

DIASPORA INDIAN WRITER AND EXILE LITERATURE : V.S. NAIPAUL'S *A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS*

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ABSTRACT

International literatures in English are now enriched by the writers of diaspora, exile and immigration. Indian writers of diaspora have immensely contributed to the growth of fiction in English. Colonial and post-colonial India are divisions that are no more relevant to a historian than a litterateur because Indian English literature has transcend the barriers of petty classifications and has almost become part of mainstream English Literature. A major contribution in this regard has been of Indian writers, like Rushdie and Naipaul, who live as world citizens – a global manifestation of the exile condition. Indian English writers like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Sunetra Gupta, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Hari Kunjru have all made their names while residing abroad. The non-resident Indian writers have explored their sense of displacement – a perennial theme in all exile literature.

V. S. Naipaul, the noble laureate of 2001, is a literary giant revered all over the world. Out of the twenty – seven fiction and non-fiction works, his fame primarily rests on *A House for Mr. Biswas*, a fiction with autobiographical nature. Most of Naipaul's works revolve around the theme of displacement and exile. His choice of themes basically reflects his nomadic feelings, who, despite his long stay of twenty seven years at Wiltshire Cottage in London, feels himself an alien and an outsider there. *A House for Mr. Biswas* delineates with the theme of exile in detail. Biswas undergoes a process of acculturation and socialization, but his story is equally about

his alienation, about belonging to a particular society yet living in “exile” from it, is his unrealized ambitions. Through his protagonist, Naipaul tries to communicate the painful and traumatic experiences of an immigrant.

The sense of isolation, alienation and loss that was born in sensitive writers of the twentieth century informs the literature of that age. The theme of exile is so pervasive in this century that it may be called the literature of exile.

The present paper, *The Diaspora Indian Writer and Exile Literature: V.S.Naipaul’s A House for Mr. Biswas* aims to find the relation of Naipaul and Biswas as exile.

International literature in English is now enriched by the writers of diaspora, exile and immigration. The sense of isolation, alienation and loss that was born in sensitive writers of the twentieth century informs the literature of that age. The theme of exile is so pervasive in this century that it may be called the literature of exile. Edward said, in his recent book “Reflections on exile”, a collection of essays writes in the title essay:

Exile is strangely compelling to think about terrible to experience. It is the unbearable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home; it’s essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile’s life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever. (Edward 173)

Indian writers of diaspora have immensely contributed to the growth of fiction in English. Colonial and post-colonial India are divisions that are no more relevant to a historian than a litterateur because Indian English literature transcends the barriers of petty classifications and has almost become part of mainstream English Literature. A major contribution in this regard

has been of Indian writers, like Rushdie and Naipaul, who live as world citizens – a global manifestation of the exile condition. Indian English writers like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Sunetra Gupta, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Hari Kunjru have all made their names while residing abroad. The non-resident Indian writers have explored their sense of displacement – a perennial theme in all exile literature. Their concerns are global as today's world is afflicted with the problems of immigrants, refugees, and all other exiles. These exilic states give birth to the sense of displacement and rootlessness.

The present paper, *The Diaspora Indian Writer and Exile Literature: V.S.Naipaul's A House for Mr. Biswas* aims to find the relation of Naipaul and Biswas as exile. *A House for Mr. Biswas* delineates with the theme of exile and alienation in detail. Through his protagonist, Naipaul tries to communicate the painful and traumatic experiences of an immigrant. The indefinite article "A" used in the title indicates intensity of his desire to belong somewhere to feel at home, to get rid of alienation.

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, the noble laureate of 2001, is a literary giant revered all over the world. Out of the twenty seven fiction and nonfiction works, his fame primarily rests on *A house of Mr. Biswas*, a fiction with autobiographical nature. The theme of the novel is modelled on his father Seepasad Naipaul and it depicts his poignant struggle to become a writer.

Naipaul is regarded as a mouthpiece of displacement and rootlessness by the critics and scholars of the field. Most of his works revolve around the theme of "displacement and exile". His choice of themes basically refers to his state of mind. The often repeated themes of alienation and exile, in fact, reflects the nomadic feelings of V.S. Naipaul's , who, despite his long stay of twenty seven years at Wiltshire Cottage in London, feels himself an alien and outsider there. Even his long stay and professional success failed to motivate him to establish an emotional bond with the country of his adoption. His remark clearly reflects this: "London is my metropolitan centre; it is my commercial centre and yet I know that it is a kind of italicise limbo and that I am a refugee in the sense that I am always peripheral. One's concerns are not the concerns of the local people" (Joshi 84).

