



IDENTITY CRISIS IN V. S. NAIPAUL'S *A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS*

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ABSTRACT

This article tries to explore the issue of identity in postcolonial literature. In the era of globalization, the need for immigration has increased for various reasons. This in turn results in the dawn of multi cultural land with cultural diversity. The article focuses on issues of identity that surges with immigration in a multi ethnical land, particularly in a colonized world. For the purpose the novels of V.S. Naipaul has been taken. It tries to analyze the characters from the perspective of rootlessness and identity crisis. It also examines the methods undertaken by these characters to construct an identity in the society and thereby break away from rootlessness.

Key words Alienation, identity, home, rootlessness

The West Indian literature is the part of the greatest design of commonwealth literature. The cultural experience of the West Indian writers forms an important theme in the literature. A quest for identity, rootlessness and alienation are the significant themes around which the literature of these countries revolves. They adopt various techniques to explore solutions to the problems of identity and rootlessness. The West Indian literature is occupied with the fate of indentured Indian labors, which went to Caribbean islands in search of job. It depicts the challenges of these people and tries to voice the aspirations and yearnings, problems and plights of these people. The breakup of the British Empire resulted in the development of newly independent nations. Emphasizing on the problem of cultural and political identity as one of the major concerns of the West Indian literature, C.D. Narasimhaiah in his book *Essays In Commonwealth Literature* says, "When the erstwhile British colonies came of the age they were faced with the choice of either taking over the British values or of asserting their identity"(11).1



Naipaul's works- both fiction and non-fiction -has attained great success. His fictional work is concerned with the complex fate of individuals, societies and cultures seeking to define their identity. Madhusudahn Rao analyzes the themes of Naipaul in the following way.

“V.S. Naipaul has used fiction not only as a way of chronicling life but also as an instrument of analysis and clarification of the reality... some of Naipaul's recurring themes of the collusion of cultures and ambiguities in human adjustment: the colonial situation which reduces a sense of alienation: and the motives within the individual which create the structure of human relationships unique to the colonial or post-colonial society”(192)²

The Oxford English dictionary defines identity as "The fact of being who or what a person or thing is". A person's identity can be shaped by his nationality, ethnicity, gender, language, class and culture. The identity may be broadly divided into personal identity and social identity. The personal identity is the conceptualization of the self in relation to others, whereas the social identity is derived from the person's membership in social groups. The increase in mobilization and post modernism has led to the hybrid identity. Culture shapes and informs a person's identity. A person in postcolonial countries tries to assert his identity in society in multiple ways. The present article studies *A House for Mr. Biswas*, from the point of view of identity crisis and rootlessness. It narrates the search for independence and identity of a Brahmin Indian living in Trinidad. The novel is set in Trinidad and covers the story of three generation. The novel has a direct association with the modern problem of identity crisis. It portrays a single man's struggle to arrive at authentic self-hood. The novel sketches the character of Mohun Biswas, the protagonist, as he tries to find relief from rootlessness and have a house of his own. The 'house' is symbolic of identity and self respect. It represents one's culture and one's roots.

The novel commences with Biswas, who is sacked from his job at the age of forty six. It covers the whole life span of Biswas from his birth to death. But on the death bed he is relieved as he has a place of his own and he was breathing his last in his own house. The forty six years of his life are years of anxiety, recurrent setbacks, and repeated failures.

“Mr. Biswas was forty six and had four children. He had no money. His wife Shama had no money. On the house in Sikkim Street Mr. Biswas owned, and has been owing for four years, three thousand dollars...it gave Mr. Biswas some satisfaction that in the circumstances Shama did not run straight off to her mother to beg for help. Ten years before that would have been her first thought”. (7)³

Although the house has many defects and they felt upset about it, yet it gives a satisfaction to Mr. Biswas as he had ultimately freed himself from the hold of Tulsi family. The house is defective one. The yard had no drainage: the house had no back door: the widows downstairs

did not close, while the front door flew open when strong wind blows even if the door was locked and bolted.

“In the days that followed they made many discoveries. The landing pillars had rotted because they stood next to a tap which emerged from the wall of the house. The water from the tap simply ran into ground”(573).

The house gives him freedom, which is missing in the Tulsi family. He has freed his children from the slavery of Hanuman House. For the first time in life, he has a house of his own after his father’s death. He plants a tree to get shade in summer. He enjoys staying in the house with defects.

“he was struck again and again by the wonder of being in his own house, the audacity of it; to walk in through his own front gate, to bar entry to whoever he wished, to close his doors and windows every night, to hear no noises except those of his family, to wander freely from room to room and about his yard, instead of being condemned, as before, to retire the moment he got home to the crowded room in one or the other of Mrs. Tulsi’s houses, crowded with Shama’s sisters, their husbands, their children ”.
(8)

The metaphor of the house gathers significance not just as a material possession that provide shelter and security but as a symbol of achievement – a sense of leaving a mark on history, a means to escape the void. Biswas wills to leave a place of his own. For Kath Woodward,

“identity is closely linked to place, to key places and often to the place that we call home. In this sense the map is a useful metaphor for understanding the formation and representation of identity in relation to location and situation as well as movements and translation(65). 4

Yashoda Bhat too interprets the metaphor of the ‘house’.

