



## **THE OPPRESSORS AND OPPRESSED IN THE NOVELS OF V. S. NAIPAUL**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The cultural loss and tension faced by the heroes of Naipaul underlines to some extent their exiled or displaced status, their inability to belong anywhere, be it the black or the white world. The theme of colonial history presents the trauma of the West Indians, their status as cultural hybrids, coupled with their inability to believe in their own power, thus turning them into colonial heroes created by oppression and dominance. Naipaul, in his fiction and non-fiction has been lamenting the facts of illiteracy among the Caribbeans. The non-person status of the slave crystallized by the colonial system is obviously manifested in all areas of experience. Naipaul has continued to portray the individual situation in different nations and landscapes. He is intensely interested in what happens to the individuals in a colonial set-up. Naipaul's treatment of character in colonial literature marks a significant change, his fiction opens a new phase characterized by a sense of loss, of an identity prematurely crushed by being derived from a culture that oppresses it.*

**Key Words:** Colonialism, Oppression, Homelessness, Brutality, Third World

### **INTRODUCTION**

The acceptance or rejection of the colonial past has nearly always posed a tough aesthetic problem for the writer; to recognize history either as a large dynamic force or a time of cultural chaos. The loss of indigenous cultures and traditions in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean is linked directly with colonial history and its legacies. This is particularly pronounced in the West Indian novel. To writers like Naipaul who contemplate the idea of history only in terms of futility as the Caribbean spectrum offers no hope but a history of despair which they feel is being repeated in every area of human experience. Struggling and

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wrestling in their own vision penetrates deep into the politics of human deprivation and a possible way out of the oppressive sense of the futility of experience. To them, colonial history becomes a European archive in which distilled memories have a stamp of permanence. The New World hero can do nothing more than to imitate the historical ghost of the ex-slave with all the pitfalls of his condemned status. The complex experience of colonialism invited multiple injuries and Colonialism, with its own norms and detested traditions threw up all kinds of divisions; the natives versus the settlers, the rich versus the poor, the black versus the white, or the oppressors versus the oppressed. These oppositions formed the system of relationships which developed out of the Black-White contact which in turn led to the Black economic and cultural subordination. Frantz Fanon comments, "In the colonies the economic structure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white. you are white because you are rich" (Fanon31).

The cultural loss and tension faced by the heroes of Naipaul underlines to some extent their exiled or displaced status, their inability to belong anywhere, be it the black or the white world. The theme of colonial history presents the trauma of the West Indians, their status as cultural hybrids, coupled with their inability to believe in their own power, thus turning them into colonial heroes created by oppression and dominance. Naipaul, in his fiction and non-fiction has been lamenting the facts of illiteracy among the Caribbeans. The non-person status of the slave crystallized by the colonial system is obviously manifested in all areas of experience. However, Naipaul's famous statement quoted very often as an instance of his sharp-edged criticism of the West Indian situation needs to be treated at some length. There is no doubt that Naipaul is not a historian or theoretician as his views are at best the result of his personal reactions and ideas. But he has become a conscious or an unconscious spokesman for the ridicule of the society. His conclusions seem to have a stamp of finality which he has repeated in his fiction and non-fiction works.

However, the novel which most delicately highlights the metaphor of colonial experience-the way man is pressurized by complex forces that make impossible his escape from the past is *A House for Mr. Biswas*. The organizing theme of the novel is the idea of slavery as Mr. Biswas belongs to a generation of men who unlike their ancestors, have escaped the actual slavery but carry the burden in the psychic sense, in their attitudes and sensibilities. His personal battle with the stronghold of the Tulsi household is a symbol of the colonial world, is a quest for existential freedom and the struggle for personality. *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a novel about the social history of Trinidad and socio-cultural change which was taking place around the Second World War. He is an uprooted man, assertions of the self, day dreaming and evasion of responsibility are the results of the plurality of his nowhere-ness. The symbolic structure of the novel based on autobiography and memory synthesizes Naipaul's quest as a writer, his own status as a displaced person, and the West Indian historical fragmentation. Mr.



Biswas's own musings about his house in the Prologue of the novel characterize the intention of the writer to verbalize a historical wound suffered by generations:

*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; worst, to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one's position of the earth; to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated. (Naipaul, A House for Mr. Biswas 14)*

The novel is also about the need in the Trinidad society for the Indians to come to a meaningful compromise with the creole world. Similarly, the Hanuman House, with its colonial fortress like walls suggests the psychology of slavery. This is accompanied by the emotional blackmail in which Mrs. Tulsi, the arch Colonizer indulges and her brother-in-law Seth, the second in command.

