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QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN IMMIGRANT WRITINGS

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Abstract:

If colonial experience has been as major source of creative inspiration for the immigrant writers, an equal contribution of creativity is from their immigrant experience. Canada is essentially a land of immigrants where almost everyone is an immigrant and similarly Trinidad has a mixed population of settlers who include English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Native Africans and Indians. Richler and Naipaul as members of the third generation of immigrants reflected the predicament of immigrants of different races in their novels. Thus their works embody the quest for identity which is the outcome of a sense of homelessness and a feeling of insecurity. The novels taken for discussion are Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Index Terms - immigrant writing, identity, quest.

The chief characters in the novels *Duddy* and *Biswas* share similar comparable qualities in their quest for ambitious and aspirations. At a very young age they are forced to work on their own. According to them attaining success includes acquiring material possessions, the deciding factor in determining the social position. Initiated into the adult world comprising of a mixture of cheats, brutes, millionaires, gentlemen and underworld dons, the protagonists had to find a secure way of their own in establishing their identity and self-respect. The most outstanding feature lays in the similarity of the protagonists' quest and their perseverance to achieve their respective goals. Enhanced with similar aspirations of property ownership and freedom, *Duddy* and *Biswas* were forced to take up menial jobs. From then on their propelling journey begins.

The protagonists in both the novels run with an incessant quest for land and house. Growing up on a St. Urbain Street in the heart of the Jewish ghetto of Montreal *Duddy Kravitz* is obsessed by his grandfather's saying "A man without land is nobody". *Duddy* intends to be somebody and so sets about earning money frantically with the intent of finally winning the land that will give him the place in the world he cannot otherwise possess. His grandfather, with whom he is close, suggests a goal in life but not the means by which this should be achieved. Left alone, *Duddy* responds to his society as a jungle where one must struggle to survive. As a school boy he survives by bullying others and by indulging in such dubious business activities as selling pornographic comics and stolen hockey sticks, but when he leaves the school for the larger society, he himself confronts exploitation and ridicule. While working at *Rubin's* resort he is baited and insulted by the snobbish McGill student *Irwin*. *Uncle Benjy* and *Cohen*, as businessmen remind *Duddy* that their world is "beautiful" in which men "eat each other up". Only 16 years young, *Duddy* is aware that he must awaken prepared for the combat.

Even within the family Duddy finds he must struggle for affection and recognition. Everyone ignores Duddy and dismisses him as an unpromising cipher, except his grandfather who tries feebly to compensate for the indifferent treatment Duddy receives from the others. Max, his father and Uncle Benjy dote on his brother Lennie, the designated doctor of the family. Very early in life Duddy becomes conscious of his father's indifference to him. While working at Rubin's resort, Duddy receives no letter or visits from his father and cannot help recalling that when Lennie once worked at a holiday camp, his father wrote to him and visited him regularly. Towards the end of the novel, a relatively older, more cynical Duddy tells his dying uncle Benjy about his sense of always being unnecessary and unaccommodated within the family. "You know as a kid I always liked Auntie Ida. But I remember when you used to come to the house, you always brought a surprise for Lennie. I could have born dead as much as you cared". And recalling how uncle Benjy scorned him when he worked one summer at his factory, he complains bitterly. "I wanted you to like me. You treated me like dirt". His brother Lennie simply sees him as a "money-crazy-kid" and is ashamed of him. Duddy discovers that Lennie had never mentioned to any of his friends that he had a brother. This rejection, alienation from family and society and a loss of identity drive Duddy to feel the need to prove himself to his belittling community. So he sets himself on the path of his grandfather's phrase "A man without land is nobody" mistaking the old man's idealistic dream for material pursuit. His grandfather's words act as a catalyst for his quest to possess land and to establish an identity.

