



THE FEELING OF ALIENATION AND DERELICTION IN V.S. NAIPAUL'S *A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS*

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ABSTRACT

V.S. Naipaul, a Trinidad-born British author of Indian origin is an eminent commonwealth writer. He has been recognized as a literary giant, one of the finest writers in the English language today. Rootlessness and alienation form the dominant themes of Naipaul's best novels. His novels show his obsession with the lot of the Caribbean people – their displacement, exile, dispossession, alienation and isolation. He analyses how the colonial experience of displacement and the consequent experience of acculturation inevitably lead to a larger problem of a lost centre resulting in utter disorder and confusion everywhere. Disorganization, absurdity, cruelty, brutality and insensitivity which threaten man's existence have become the main characteristic of the new world. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Naipaul deals sensitively with the East Indians' struggle to find a foothold in the New World. In this novel, he goes deep into the psyche of an individual to reveal his craving of an authentic selfhood. This novel delineates the entire story of Mohan Biswas from birth to death in which his relentless struggle is mentioned against odds. But ultimately he is successful in finding a house which is not normally possible for a man like him having limited resources. This is not his individual story but becomes a social history of the East Indians of Trinidad. There is no doubt a description of cultural ambivalence but the focus is over East Indians' efforts to get foothold in a New World.

Key- Words: V.S. Naipaul, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, alienation, dereliction, rootlessness

In colonial society, a kind of alienation from original culture and a search for selfhood is perceptible. A kind of a crisis of identity of the colonized has been the main plank in the novels of Naipaul. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Naipaul deals sensitively with the East Indians' struggle to find a foothold in the New World. In this novel, he goes deep into the psyche of an individual to reveal his craving of an authentic selfhood. This novel delineates the entire story of Mohan Biswas from birth to death in which his relentless struggle is mentioned against odds. But ultimately he is successful in finding a house which is not normally possible for a man like him having limited resources. This is not his individual story but becomes a social history of the East Indians of Trinidad. There is no doubt a description of cultural ambivalence but the focus is over East Indians' efforts to get foothold in a New World.

This novel marks a turning point in his career because it combines the frivolous comic spirit of the early novels and the depth and maturity of the later ones. It reveals Naipaul's compassionate concern for the uprooted and unprivileged East Indians living in the ex-colony of the West Indies. Dr. R.S. Pathak has rightly mentioned, "this novel is a sensitive presentation of the dilemma of the Indian immigrant's fractured



consciousness, resulting from factors like transplantation, exploitation, rootlessness and so on".(Commonwealth Fiction 152)

In this novel, Naipaul has a deeper grasp of the themes of dereliction, dispossession, isolation and search for identity. He analyses the failure, futility and aimlessness of the uprooted people of the Hindu community who have been affected by the experience of more than one culture. Being born and brought up in an alien land and living in a mixed and pattern less society they have been unable to develop an organized personality which is necessary for the formation of true identity.

The 'house' which is central and guiding principle of the novel is a symbol of a place where a man can assert his individuality and live with an air of respectability. Mr. Biswas, a member of the second generation of the dislocated and rootless Hindu community aspires to acquire a house of his own :

His search for a house was a search for independent existence, a search of belonging to the world in a way that conferred upon him a significance . . . (55)

Acquisition of a house becomes an obsession with Biswas and he attempts to build it at many places one after the other. However, all his attempts to do so are ruthlessly thwarted by his society (represented here by the Tulsi family) which offers no scope for individuality.

In a most heroic manner Biswas determines to fulfill his dream by fighting out the oppressive forces of his cruel society. At last the New World hero gets success in his attempts and starts leading an independent life in his house along with his family. But ironically, it happens not long before he falls a martyr to the oppression of his society. The hostile world ultimately even takes away his life.

In this novel, Naipaul has fully explored the various modes of colonial exploitation – political, social, racial, cultural, economic, educational and above all psychological. He searches deep into the subtle areas of experience which come to shape the personality and behaviour of the unprivileged people in the colonies under British rule. He ironically hints at the British strategy to reduce the local people to 'mimic men' of their white masters. These 'faceless men' lead an absolutely purposeless and ridiculous existence.

In order to ironically demonstrate his vision of colonial oppression and exploitation, Naipaul has fictionalized a special set up of Tulsidom. Tulsidom is ironically presented as a replica of the colonial system in miniature. The Hanuman House with its fortress like walls drives the spirit of slavery. The Hanuman House ironically symbolizes the regimentation of life which Biswas fights against throughout his life. It is symbolic of darkness, stagnation and decay.