A close reading of the novel shows Mr. Biswas's essential condition as the anxious uprooted man has to be understood in terms of the cultural, social and psychological situation, he is placed in as a second generation Hindu in Trinidad of 1930s. Ironically, he marries into the Tulsi family which gives him protection and job he could hardly get elsewhere yet he rebels against the Tulsis. The Tulsis are running a sort of mimic world of colonialism and the important thing is that the Hanuman House too is run on the traditional Hindu family lines and protocols. On the surface, the Tulsis have made an admirable reconstruction of the clan in strange and hostile conditions. It has its own schemes, leaders, duties, law and order, religious rituals and provide job and help to men of their community on merits. In one sense, the rebellion of Mr. Biswas becomes meaningless as he has no alternative in the colonial Trinidad outside the Indian protective system. Time and again, he returns to the Tulsis, only to reject their help again. But seen minutely, the Hanuman House is not a coherent or benevolent reconstruction of the traditional Hindu joint family. It is more a slave society where Mrs. Tulsi and Seth need workers to boost their influence and for this very reason, they exploit the homelessness and poverty of men like Biswas and other fellow-Hindus. Mr. Biswas is given the impression that he is one of the Tulsis, yet he is insulted and told that he entered the clan of his own free will. This is again an ingredient of the colonial system in which the fundamental idea was that the slaves must be made to understand the kindness and legitimacy of the colonizers. In this context, the comments of Albert Memmi becomes relevant:

*In order for the colonizer to be the complete master, it is not enough for him to be so in actual fact, but he must believe in its legitimacy. In order for that*



*legitimacy to be complete it is not enough for the colonized to be a slave, he must also accept this role. (Memmi 88)*

Almost every aspect of the Tulsi household bears the mark of oppression and finally the Tulsi autocracy crumbles in the face of larger social complexities which pave the way for a general rebellion. His struggle against the indestructible system of brutality and humiliation affirms the universal nature of values he fights for by remaining within the system. This problem of losing identity has been faced by all racial groups in Trinidad though with the passage of time, education assumed greater importance for personal success in a highly materialistic and competitive world. As a contrast with Biswas, Ralph Singh, the hero of *The Mimic Men* is not really oppressed but he is one of the political oppressors in the new order in the imaginary Caribbean island. However, the impact of the past on Ralph Singh is noteworthy, for it has turned him into an aristocratic recluse. *The Mimic Men* is basically a novel about the change in the colonial man's outlook.

*Guerrillas* is also a novel portraying an imaginary Caribbean island highlights race problems and cultural confusion. In this novel, the effect of literacy in the experience of colonization of the Blacks assumes significance. Jimmy, the protagonist has a degree of grounding in the white society which is evident in the pages of the novel he is writing. He writes with a white mask, the narrator of his story being a white Englishwoman on a West Indian island recording her meetings with a local hero named Jimmy. Through this mask, Jimmy fantasises about his own image in the eyes of the whites. The girl Clarissa's fear of the impending revenge by the blacks' island, gang rape is the most moving part for Jimmy as he sees himself as her protector. Literacy in Jimmy encourages historic consciousness and through his education acquired under English rule, his tradition is the category of his novel through which he traces his own cultural and racial past. Although it is clear in the novel *In a Free State*, Naipaul's sympathies are with the underprivileged and the poor of the Third World yet he sees that revolutionary rhetoric is often the play acting of men like Ralph Singh who have been unable to impose discipline on their lives. Writing about the idea of Black power in the islands in his novel *The Overcrowded Barracoon*, Naipaul rejects the notion of protest when he says:

The enemy is the past, of slavery and colonial neglect and a society uneducated from top to bottom. The enemy is the smallness of the islands and absence of resources. Opportunism or borrowed jargon may define phantom enemies, racial minorities, elites. But at the end, the problems will be the same, of dignity and identity.

(Naipaul, *The Overcrowded Barracoon* 271)

Naipaul has continued to portray the individual situation in different nations and landscapes. He is intensely interested in what happens to the individuals in a colonial set-up. His novel A







Conrad and Forster leads to V. S. Naipaul. However, Naipaul has a moral advantage over the English writers as his delineation excludes any romantic angle in colonial literature. He writes about the persistence of colonialism in the era of political independence. The self awareness of his native characters stems entirely from the culture that perceives them as 'other'. Knowledge of themselves as objects in society brings about a feeling of shame and self-contempt. Naipaul's treatment of character in colonial literature marks a significant change, his fiction opens a new phase characterized by a sense of loss, of an identity prematurely crushed by being derived from a culture that oppresses it.

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