V.S. Naipaul seems to have a very complex personality. He is an Indian Brahmin uprooted from the land of his ancestors. It is a known fact that his grandfather migrated to Trinidad as

an indentured labourer. Secondly, he is West Indian by his birth and growth. Finally, he lives as an expatriate in London because of his self-made exile. Obviously, these three factors are largely responsible for the shaping of his personality. Indeed, they are important in the making up of his mind.

Naipaul's writings and interviews have always focused on the loneliness, sense of exile and alienation, the perpetual disturbance, the hollow in his heart. Though Indian by origin, he was born and brought up in Trinidad. He grew up in "multicultural society of Trinidad, peopled by migrants from four continents. He was a part of a joint Hindu family with its rigid clannish and suffocating atmosphere. He was an alien in the midst of other aliens" (Chakroberty 46). Later he migrated to England, but he could not find himself attached to any place. He feels that he is "eternally an outsider – an Indian in the West Indies, a West Indian in England, and as described by men – nomadic intellectual in the non descript third world" (Nagrajan).

In the novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the main character Biswas undergoes a process of acculturation and socialization, but his story is equally about his alienation, about belonging to a particular society yet living in "exile" from it in his unrealised ambitions. In writing the novel, Naipaul turns to his father's life and writings, but he also draws from his own experience of exile to create Biswas sense of alienation and estrangement in the colony that he could not leave but which the author did.

Constant separation from the family fields Mohan Biswas with the sense of loneliness and alienation. Social acceptance and recognition are necessary for the sense of security, but Mohan Biswas never had either of these. His marginalisation started with his birth. He was born in reverse position and had six fingers in his hand and due to these signs; Pundit Sitaram who made his horoscope predicted that he would be a spendthrift, a lecher with an unlucky sneeze and warned that his father should not see his face until twenty one days of his birth. The midwife in the house predicted that Mohun would be responsible for the death of his parents, that he would, "eat up his father and mother" (*A House for Mr. Biswas* 12). Later in his life, he was often reminded of this prediction made by Pundit, and it always increased the bitterness that already pervaded his heart and made him feel more miserable. It further aggravated his sense of loneliness. While he was only a boy, his brother's, Pratap and Prasad used to enjoy themselves by roaming around in the village, swimming in to the ponds and

rivers while he was compelled to stay at home, where the only option for him was to play with his sister Dehuti. Thus he was alienated from his family. Often he used to crave to see the outside world, to roam freely like others. But for him “life was unpleasant only because the Pundit had forbidden him to go near ponds and rivers” (AHfMB18). After the death of his father he was admitted to a school but here he was regularly flogged by his teacher Mr. Lal, who once “ordered him to write I AM AN ASS on the blackboard” (AHfMB 46). Thus the constant humiliation and physical and mental abuse casted negative impact on his personality and gradually he developed a kind of animosity towards people and became more isolated and lonely. After studying here for six years, Biswas was sent to Pundit Jairam to learn religious scriptures and to get training for the profession of a Pundit. His sense of self respect got hurt when he was closed flogged and ill treated by Pundit Jairam. While expelling him from his house, Pundit Jairam spoke in a very harsh and cruel manner “you will never make a pundit. I was talking the other day to Sitaram, who read your horoscope. You killed your father. I am not going to let you destroy me” (AHfMB 55).

Mohan Biswas chance marriage to Shama made him a son in law of Tulsi’s. It was a large, very large joint family. Here he was expected to merge his personal identity with Tulsi’s in exchange to food and shelter that he receives. But this was not an easy task for him. He felt trapped. His instant reaction “He was married. Nothing now, except death, could change that,” (AHfMB 102) explain his mental state. The joint family of Tulsis, with its at least two hundred members used to live under one roof. By the virtue of his marriage with Shama, Biswas automatically become a member of this family. Immediately after his marriage he realized that this marriage would not give him any happiness. Under the influence of this belief, he could not develop healthy marital relationship with his Shama, even he was a newly married groom, following his policy of caution, he had not attempted to establish any relation with her. Later he returned to his house in Pagotes. Then his aunt Tara visited Hanuman House and after her return, Biswas asked her whether she liked Shama, her reply, “that it was none of her business; and this hurt Mr. Biswas, for it emphasized his loneliness” (AHfMB 103). Later, one the same evening, as he peddled towards Hanuman House, he was so unhappy that “he wondered how many nights he would spend behind the closed façade of Hanuman House” (AHfMB 103). As he had no other option he returned to Hanuman House but here everybody except Shama was a stranger to him and often he would feel depressed as “it was a strain, living in a house full of people and talking to one person alone” (AHfMB