Hanuman House stood like an alien white
fortress..... bulky, impregnable and blank
windowless slightly sinister (51)

The fortress of Hanuman House also symbolizes the orthodox and conservative Hindu society of Trinidad. By presenting Tulsidom as the monolith of conventions' Naipaul has attacked illiteracy, ritualism and conservatism of the tradition ridden Hindu community in the West Indies. He ridicules the traditional Hindu community which is content to live in a shell and blindly stick to its rituals and customs, without questioning their real significance. He believes that these rituals are the unnatural social and racial impediments which tend to thwart the growth of personality and individuality of the people of a community. Such a society offers only failure and discontent. That is why Naipaul's protagonist refuses to surrender to the meaninglessness, void and darkness of Tulsidom and breaks away from it to live an independent life.

Biswas decides to fight against the oppressively traditional Tulsi family and conquer the superstitiousness, fatalism and ritualism of his community which it has inherited from its ancestors :

A house for Mr. Biswas can be seen as the struggle of a man not naturally rebellious but in whom rebellion is inspired by the forces of ritual, myth and custom - Mrs. Tulsi, her dead husband Seth and



the others at Hanurnan House just about personify the fierce and demanding 'Pantheons of the Hindu Gods' (78)

Though the surface story of *A House for Mr. Biswas* only gives a biographical sketch of Mr. Biswas, beginning with his inauspicious birth in a Trinidad village and ending with his death in Port of Spain as a 'sacked journalist at the age of forty six', yet the soft ironic touch that underlines the whole story reveals some deeper meanings. The very name Mohan as given to the protagonist is ironic. As we read in the novel Mohan means "the beloved The name given by the milkmaids to Lord Krishna". (17). But here this name has been ironically given to the most neglected child in the family - necessary to no one and dependent on everywhere.

Biswas is an unwelcome child in the family because the midwife at the time of his birth predicts that he being born six-fingered and "born in the wrong way at midnight, "The inauspicious hour." (16) would bring disastrous misfortune for the family and "eat up his own mother and father". (16). The Pundit also prophecies that he would bring bad luck for the family. He also predicts that his potential for spreading disaster would be reduced if he were kept away from water and trees, it might be coincidence or it might have been fated, but water and trees play a pivotal role in Biswas' life.

Like Oedipus he is fated to kill his father, unlike Oedipus he fulfils his 'prophecy' in the most ridiculous way (*Critical Perspectives*, 84):

Biswas is always considered to be ill fated and unnecessary by all the members of his family. The total lack of love from anyone in the family leaves Biswas emotionally bewildered and absurd. His poor physique makes him look all the more absurd. He has "the shallowest of chests, the thinnest of limbs and a soft rising belly." (12)

After he receives an elementary education along with severe flogging, he is sent to Pandit Jairam's house. Then he is made to work at Ajodha's rum shop, where he is cruelly treated by Bhandit. He feels too frustrated here and his frustration is often expressed in his grotesque actions like spitting in the rum shops. He is made to move from one place to another aimlessly and purposelessly. The purposelessness and nothingness of his life is clearly revealed in the very first lesson he is taught. 'Ought oughts are ought' i.e. 'nothing comes out of nothing'.

Ultimately Biswas becomes a sign painter and is seen entrapped into the Tulsi family after he marries Shama, one of the Tulsi daughters. While he was expecting to achieve some security in the Tulsi family, ironically he is faced by total oppression of the various Tulsi members. In fact they have totally abdicated their individuality and live like slaves always following the dictates of the arch colonizers..

Biswas' heroic struggle to attain dignity and fulfill his aspirations, as reflected in his desire to own his own house, becomes an allegory of the attempt to emancipate oneself from colonial/determinist dependence (*Critical Perspectives*, 133)

The whole plot of the novel revolves around the problems which confront Biswas as he tries to assert his individuality in a hostile world. Because of his individualism, he is ridiculed and humiliated by the Tulsis. He is labeled as 'Biswas, the paddler' by Seth. He is called a 'serpent', a 'creole' the worst insulting word used for the East Indian Hindus. He is even beaten by a person like Govind. Whenever he indulges in any act of individualism, he is asked to appear before the family tribunal, because assertion of one's identity is considered to be the biggest sin and crime in the Hanuman House.

As a consequence of such kind of environment, he develops odd habits like bathing continuously for a long time, reading the newspapers pasted on the walls and repeating meaningless and irritating words to himself. Biswas has been depicted as a typical eccentric whose buffoonery and grotesqueness provoke boisterous laughter. He is a joker who cuts joke and fills the novel with his play of humour. "When it was necessary to be solemn he was a clown, when pious, he was blasphemous, when he was supposed to be appreciative, he was ungrateful." (William Walsh, 39)



Too much of frustration and mental agony paralyse Biswas completely and he is unable to carry out his work at the Tulsi shop. Ultimately he is sent to The Chase to run an independent shop. But all his ventures here end in utter failure. He feels too lonely and has a constant feeling that his stay here is only temporary. "How lonely the shop was! And how frightening.... afraid to disturb the silence, afraid to open the door of the shop, to step into the light . . ."(130)

His mental condition becomes miserable and his personality faces total disintegration. Out of desperation he says in front of his dog Tarzan, "You are an animal and think that because I have a head and hands and look as I did yesterday, I am a man. I am deceiving you. I am not whole." (241).