Duddy is haunted, reverberated, and possessed by the idea of possessing the land. His striving for recognition and survival instills in him a sense of being inconsequential and dispensable. He who has no chance of succeeding academically or socially interprets the admonition of his grandfather to mean that with land comes identity, dignity and power. So Duddy's program for prosperity begins with a job of a waiter in a hotel of Laurentian Mountains, where he sees that land and the lake when he goes out with a French Canadian Chambermaid Yvette. The sight of the lake and land landed him in the sea of immense joy evident of the sense of security, freedom and shelter. He embarks on a plan to buy the land so that he can build a lakeside community and give his zeyda, the farm he longs for. To raise the money he takes up movie making. He worked day and night and was trying to do three or four things at a time. He educated himself on language, business, administration and other self-improvement books. Going bankrupt at one juncture he gives up the idea of buying the land but resumes the idea by going to the extent of selling the house given to him by his uncle Benjy as an ancestral preserve to be taken care of. In this attempt to raise money he asks his father who refuses to lend him. Duddy exhausted every other means of obtaining money. Finally he goes to the extent of forging a check of Virgil and buys the land. He hesitates for a long time before encashing Virgil's cheque and that was a crucial moment he badly needed money to realize his dream. But at the same time Duddy refused to accept his uncle's generous financial offer which would have made it possible for Duddy to make the final payment on the land. This refusal shows that Duddy desires not just to secure land but to do so, on his own. He feels that if getting the land is all that stands between him and being "nothing" he will get it. His fighting spirit and obsession for the possession of land gives us a relative indication of the continuing fight by the Jews for their Promised Land.

In the end Duddy gets all the land he wants but at the cost of alienating the people who have loved him. His grandfather refuses to take the plot offered to him. When Duddy feels he is desolate, the waiter at hotel hands over bill and asks: "As you the Mr. Kravitz who just brought all the land around Lac St. Pierre?" Kravitz replies. "Yeah, em...I haven't any cash on me...Daddy can you..." The waiter politely say, "That's ok, we'll mark it". There occurs a sudden change in Duddy. He grabs his father and shouts in joy that he is recognized. He acquires the land in the end and feels that he is a real somebody with a status-he is recognized. What we see and what Duddy clearly sees is that by the very fact of acquiring land he has achieved a metamorphosis. He has been raised by that one act from the class who pays cash and struggle hard to get it, to that of those who operate on credit. Like his uncle he has made the leap from the realm of the workers to that of the proprietors.

Similarly Mr. Biswas's longing for a house is the predominant theme in the novel A House for Mr. Biswas. Biswas's long cherished hope to build a house of his own is not only to fulfill his human necessity but also to assert his identity, freedom and position in the society. The sense of alienation that is forced on him is the outcome of the feeling that he is unfortunate man who carried ill-luck with him since his birth. Tormented by alienation and insult, his self-respect drives him towards the quest for a house of his own.

After having failed in his efforts to establish himself either as an assistant to pundit Jairam or as an assistant at a rum shop, Biswas finds himself married to Sharma, a daughter of the Tulsi family at Hanuman House. In his wife's house Biswas finds that it would be necessary for him to lead a life of servility and utter subordination to Ms. Tulsi and Mr. Seth. Unlike the other inhabitants of the house, Biswas, as self-respecting and independent-minded man, rebels against the system which demands an unquestioning obedience. Biswas's refusal to conform to the code at Hanuman House leads to the expulsion from the house. He is sent to take charge of the Tulsi food House. There he finds himself ill-equipped to deal with the customers and also he is unhappy with the accommodation given to him. He feels insulted when he is refused the freedom to name his first born. He realizes that only a steady job with which he can stand on his own and only a house of his own could give him the freedom and dignity he aspires for.

Biswas like Duddy is the product of a disintegrated family. After his father's death, his two elder brothers were sent away to a distant place to work on a sugar estate, his sister Dehuti is sent to the house of his Aunt Tara to work as a domestic servant. As a boy Biswas had moved from one house of strangers to the other house of strangers. At one point of time in the novel, he asks his mother, "why do you keep on sending me to stay with other people..." "I am going to get a job of my own and I am going to get my own house too. I am finished with this". So saying Biswas leaves the house in search of job. This motive is seen compelling him throughout the novel to act, for it becomes the purpose, aim and aspiration of his life. His quest for a job and a house is forced by his search for love, freedom, security which he missed in his childhood. At a deeper level the quest stands for a sense of belonging, to make one's indelible mark on the world.

Biswas is very much resolved to pursue in his aspiration which can be traced as different stages in his life. At Green Vale, Biswas cannot adjust himself to his life in the Tulsi barracks. As the conditions in barracks are awful and intolerable, Biswas thinks it is necessary to build a house of his own. Now this house which he decides to build would be more than a place where he can live. The new house would symbolize his individuality he must maintain against the rest of the world. But he doesn't have money for the purpose and yet, owing to his desire for independence and for living in a neat house, he embarks upon the project of building a house, which leads only to a feeling of frustration, because the house cannot be completed. Only one room in the house of which he is certainly the owner, is inhabitable. Though Biswas moves into it, he suffers from loneliness as he is not able to take his family with him. He wants to fill the gap in the house to make it a home. Moreover the house built by Mr. Biswas at Green Vale is burned down by the laborers who had been hostile to him from the very beginning. Consequently he suffers a nervous breakdown, unable to see his house being destroyed.

