

SOCIO-CULTURAL ALIENATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF THE PROTAGONIST IN *A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS*

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ABSTRACT

The common thread of all post-colonial writings is alienation, oppression, suppression and crisis of cultural and social identities. The writings of Naipaul have been the mouth piece of socio-cultural alienational experiences. Alienation is the sense of being detached from being attached. Alienating effects of imperial rule on postcolonial people make Naipaul travel different countries for finding rootlessness. Colonialism makes the colonized experience some psychological effect as the result of the colonizers' oppression towards them. Slavery with indentured system is the example of the colonizers' oppression towards the native ultimately resulting in socio-cultural alienation. The novels of Naipaul are autobiographical. *A House for Mr. Biswas* is an autobiographical novel. The protagonist Mohunbiswas, being an East Indian descendent in West Indies, a colony of England, Mr. Biswas is physically in one place (West Indies) and culturally in another (East India), and experiences alienation.

KEYWORDS: Socio-Cultural Alienation, Naipaul, *A House for Mr. Biswas*

INTRODUCTION

A House for Mr. Biswas is Naipaul's magnum opus. There is similarity between Naipaul and Mr. Biswas, the protagonist of *A House for Mr. Biswas*, as they experience a sense of alienation first in the form of normlessness which eventually leads them to an existential sense of alienation. Mr. Biswas is physically in one place and culturally in another. As Mohit K. Ray comments, "Naipaul is an Indian in the West Indies, a West Indian in England, and a nomadic intellectual in a postcolonial world." (*V S Naipaul: Critical Essays*, p. 208). The novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* deals with an East Indian's struggle for a place to strike his deracinated root afresh. Mr. Biswas shares Naipaul's own sense of alienation, the sense of travelling everywhere but belonging nowhere.

The novel takes its subject from the life of the excluded who have been alienated from societies to which they apparently belong. The novel also attacks the Indian society's segregated, traditional way of life which contents to live in its shell and preserve its own special religious identity. In *Alienation, Naipaul and Mr. Biswas* Mehmet Recep comments, "*A House for Mr. Biswas*, metaphorically, is a miniature world which symbolizes the colonial world. Mr. Biswas's personal battle with the stronghold of the Tulsi household (the symbol of the colonial world) is a quest for existential freedom and the struggle for personality." (p. 117).

A House for Mr. Biswas elucidates the life of a Hindu Trinidadian who is said to be born with a bad omen, with an unlucky sneeze and sixth finger, Mr. Biswas inadvertently causes the drowning of his father and thus the loss of his childhood home. After an unsuccessful stint as a pundit's apprentice, Mr. Biswas realizes that he cannot return to live with his mother for long, and his job as a sign painter brings him to the home of his future in-laws, the Tulsis. He marries one of

the Tulsi daughters and although he greatly desires a house of his own, he necessarily spends much of his life shifting between various Tulsi homes after leaving Hanuman House, their main estate. By the end of the novel, Mr. Biswas has finally acquired his own home, and he and his family find they have forged stronger bonds with one another during their years together.

Throughout his life, Mr Biswas seeks to independence from his wife's family who deny him his individuality resulting in social alienation. He attempts to buy or build his own house, yet, due to lack of experience and a strong personality all his attempts fail dramatically. Even when he finally succeeds in buying his own house, the building turns out to be poorly constructed, over-priced and unhomely. Between Tulsi and him, there is no proper relatedness so that alienation forms in his life. Mohun's is a mode of experience in which he experiences himself as an alien. Whatever work he takes up he feels estranged from it.

As a Brahmin, Biswas does not get proper treatment from Tulsi family. Moreover he is looked down upon as the son of a labourer because of his financial liability and being burdensome for family enterprise and he was pushed down to the lower run of the family hierarchy of Hanuman House in which Mohun Biswas is a have-not and an alienated human being. "Mohun develops an idealized image of himself so different from his self-image that there exists a profound gap between his idealized image and his real self." (Horny. 111). Tulsi family is an object of dislike and hostility for Biswas. He hates the Tulsi and delights in imaginatively upsetting the family hierarchy. So he mocks the people at the family members by re-naming them. Mrs. Tulsi becomes the old cow, the old hen, the old queen; Seth the elder brother-in-law and business manager, the Big Boss and so on.

The first section of the novel "Pastorals" is about the birth and early childhood of Mr. Biswas. In this section, Hindu way of life with its customs, traditions, rituals, and philosophy of the people receives full expression in the small Indian world created by indentured Indian labourers in an artificially created colonial society of Trinidad. But here, too, it is the superstitious beliefs, the faith and reliance on pundits which cover the initial pages of the novel. Mr. Biswas has six fingers, a symbol of bad luck for his father and family, and this plays a decisive role in Mohun's life. Mohun is an alien even in his own family as from the very beginning he is declared unlucky in his horoscope, too, something that makes him feel alienated in his own Indian world.