107). Thus all these incidents made Biswas feel more and more lonely. While all other Tulsis-in-Laws accepted this situation, but throughout his life Biswas made serious efforts to revolt against it. Their differences of opinion and ideology created wide gap between them and he used to feel himself all alone in that large family ___even Shama, his wife, would not share his problems. The indifference of Shama intensified his alienation. Once, when he was brutally beaten by Govind, in the presence of Shama, she neither tried to intervene nor consoled him after the incident, rather she “had maintained her martyr’s attitude throughout...” (AHfMB 139). From her appearances and gestures she made him to feel guilty, as if only he was responsible for the entire episode. Had he just one person, just one person whom he could reveal his heart, he might have felt less isolated. But he was destined to suffer in isolation.

Mr. Biswas’ only desire was to live according to the desire of his heart but he had neither money, nor job, so he felt enormous pressure on him as “he was expected to become a Tulsis” (AHfMB 99), to merge his identity into the Tulsidom but “at once he rebelled” (AHfMB 99). Yet with his unflinching spirit, he somehow managed his calm and even the worst circumstances could not break him down. Every effort of Mr. Biswas to become self-dependent was curbed down mercilessly. When he revealed his heart to Govind, another son-in-law that he would like to earn for himself, “to paddle his own canoe” (AHfMB 108), he immediately revealed it to Seth and it antagonized everybody in the family against him. Seth rebuked him in the presence of everybody:

“So we want somebody to work on the estate. Is nice to keep these things in the family. And what you say? You want to paddle your own canoe. Look at him!’ Seth said to the hall. ‘Biswas the paddler.’ ‘It runs in the family,’ Seth said, ‘They tell me your father was a great diver. But where has all your paddling got you so far?’” (AHfMB 112).

He was criticized and humiliated publicly but nobody tried to defend him and naturally he felt that in the entire Tulsis family, he had not a single soul to sympathize with him.

Biswas was then, compelled to work at the estate at Green Vale. Away from his family it was a kind of exile for Mohun Biswas who had to stay here in the company of antagonized labourers. Here he remained in such a pathetic condition that at times he undergoes a strange mindset and once at the time of this fury, when his wife Shama sent a message that she was

bringing the children there for a few days, he immediately indulged in all kinds of negative thoughts. Naipaul describes it in a poignant manner:

“Mr. Biswas waited for them with dread. On the day they were to arrive he began to wish for some accident that would prevent their coming. But he knew there would be no accident. If anything was to happen he had to act. He decided that he had to get rid of Anand and Savi and himself, in such a way that the children would never know who had killed them. All morning he was possessed of vision in which never know who had killed them. All morning he was possessed of visions in which he cutlasses, poisoned, strangled, burned, Anand and Savi; so that even before they came his relationship with them had been perverted. About Myna and Shama he didn't care; he did not wish to kill them” (AHfMB 284-85).

Later, during his stay with Anand he tells him “I am not your father. God is your father....I am just somebody. Nobody at all. I am just a man you know” (AHfMB 291). It explains the turbulent mental condition Biswas was passing through. He found himself totally incapable to establish any emotional bond with his family members and that further intensified his alienation.

This gradually separated him from others even from Shama. Biswas stayed in the Tulsi house for quite a long period yet he felt himself all alone, trapped and confined in one room. Here he remained alienated throughout his stay, often his wife Shama found him muttering that he was “‘trapped’ in a ‘hole’. ‘Trap’, she heard him say over and over. ‘That’s what your family do to me. Trap me in this hole’” (AHfMB 232).

As he is unable to confide on anybody, his inability to establish relation with other members of the family made him more isolated. The members of the Tulsi clan were dull. Somehow Biswas could not adjust with it. At the Hanuman house his status was that of a total stranger as “he mattered little to the house. His status there was now fixed. He was troublesome and disloyal, and could not be trusted. He was weak and therefore contemptible” (AHfMB 104).

Thus all the time while he remained at Hanuman House he received only “the aggrieved and aggressive stares” (AHfMB 134). If he had to accommodate with the rules of Hanuman

House it would be to stoop to the state of a slave. Therefore he resists it with all his power. He struggles up to the last to “release himself from the clutches of a stifling and suffocating world, symbolized by Hanuman House” (Chakroberty 46). He remained a stranger even till the end.