“The symbolism of the house is worked out artistically. The house stands for a rootless man’s longing for a home. The expatriate Hindu’s love for a home is personified in Biswas’s longing for home; it is also the Third World rootlessness in general longing for home and also a universal longing for an identity and a home of one’s own. The home also stands for one’s identity for which every rootless person strives”. (58)5

In order to assert his identity Biswas, needs the security in the society and the support of the family play a major role in finding the roots. He enters into Tulsi household with a thought that they may offer him the protection and identity. But he becomes a mere servant in the



house. The Hanuman House symbolizes the conventional Hindu world, which is abound by rituals and superstitions. He passes sarcastic comments against the members of the Tulsi clan. His resultant rebellious attitude towards the Tulsi house hold is in fact a defense against losing his identity. He never conforms to the codes of Tulsi house and is a stranger in the system. In order to get true identity, he participates in the activities of Aryan Samaj., who are protestant Hindu missionaries. In this connection he meets the business rivals of Tulsi family. Mr. Biswas's dreams, assertion of self and evasion of family responsibilities are the result of his cultural, social and psychological rootlessness in a multi cultural land of Trinidad. Champa Rao Mohan mentions,

“The social identity of people is rooted in their culture while at the individual level, it is determined by personal achievements. In order to experience a ‘Wholeness’ it is necessary to fuse the individual and the social consciousness. In the case of artificially created colonial societies like Trinidad, this spirit becomes even more pronounced. With the result this homogeneous cultural identity becomes missing in the case of Trinidadian. They find themselves uprooted in an alien land”. (47)6

Biswas gets success in proving his identity, when he gets proprietorship of general store situated at The Chase. He becomes a transformed man and takes control of family, wife and children. But after six years, he is despised and cheated by the customers, which leads him to change his place.

Mr. Biswas, as a fatherless and homeless derelict, needs a shelter when he is battered by the cruelty of society. As a result he continues to be a temporary resident living in the houses of others. He is sent to Green Vale to supervise the work of the labourers in the Tulsi estate. In order to assert his identity and get away from the sense of isolation and alienation, he builds a house. But the house is destroyed by the labourers. Mr. Biswas' quest for independence is achieved through his balancing of this ambiguous belonging to the two worlds. Mr. Biswas' leaving Hanuman house and moving to the house he has built at Green Vale is his first attempt at independence. The collapse of the house at Green Vale, however, is paralleled by his nervous breakdown and the subsequent return to the shelter of the Tulsis He faces the problems of 'social and self alienation'. The social alienation is the result of estrangement brought by the sudden discovery that the social systems are oppressive of man's aspirations. The house, which is his identity, is burnt down and he faces self alienation. Here the words of Melvin Seeman are worth mentioning.

“The loss of contact of the individual selves with any inclination or desires that are not in agreement with the prevailing social patterns as a result of which the individuals are forced... to feel incapable of controlling their actions. Self alienation has worse affects on individual than social alienation. It happens to be the basic form of

rootlessness and can easily impede an individual's mental and psychic development in a terrific manner". (36)7

Biswas succeeds in purchasing a house in Sikkim Street in Port of Spain, after many failed attempts. He finally gets identity in society and it is a legacy that he wishes to leave to his children. Though the house is not built properly and his mortgaged, he is satisfied that he has laid claim on his portion of earth. His long struggle for a house ends and gets place of his own in an alien land.

"Nothing would have ached more than to die without having claimed to die on someone else's portion of earth. How terrible it would have been, at this time, to be without it : to have died among the Tulsis, 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". (13-14)

His heroism lies in his self-respect and integrity. He dies contended man. By achieving a place he tries to emancipate himself from the feeling of alienation and tries to find an identity. Lee sums up the tragedy of Biswas and how a house becomes a symbol of identity for the immigrant.

It is a tragedy of a man who wears himself out trying to adjust himself to a profound change in his society, and his personal outlook, and who, before he is forty, considers his career closed, and resents his ambition on his children. Mr. Biswas achieves little...but leaves his children in a better position to go on into a changing society. He himself is a first generation casualty of the change. He begins with nothing, and achieves only a little. Early in the book, he had been taught to recite his multiplication tables beginning 'Ought oughts are ought', and this that 'nothing will come of nothing' haunts his life. It is his achievement to make a little (a house) come of nothing".(76).8

Naipaul has artistically portrayed the plight of the Indian immigrant in West India. Biswas's search for his identity concludes when he achieves his identity in a form of house.

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