Mr Biswas's birth and childhood resembles the life of the classic character of *Oedipus the King*. Having been born with 'six fingers' and in 'a wrong way', Biswas is different and distinguished from other children (p.14). He was unwanted, unloved and viewed as the bearer of bad luck to his family, just as Oedipus was as a baby. Like Oedipus, quite accidentally and unintentionally Biswas causes his father's death when the father dives into a pond to save him from drowning. The incident vilifies Mr Biswas and becomes a turning point as it starts the process of "homelessness" that characterizes his life thereafter. He is sent to stay with his relatives and '[f]or the next thirty-five years he [is] to be a wanderer with no place to call his own' (p.38). Biswas is destined to share Oedipus's misery; the latter is blinded and banished and the former is left displaced and homeless. The absence of a father leaves Biswas with no role model to identify with and in effect the process of identity formation is left unaccomplished for him. Another possible reading is that Biswas as a child refuses to adopt his father's colonial identity. The child's symbolic unintentional father-killing can be interpreted as a positive gesture to dispense with the legacy of dependency and colonial identity. Naipaul uses this as an opportunity for the young Biswas to acquire a new independent and decolonised identity for himself and his descendants.

The protections of society are removed in the Green Vale chapter until Biswas and Anand, his son are isolated, helpless against the violence of others and the natural world. They are reduced to the condition of the insects who are defenceless against the attack of organized groups of other insects. Nature is uncaring, dangerous; life is short; creatures are naturally at war with each other and protected only by being part of a community. Biswas's fear of harm and death is also a fear of alienation. The void is in his mind, a kind of insanity in which his selfhood and individuality are lost. The stripping away of the physical comforts and protections of civilization results in a loss of rationality, humanity, other kinds of consciousness than fear. He is metamorphosed into something primitive, subhuman. Although supposedly a rationalist he chants a mantra for protection.

It is more a slave society where Mrs. Tulsi and Seth need workers to boost their sagging influence and economy. They exploit the homelessness and poverty of men like Biswas and other fellow Hindus and only play a mock-clan system to keep outsiders under illusion. Virtually like the West Indies, the Hanuman House is an amalgam of disparate elements brought under one roof by economic needs. The acceptance of Hanuman House and its dubious claims is an acquiescence of one's slavery. The irony lies in the Indians' carrying on the older system within themselves while they resent White colonialism. This is also the power of Naipaul's satire, Mr. Biswas is repeatedly accused of not being grateful to the Tulsis despite the fact, as Mrs. Tulsi says, "coming to us with no more clothes you could hang up on a nail". Further, the Tulsis refer to Biswas as a "Creole" – the worst insult for an Indian in the Trinidad of those days.

Biswas' entry into the Tulsi family is an important stage in the assertion of his selfhood. It is a typical joint family which functions on the same principles as those of the British Empire in the West Indies, or for that matter, any colonial establishment. It provides subsistence and shelter in return for total submission or abdication of self. Maureen Warner Lewis recalls, "No wonder then that Mr. Biswas felt 'trapped' when he fell into the clutches of Tulsidom, for Naipaul depicts Hanuman House as a symbol of traditionalism, rigidity, cultural infallibility (to its inmates), ritual, duty, hierarchy, and communal life."⁴⁶

In his article, *Identity Crisis in V.S. Naipaul's A House for Mr. Biswas* Kumar Parag comments, "Here, Naipaul, identifies the desire of Mr. Biswas to have a house of his own while also acknowledging the problem of alienation among displaced people. (Shands, Kerstin W. p. 138). Interestingly, after coming to Chase, Mr. Biswas's attitude towards Hanuman House changes. Whereas he has used to think that Hanuman House is not ordered, he discovers that "the House was the world, more real than the Chase, and less exposed; everything beyond its gates was foreign and unimportant." (p. 188). Mr. Biswas thinks that life in Chase will help him discover his own identity, but it is the sense of alienation that looms large and he fails to find his authentic selfhood. He also discovers that he wants to have his own identity among East Indians. Mr. Biswas now feels that despite hostility, he is recognized as a mimic man in Hanuman House.

At Chase he feels alienated. What Naipaul seeks to convey, is that a person's social identity depends on the society to which he belongs, and that the family is sustaining and stabilizing experience for marginalized individuals like Mr. Biswas. For Mr. Biswas, life is meaningless without Shama, his children and even the Tulsis. This makes Mr. Biswas' visits to Hanuman House more frequent. Life at Green Vale is a more distressing experience. After the spacious accommodation in Chase, the single room into which he moves with family and furniture leaves him feeling suffocated. Although Green Vale gives him a sense of freedom and importance (specially on Saturdays when wages were distributed),

his actions in Green Vale are motivated by excessive insecurity both physically and mentally. Here, his dream to build a house begins to shape into reality. It is not that he wants a spacious place for himself, but he wants to be recognized as the father of his children, specially by his son, Anand. For Mr. Biswas, “Anand belonged completely to Tulsis” (p. 216). Mr Biswas’ first attempt to claim a portion of the earth fails. This dream to build a house meets the same result as the doll’s house had given to Savi, daughter of Mr. Biswas, on her birthday. Shama, his wife, had to break the house in order to quell the anger of the Tulsis and to satisfy their egos.

Naipaul focuses the subject of the psychology and traditional practices of the East Indians. The novel deals with the theme of the general history of three generations of East Indians and their struggles to survive and be accommodated in Trinidad. Mr. Biswas’ aim or life’s goal in this world is to die as an accommodated individual after claiming his share of land on this earth, which if viewed from a modern man’s perspective, becomes or appears to be a universal problem, the problem of everyman in the modern world. Landeg White comments, “The novel explores the consciousness of the people who constitute a destitute culture and “carry about them the mark, in their attitudes and sensibilities and convictions, of the slave, of the slave the unnecessary man.” (*V S Naipaul: A Critical Introduction*. p. 92).

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