It was his sense of alienation that motivated him to search for a house. House was a great need in his life, as it becomes a symbol of personal identity, solace, self-respect and independence, the elements he was deprived of throughout his life. Ultimately when he purchased a house at Sikkim Street, it brought an end to his constant struggle. This house, though heavily loaned, yet here he was not at the mercy of anybody, rather he was his own master. He was experienced the sense of belongingness for the first time in his life. It evoked sense of security in him and strengthened his decaying relationship with the family. Here, he “found himself in his own house, on his own half lot of land, his own portion of earth” (2). It was an end of his exile and alienation, now he was perfectly at peace and at last gracefully in his house.

A House of Mr. Biswas gains its symbolic eminence because of its background of deprivation, crowding and insecurity which make the possession of a private dwelling an ideal goal for an inhabitant of Trinidad. The various lodging places have all their draw backs. Hanuman House is authoritarian and oppressive in its organization, the houses at the chase and Green Vale are unbearable burdens because of the uncertainties surrounding their constructions, the short hills and Port of Spain buildings are dispiriting because of their rapid deterioration under the hands of the exploitation Tulsī family. These lodging places from a backdrop and they at the same time motivate Mr. Biswas towards his goal.

The novel renders Biswas complexity and provisionally resolves the tension within the outer between his Trinidad Indian heritage and his metropolitan experiences and attitudes. The author achieves this balance and resolution prove and intimacy with his father’s esprit and through the distanced perspective of exile. The experience of exile also have a different, countereffect, however: it works to the value the society that the author has left. There is a sense in which the novel is about Naipaul’s fear of what would have happen to him had he remained in Trinidad, thus, Biswas unfinished manuscript “escape” signifies not only that characters unrealized dream of becoming an author, but also a son’s apprehensive vision of what might have become of his own carrier had he stayed on the West Indian Island.

A house for Mr. Biswas is a collaborative creation between a son and his father's life and writings. This is not to say that the novel is a biography, that Mohan Biswas and Seepersad Naipaul are one and the same, but that the fictional creation emerges from the son's forging into art of the father's life and writings and his transformation of their voices by filtering them through his own. The son inherits the father's dream of becoming a writer, and by becoming a writer he in turn creates a fiction of his father and his father's dream. When one reads *A House for Mr Biswas*, one can easily observe that the sense of alienation that the protagonists Mohun Biswas experiences in his fictional life is the very sense that Naipaul has experienced in his real life.

Biswas emerges, as well, from the experience of alienation within Naipaul's exile: in Biswas' not belonging, is Naipaul's: his sense of being an outsider is also Naipaul's. Mr. Biswas does not revolt against established customs because of social or political beliefs. His revolt is against any value system which denies the intrinsic importance of man, denies freedom and dignity. Biswas's heroic struggle to attain dignity and fulfil his aspirations, as reflected in his desire to own a house becomes an allegory of the attempt to emancipate oneself from colonial, determinist dependence. To him a house, is not simply where one lives. It is one's identity – national, cultural and spiritual.

Naipaul's early views can be seen as part of the continuing conflict found in all societies between those who seek a better world abroad and those who stay at home and find sufficient cultural nourishment in their local community. He appears to be a writer who has preferred exile to home, but continues to write home and its problems. To sum it up, it has rightly been said by Chandrashekharan, "One good thing about Indians: Though one can take an Indian out of India, one cannot take India out of an Indian".

He is a product of three cultures: the West Indies, Indian and England. For many years he thought of home not as England but as India. While other writers have attempted to set down roots in London or Paris, Naipaul attempted to settle in India. The experience of that failure is recorded in *An Area of Darkness* (1964), where Naipaul discovers that, despite his Indian upbringing, he is essentially western. The East shocks him with its disregard for individual dignity, its fatalism, its mythical retreat from reality and its lack of energy. He is shocked by Indians uncleanliness, feudalism, and disregard for facts.

Speaking in an interview, Naipaul confirms the above idea saying “When I speak about being an exile or a refugee, I am not just using a metaphor, I am speaking literally” (Evans 62). It is clear that even after having lived in England for many years, he, still, has not had the sense of belonging, as he says: “I still had that nervousness in a new place, that rawness of response, still felt myself to be in the other man’s country, felt my strangeness, my solitude” {Naipaul 7}. He is, as Mohit K. Ray articulates, “an Indian in the West Indies, a West Indian in England, and a nomadic intellectual in a postcolonial world” (Mohit 208). In a recent interview after his latest book, *The Masque of Africa: Glimpses of African Belief*, when asked that when he went to see a fortune teller in West Africa on his recent journey, what did he really asked. He replied that he always ask them the same questions, will he own a house of his one day and will he find emotional satisfaction with someone. So, this explains it all, that Naipaul till date is in search of his grounds which automatically shift to the characters he creates in his writings.

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