



## HOMELESSNESS AND DISPLACEMENT IN V. S. NAIPAUL'S *A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS*

**GURJASJEET KAUR**

D/O. S. Jasveer Singh  
Assistant Professor  
Guru Nanak College, Budhlada,  
District: Mansa (Punjab) INDIA

### ABSTRACT

*Sir V. S. Naipaul is one of the most popular writers of present time. His fictional and non-fictional writings deal with the problems of diasporic, colonial, post colonial and Third World societies. He has candidly written about alienation, displacement, homelessness, identity crisis, power, freedom and frustration of diasporic people. The present paper attempts to discuss homelessness and displacement in his novel A House for Mr. Biswas.*

**Keywords:** Homelessness, displacement, diaspora, rootlessness, alienation.

#### Introduction

Diaspora literature involves an idea of a homeland, a place from where the displacement occurs. Diasporic literature, writing by to a lesser extent about migrants, is a topic which has commanded growing interest within literary studies since 1980's. The idea of 'home' evokes the spatial politics of home, the sense of self, displacement, intimacy, exclusion and inclusion. It is also connected with the human emotions, feelings, sentiments, bondage and intimacy. In the present age of international migration, the idea of home is a key factor. Diaspora is concerned with human beings attached to the homelands. Their sense of yearning for the homeland, a curious attachment to its traditions, religions and languages give birth to diasporic literature which is primarily concerned with the individual's attachment to the homeland. V. S. Naipaul remarkably portrays homelessness in *A House For Mr. Biswas*:

*To have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one's portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one has been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated.*

(Naipaul 14)

Throughout his life, Mohun Biswas is a wanderer with no place to call his own. The phenomenon of people's displacement got impetus with various technological and scientific advancements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The sense of place has essential significance in the



understanding of human identity. For Diasporans, the emotional, cultural and psychological identification is often related to difference, distance and dislocation. As Homi K. Bhabha in *Location of Culture* describes displacement:

*A disorienting condition: the borders between home and world became confused and uncanny, the private and public become part of each other forcing upon us a vision that is as dividing as it is disorienting. (Bhabha 41)*

Displacement, whether forced or self-imposed, is in many ways a calamity. An important point to note is that writers in their displaced existence generally tend to excel in their work, as if the changed atmosphere acts as a stimulant for them. V. S. Naipaul's character Mohun Biswas from *A House for Mr. Biswas* is an example of an individual who is generations away from his original homeland but his heritage gives him a consciousness of his past. He becomes itinerant specimen of the outsider, the unhoused, for the world to see. Naipaul portrays men that who can not construct a coherent self and the reason for this malady lie deep in the pattern of subordination and existential split suffered by them under a system that recognized no difference, humanly or culturally in its ruthless drive to hegemonize everything. As Peter Hughes has commented:

*Above all, because the writing out of the narrative of decline and fall, of disorder and lack of authority, involves, the discovery of a void at the heart of Naipaul's world and it has been discovered through his writings. (Hughes 11)*

In *A House for Mr. Biswas* Naipaul has presented Mohun Biswas's wish to own a house. He faces homelessness and displacement again and again. He wants an independent accommodation for his family. His wish to own a house is a symbol of his search for independent self. This shows his urge to belong. His ambition to be a well known reporter and to own a house would be a symbol of security in an oppressive environment. Mr. Biswas is born into and grows up in search for a place he can call his own. Biswas inherits from his father, Raghu Biswas, the congenital trauma of the experience of displacement from the originary center, the geographical and illusory homeland, India, which contributes to his sense of displacement in the present home. Thus Trinidad, where Mr. Biswas is born, is a space in which he feels a sense of unease, a sense of not belonging at home. Homelessness and displacement is suggested in Biswas's moment of realization,

*"As soon as he saw the barracks Mr. Biswas decided that the time had come for him to build his own house, by whatever means." (Naipaul 214)*

Diasporic people want to own a house in their settler countries. Mr. Biswas feels as an alien at Hanuman House. Again and again son-in-laws of Hanuman House face homelessness and displacement. They try to settle at one place then they have to go somewhere else. When Mr.