His recovery from the mental disintegration begins during his semi-independent occupation of the rented house in Port of Spain where he spends fifteen years of his life. The city helps him to become a social being and he now wants to involve himself in the world around him. Moreover he gets a job as a journalist which wins him respectability in the society. It also rescues him from the total collapse because writing for him is an assertion of independence. It is ironic that Biswas gets his provisional appointment as a journalist on his writing a grotesque feature 'Daddy comes home in a coffin'.

Somewhere in America in a neat little red-roofed cottage four children ask their mother every day, "Mummy, when is Daddy coming home ? (295)

However, the vision of his own house sustains Mr. Biswas throughout all these years of instability of mind. Ultimately he succeeds in acquiring his own house and settles in it along with his family. The house at Sikkim Street assumes a greater importance among every other relationship. Now he is absolutely free and no more a mere object in the hands of the Tulsis. He is happy that Shama has become loyal to him and does not desert him any more as she used to do earlier by running frequently to the Hanuman House. "But bigger than them all was the house, his house." (12) The biggest irony is that the house acquired by Mr. Biswas after a life-long struggle is mortgaged to his uncle Ajodhya.

.....Biswas, whose life long ambition is the ownership of a house - to him it means security and comfort - must find himself inescapably trapped with his newly bought house : the suggestion is that of failure and defeat implicitly present within every kind of fulfilment.

However, unlike Naipaul's early novels, irony here is not destructive in any sense. It strikes a hopeful note in the face of man's helplessness. Though he has achieved only partial independence yet this independence means a lot to him. Biswas is able to 'lay claim to his portion of earth' before he dies, As we read in the Prologue,

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, worst to have lived without even attempt to lay claim to one's portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated. (12-13).

The house acquired by Biswas represents his success in turning the traditional passivity of his religion and society into a more purposive activity. His passivity and inaction change into his active participation in the shaping of events. His career emerges as a great possibility and hope for the destitute, the degraded and harassed people. In fact, like Biswas, Naipaul himself seems to be caught by the love-hate relationship with Hinduism.

As influenced by the Western culture, the people of Trinidad behave in an imitative and artificial manner. While mimicking their white ex-masters in a most ludicrous manner, they look too absurd. As we read in the novel Biswas pretends to look too absurd. As we read in the novel Biswas pretends to look modern and behaves in a ridiculous manner. Once when Anand, on sipping Coca Cola remarks 'It is like horse-pee' Biswas tells him 'You've got to stop talking like that. You are in Port of Spain now'. Naipaul strongly protests against such mimicry of the East Indian people.



The people of the Hindu community of Trinidad have been depicted in this novel as leading a fantasy existence. Unable to adjust themselves to the environment of Trinidad, they continuously dream of going back to India though they very well know that this dream of theirs is never going to be fulfilled.

They. . . were not interested in the land where they lived; it was place where they had come for a short time and stayed longer than they expected. They continually talked of going back to India, but when the opportunity came, many refused, afraid of the unknown, afraid to leave the familiar temporaries. (174)

We see that in this novel, Naipaul has delineated his vision of the overall predicament of the protagonist depicting his physical as well as spiritual sufferings. At the spiritual level, Biswas is often haunted by a feeling of loneliness, void and meaninglessness in his life. The image of the boy standing all alone near a wayside as glimpsed by Biswas ironically depicts the futility of man's life. The meaninglessness, alienation and homelessness, is the fate that awaits the child and everyone else in this world.

The sun fell, and in the short dusk they passed a lonely hut set in a clearing far back from the road. Smoke came from under the ragged thatched caves; the evening meal was being prepared. And, in the gloom, a boy was leaning against the hut, his hands behind him, starting at the road (171)

In this passage the novelist has depicted man's perennial existential dilemma, his placelessness and helplessness to dispel the eternal fear of getting lost in the chaos around him.

The whole novel has been structured in a way that while at the superficial level it reveals the total vision of a dislocated and alienated man, at a deeper level it expresses the novelist's higher vision of cosmic homelessness, loneliness and meaninglessness of life. The novel depicts man's futility in the face of the hostile natural forces which act against man. However, while emphasizing human frailty and failure the novelist does recognize the value of hope and reconciliation in the face of odds. Irony, that ranges from lightly humorous to profoundly somber expressions helps the novelist in reaching new levels of exploration of the deeper human experience. It is with the help of his irony that Naipaul has been able to elevate the regional theme of dereliction to the cosmic placelessness and homelessness, transcending all the regional barriers. *A House for Mr. Biswas* is undoubtedly a novel on an epic scale, embodying the subtle existential and metaphysical overtones of human experience.

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