, he is sent to the Canadian Mission School to learn and following that, to Pundit Jairam and to Ajodha's rum-shop to work. Due to some clashes with Bhandat, Ajodha's brother, Mr. Biswas moves out, allowing him the first chance of independence, with him deciding to choose his own job of sign-painting. "Give up sign-painting? And my independence? No, boy. My motto is: paddle own Canoe" (A House for Mr. Biswas 107). Until this moment, Mr. Biswas was a small boy who was in need of education and family support which are the basic foundations for human life. Mr. Biswas also experience a fluctuating kind of emotional love and care from his family that creates a feeling of dissatisfaction

inside him. When he realizes that he is no longer a little one to be pampered, Mr. Biswas decide to move out ad instead begin the search for creating a self-identity of his own and achieve social freedom in his own way, as seen by his choice of sign-painting. But soon, even that job is considered as a temporary one.

Meanwhile in the next section of the novel, Mr. Biswas goes through an important phase of life in which he is trapped in Hunuman house. With the expectation to start a family of his own, he is forced or marry Shama, the sixteen year old daughter belonging to the Tulsi family. He is forced to moved into their house. There he feels a lot of dejection. He has no proper job and thus no proper way of earning his own money. Because of this, he is ridiculed by the Tulsis. He becomes quarrelsome and feels empty living in Hanuman House. When he gets a chance to move away, he looks at this opportunity as a triumph. Mr. Biswas feel happy to asset his individuality. Yet again though, it doesn't last long. He sees that his journey is going to be 'a chase'- one that is going to be extremely difficult. "chase was a pause, a preparation, real life was to begin for them soon and elsewhere" (A House for Mr. Biswas 147).

A sense of desolation heightens the tensions between Shama and himself. The constant disappointments weigh on his relationship, especially the one with his wife. His multiple change of jobs is the main reason. The most significant being when he is forced to become a 'Sub-overseer' in the Tulsi estate while earning twenty five dillars a month at Green Vale. There, he feels that the single room, in which he has to live with family members and their furniture, makes him feel suffocated. He develops a general phobia of people. His fears are fears of a man who has yet to find his place in an environment that is trying to disown him. Later with some hope, he starts to build a new house of his own. This is set as the first attempt that Mr. Biswas is taking to claim a portion of the easrth that fails to bear fruit. He tries to start building the house that he had gifted his daughter, Savi which was broken apart by Shama to pacify her people. Again, he becomes dependent on the

Tulsis and gets an interense feeling of "Alienation". "I am just somebody. Nobody at all" (A House for Mr. Biswas 270)

Later, when he is expected to vacate his living room for Owad, Mrs. Tulsi's son, Biswas leaves the house, with no word to Shama and accidently boards a bus without knowing where to go and what to do. This part of the novel is like a turning point for Mr. Biswas who is trapped in darkness and finds a little light by reaching the post of Spain and starts a new life as a journalist. He becomes a reporter for the 'Trinidad Sentinel' with the payment of fifteen dollars a month. This new identity, changes the attitude of the Tulsis towards him and he feels that he has finally won a victory when two rooms are offered by them at Shor thills. Suddenly, however, 'The Sentinel' is taken over and Mr. Biswas finds a new job in the Welfare Department. It is not economically uplifting. But then, another crisis erupts among Owad, Anand, Mrs. Tulsi and Mr. Biswas that results in him vacating the house. "He could not simply leave the house in Shorthills. He had to be released from it"(A House for Mr. Biswas 432).

Despite such an environment of confusion and fears, Mr. Biswas manages to get a loan and buy a house belonging to the Solicitor's clerk in the Port of Spain. Though he finds many problems with the house and feels cheated that he has been sold a defective house. Mr. Biswas is relieved and satisfied. In spite of depression and feeling pressure to repay his loan, Mr. Biswas perseveres. Finally he finds fulfilment and gains freedom living out his last days in his own house finally dies at the of forty six. "I do not want anything bigger. This is just right for me. Something small and nice" (A House for Mr. Biswas 580). Normally, Naipaul's characters are portrayed as rural and poor. They have to undergo a lot of trials and tribulations for a long time, in order to gain for themselves a free and fair existence. But unfortunately, they will not be able to cross the boundary of colonial society. Mr. Biswas's life is a series of minor disasters, each of which can be considered as an angry rebuttal of uncongenial society that exhausts him early in his middle age itself. His final peace is as much the

consequence of a personal triumph as of exhaustion, sickness, failure and acceptance. Man becomes the victim of his society rather than its guide and beneficiary.

Mr. Biswas is a man on the margins; the stabilizing and sustaining experience of society has been snatched away him at an early age, leaving him an orphan. An experience of freedom coupled with an excessive insecurity motivates his actions throughout the novel. Being self-imprisoned, Mr. Biswas values his subjective freedom as the attainment of a personal vision. In the growth of Mr. Biswas from childhood to adulthood, we see the emerging pattern of his personality in conflict with his society. At last, released from the Tulsis, Mr. Biswas is trapped in his own home by his material inadequacies and his emotional dependence on his children.

On facing dejection in feeling the love of a family, further aggravated by the lack of motherly care in his early days, Mr. Biswas tries to get love and care from his own wife, Shama. This lack of support in Mr. Biswas's life creates an empty feelings in his heart. In this entire novel, the house that Mr. Biswas wants to build represents his inner desire to build his self-identity. The house symbolizes freedom and security. The house of his dream is highly symbolic. It is an archetypal symbol that represents 'stability and permanence'-that is something solid in life. Mr. Biswas, who is constantly being tortured by communal pressures and threatened by an unstructured society, is very much ready to assert his identity. A 'House' of Mr. Biswas's own, is a dominant metaphor that symbolizes order and identity. Apart from Mr. Biswas, there are other characters in the novel whose quests for identity can also be identified. The name of Mrs. Tulsi is unrevealed in the entire novel. This narrative technique shows that her identity is totally dependent on her dead husband, Pundit Tulsi. Shama too, feels completely secure under the shelter of Hanuman House. She doesn't make an effort to build her own identity as Mr. Biswas is trying to, because she is happy to be called a Tulsi.

Mr. Biswas builds his own house, it becomes important. It may not be as grand as the Tulsi's home, and it may have many flaws. But yet it is a better home. Even Mr. Biswas accepts it as it is, because it represents his own identity, "The sun went through the home and laid dazzling strips on the exposed staircase…" (A House for Mr. Biswas 572). This description of his own house differs from his description of the Hanuman House. His use of words such as 'bulky', 'blank', 'closed' to refer to the Tulsi home, while using words like 'sun' and 'dazzling' to describe his own house shows us how much his 'own' house represents his happiness and sense of fulfilment in the last days of his life.

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