Biswas can't adjust at Hanuman House he is sent to a village, The Chase, to take charge of a Tulsi food shop. Mr. Biswas' shop is short, narrow room with a rusty galvanized iron roof. Again he is very dissatisfied with the accommodation that is given to him. Then he goes to the Green Vale. At the barracks one room is given to one family and sheltered twelve families in one long room. This long room is built of wood and stood on low concrete pillars. Mr. Biswas is given an end room. They move all their furniture in this room. The conditions at the barracks are intolerable. He feels very alienated. He thinks about making of his own house. He does not have enough money for the purpose. But he starts making his own house. He spends all his savings. Second hand material is used for construction because of lack of money. His house cannot be completed. Only one room in the house is habitable and he moves into it. But this house is burnt down by labourers who have been very hostile to him from the very beginning. He becomes houseless again. Thus his desire for independence and self-assertion comes to nothing.

After recovering from illness he leaves Hanuman House and goes to Port of Spain in order to explore fresh woods and pastures. Now he has to live with his sister Dehuti. He attains a job in 'Trinidad Sentinel' as a reporter. He starts living in Mrs. Tulsi's house on rent with his family. But he is not happy. Then he builds his own house on Tulsi Estate in Shorthills. After shifting into this house he at last becomes independent and heaves a sigh of relief. But this independence is short lived. His house catches fire and is burnt down. Once again he finds himself at Mrs. Tulsi's house, unhoused and displaced.

From Shorthills Mr. Biswas moves with his family to Port of Spain where he is provided with two rooms in Mrs. Tulsi's house where he had lived before. Biswas family is not the only one to move from Shorthills to Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain. The Tuttles go; and so do Govind, Chinta and their children; and a widow by the name of Basdai also goes there. With such a large crowd in this house there is no peace of mind for Mr. Biswas. On account of insanity conditions prevailing in the house, Biswas's children suffer from various ailments. He feels mentally perturbed all the time. Not having a house of his own makes him miserable. The noise becomes unbearable to him when W.C. Tuttle buys a gramophone and begins playing a particular record on it over and over again. His misery even does not end even when he becomes a government official. In this state of mind one day he quarrels with Mrs. Tulsi and Owad who is returned to Trinidad after staying eight years in England. Owad has taken up his residence in the same house. In anticipation of Owad's return, Mr. Biswas has been asked to vacate the two rooms which he is occupying. He has to shift to other rooms. In the heated quarrel he becomes furious so that Mrs. Tulsi asks him to quit her house and he says that he has no desire at all to continue living there.

Now it becomes very essential for Mr. Biswas to find some other accommodation for his family. In the course of his search for house he happens to meet a solicitor's clerk in a café. The solicitor's clerk comes to know that Mr. Biswas urgently needs a residential

accommodation. He tells that he wants to sell his house, which is situated in Sikkim Street. He tells him that his mother cannot climb up to the upper story of the house because of heart problem. Mr. Biswas feels greatly impressed by the look of the house. The clerk says that he wants to sell house for six thousand dollars; but the bargain struck at five thousand and five hundred dollars. Mr. Biswas has only one thousand and five hundred dollars with him, so he borrows four thousand dollars from his uncle Ajodha in order to pay for the house. But Mr. Biswas fails to inspect this house closely. When he moves to the house he finds several defects in it. The house has no door. Two of the wooden pillars, supporting the staircase landing, are rotten. He realizes that clerk is a jerry-builder. The house needs certain urgent repairs, and this means more expense. They have to borrow money from Basdai for the repairs. At last Mr. Biswas and his family can leave Mrs. Tulsi's house. The defects of the house are forgotten. The repairs have already been carried out. Thus Mr. Biswas has every reason to feel happy with the house that he has acquired. Mr. Biswas has achieved the fulfillment of his dream to possess a house and to lead an independent and self-respecting life. Besides the thought of having to repay the loan of four thousand dollars begins to weigh heavily on Mr. Biswas's mind. After having a house of his own he suffers from heart attack and dies at the age of 46. So the acquisition of a house proves to be only a mixed blessing, a partial failure and a partial triumph.