After his recovery he resumes his idea of building up a house. So to earn money Biswas like Duddy, tries his hands at several jobs. Apart from his apprenticeship as a pundit and an assistant at a rum shop he works as supervisor for the Tulsis at Green Vale, joins as a newspaper reporter in Port o Spain, finally settles as a Community Welfare Officer. Meantime he builds a house of his own again at Shorthills and moves into it, this time with his family. For Biswas his marriage will be successful only when he tears himself and his family from the grip of the Tulsis, after all a man gains his identity through his relationship with his wife and children. His wife's return brings back Biswas's liveliness and comfort and makes him feel a proud husband and father. But unfortunately this house also catches fire and is partially destroyed. He again has to shift himself into the Tulsis, but feels sorry for having done so because they make him vacate by sending him notice. So as a final attempt he decides to buy a house for which he has to borrow money from Ajudha, Aunt Tara's husband. The house is afterwards found to have many defects and is in need of extensive repairs. Some more money has to be spent on it but Biswas feels that at least the house is his own. His family moves into the house, which they have secured at a heavy cost. Biswas though doesn't show any streak of brilliance or smartness as Duddy, his greatness lies in the fact that he has been able to achieve his dream and preserve his dignity.

At last Biswas becomes the proud possessor of a house though it is irretrievably mortgaged. The apparent ownership is only a partial success of Mr. Biswas in his life time which has to be carried on by his children. However there is a sudden burst of good luck for the family when his son gets scholarship to go to England and his daughter returns to Trinidad with a good job at a big salary. This brings much emotional relief to Biswas.

Even though he doesn't live long enough to enjoy the house, the achievement seem to him to be stupendous. To have lived and died as he had been born unnecessary and unaccommodated, would have been a disaster for him. Now at least he had got his own portion of earth. Mr. Biswas has not allowed his individuality to be swamped or vanquished despite the heavy odds and economic pressures on his purse. Ill treatments and hurdles never stopped his heart's desire and finally he succeeds in his quest for not only a house but also a home.

A rough caricature of their career gives an account of a steady, step by step improvement in their prospects. Rising from the level of a mere stamp seller, a cartoon book seller, employer in a garment factory, waiter in a hotel to the level of a film producer Duddy resembled the rich Boy Wonder in the Montreal city. Biswas also encounters similar experience like Duddy. Both belong to the generation of immigrants who migrated from their homeland in search of a living. An immigrant, alien to the country, Duddy's grandfather exhibits his deplorable feelings, the fear of living in the new country. He regrets that his life was a failure in that country with money. Similarly Biswas's grandfather migrated from India to Trinidad. An indentured sugarcane laborer he regrets having come to The West Indies. The similarity of the background and heroic struggle of the protagonist go hand in hand. Biswas finding a permanent place and Duddy's love for land could otherwise mean establishing their self-respect and a sense of ownership which their grandfathers never had enjoyed. Another common feature perceived in the protagonists is their unimportant positions occupied in their family-an outcast among the outcasts. Biswas and Duddy shared unhappy experiences of childhood. Their world carried no witness of their birth and early years. Being neglected and despised member of the family, the pangs of life reacted on them. They always exhibited tender longing for affection, friendship and company, conventional comforts of shelter, education and emotional satisfaction failed to reconcile them within the society. Just as Simcha Kravitz was responsible for installing such a great ambition in Duddy, Aunt Tara and her husband were totally responsible for instigating a similar quest in Biswas.

In the final scenes of the novels, Duddy and Biswas establish an identity and a kingdom of their own. The struggle to free from the clutches of slavery, poverty and insecurity ends in triumph. To Duddy, the land at Lac St. Pierre represented the climax of a lifetime hopes. He steps into the world of his own; a land with lots of pine trees, the glittering fields under the setting sun, the lakes covered with thin sheets of ice, the soft drifts between the rocks-he enjoyed each and every aspect of his property justifying his claim to his portion of earth. The land that Duddy dreamt of and finally acquired is the pivot of the novel just as Biswas dreamt of his house. By acquiring a house of his own Biswas was able to establish his claim over his wife and children. With a job of his own he was able to make more successful claim on his family. For the first time Biswas lives in a house "where everything worked as it was meant to". In both the novels sufferings preceded success. Both protagonists undergo sufferings which were embodiments of significant change and transition to a higher life. Both grew changed due to varied experiences in their quest to assert their identity to the family and the belittling Society.

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