Mr. Biswas does not face homelessness and displacement singularly. Other characters such as Seth, Mrs. Tulsi, Gobind, W. C. Tuttle and widows of Hanuman House also face living problems. The novel narrates the collective history of the indentured labourers. The indentured labourers led precarious and fragile existences which are symbolized by the place of dwelling, the home. His grandparents' house is also disappeared, and when huts of mud and grass are pulled down they leave no trace. This history makes Biswas determined to build a solid house in order to achieve permanence and escape that pervasive sense of extinction. The novel is principally about the 'unaccommodated' man which is the condition of homelessness. The Prologue ends with the threatening thought:

*But bigger than them all was the house, his house. How terrible it would have been at this time to be without it: to have died among the Tulsi's, 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 the earth; to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated. (Naipaul 8)*

When Biswas finally possesses his 'own' house, ironically it is heavily mortgaged, he is dying, and he is estranged from his son. His ownership of a portion of land is significant because his partial independence breaks the colonial pattern in which his ancestors were dispossessed. Owning a house is important because its material reality gives Biswas presence in the world. Biswas does not fully achieve independence; he still remains economically

dependent, unable to completely shed his humble origins. It suggests the tremendous struggle of Biswas to achieve his independence and his own identity. According to Bruce King:

*Naipaul examined the difficulties of the Trinidadian Asian Indians in finding the economic means to become independent individuals. Yet without such independence, symbolized by Biswas's need for a home or his own place in society, they could not really be part of the New World and would remain homeless, angry exiles dependent on a decaying past. (King 212)*

*A House for Mr. Biswas* is essentially a diasporic novel. Mr. Biswas' attempt to build and own a house is symbolic of his search for a greater sense of belonging, a more stable identity and sense of security. Biswas tries best to be independent of the Tulsi family but his opportunities in the colonial society are limited. Biswas struggles between the tepid chaos of a decaying culture and the void of a colonial society. The significance of the novel lies in its ability to show the struggle of an emerging and vulnerable postcolonial subjectivity, as mainly embodied in the character of Biswas, as a result of the diasporic history of indenture and migration. He spends a large part of his life as homeless, displaced and rootless:

*And so Mr. Biswas came to leave the only house to which he had some right. For the next thirty-five years he was to be a wanderer with no place he could call his own, with no family except that which he was to attempt to create out of the engulfing world of the Tulsi's. (Naipaul 40)*

Sense of loss and rejection, darkness and gloom, uncertainty and confusion, dilemma, chaos and crisis go into the making of Naipaul's characters 'unnecessary and unaccommodate'. In this novel Naipaul has presented the existential problems of outsiders in African society. Shuttled from one residence to another after the drowning death of his father Mr. Biswas yearns for a place he can call home. This novel is about a man who spends his life trying to make a mark on the world. The achievement of one's individuality does not immediately follow the attainment of freedom but it is constructed through a life time of painful struggle. This novel is concerned with displacement and homelessness, as John Them explains:

*A complete portrait of Hindu life in colonial Trinidad has been realized through the description of Mr. Biswas' experience in each of the novels many hours which represent: the passive dependent life of the child; the Hindu's dependent states as a member of the extended family; an abortive attempt at escape through small time capitalism (the Chase); the construction of plantation system (the Barracks); the impossibility of complete emancipation (the house he builds at Green Vale and near Short Hills); unsuccessful parody of phantocracy (Short Hills); and finally, the partial freedom possible once, one has realized one's limitations (The James House).*



(Theim 12)

Through Mr. Biswas' various associations and experiences with people's in different positions and places, Naipaul gets a chance to portray homelessness, alienation, rootlessness and displacement of diasporic people. The various lodging places have their drawbacks. Hanuman House is authoritative in its organization; the houses at The Chase and Green Vale are unbearable burdens because of the uncertainties surrounding their construction. These lodging places form a backdrop and they motivate Mr. Biswas towards his goal to own a house.

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