

Towards The Path of Exploring: Unhoused and Unnecessary in 'A House for Mr. Biswas'

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***Abstract:** This paper entitled Towards The Path of Exploring: Unhoused and Unnecessary In 'A House for Mr. Biswas' pursuits and analyses the psychological forces viz. disgust and anguish which create the feeling of alienation and fragmentation within a person in the colonial world. Under the light of Naipaul's novel A House for Mr. Biswas, it attempts to reveal the hardships of the postcolonial people, endure in their search for self-identity and self-esteem in Caribbean society. Also, it's intended to make an in-depth and insightful study of the existential predicaments, complications, contradictions and endeavours of the protagonist named Mr. Biswas and other major characters. It also explores those crucial circumstances in which of being alienated, Mr. Biswas deteriorates himself as homeless and rootless in Carole society. While reflecting the theory of mimicry by Homi K. Bhaba, this paper also touches the social and cultural issues by which the individuality of a particular person is affected, decayed and disordered. To accomplish the theme of present research paper effectively, the major aim is to discuss Trinidad, Naipaul's birthplace, is so important that can't be simply overlooked in his life.*

***Keywords:** Colonialism, postcolonial, imperialism, nostalgia, fragmentation, disgust, mimicry, alienation, immigrants, rootlessness, homelessness*

"Nor fame, nor power, nor love, nor leisure.

Others I see whom these surround

Smiling they live, and call life pleasure:

To me that cup has been dealt in another measure."

(Shelley, P.B. CCXXVII 24-27)

The sense of alienation and fragmentation in these lines is bred and articulated from that of detachment and division of the personal feelings of the poet which he observes at his surroundings. What Shelley felt in romantic age has become more acute in the modern age with

man's inner inconsistencies and existential incompatibilities exacerbating the schism. 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 and alienation is so pervasive in twentieth century literature that it may be called the literature of exile. Chakrabharti considers that it reflects the general disillusionment that beset the two post-war generations and deep spiritual isolation felt by man in a universe in which he felt himself to be inconsequential and stranger. (Chakrabharti 2005:46)

At present, the most rational debate characterizes West Indian literature as a tradition within a tradition, an outgrowth and extension of the western mode of writing. This creates an environment of literature just like the colonial experiences of the West Indian writers who are striving to find an identity for themselves and their dexterity that's distinct from the borrowed forms of the colonial authorities. West Indian fiction is distinctive for its intense social consciousness faced by a society formed through slavery and colonialism whose values have never been defined before, the novelists in the West Indies must recreative experience and simultaneously create the standards against which such experiences must be judged.

One of the best-known writers of post imperialism society is Naipaul, V(idiadhara) S(urajprasad), the accomplished novelist from the English speaking Caribbean, once commented on the contents of his literary works, "I feel that any statement that I make about my own work would be misleading. The work is there: the reader must see what meaning, if any the work has for him. All I would like to say is that I consider my non-fiction as integral part of my work" (James 1976:102-3). In *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*, Chinua Achebe accuses Joseph Conrad and Naipaul of racism on the grounds that in certain respects, they use their remarkably powerful creative myth of the African as pathologically primitive (Achebe 1988: 2).

Fragmentation, alienation, and exile are common terms associated with postcolonial literature. Needless to say, "Imperialism played a key role in bringing a sense of alienation and disorder to the countries where imperialists ruled" (Parag 2008:135). Homi K. Bhaba states, essentially:

Colonial discourse wants the colonized to be extremely like, but by no means identical. If there were an absolute equivalence between the two, then the ideologies justifying colonial rule would be unable to operate. This is because these ideologies assume that there is structural non-equivalence, a split between superior and inferior which explains why any one groups of people can dominant another at all. (Huddart 2005: 59)

Naipaul used variety of techniques to explore his own former status as colony, as margin to the centre of dominant imperial powers. Undoubtedly, the 'colonial experiences' is the theme that confronts each West Indian writer, and his attempt is a resolute confrontation between

himself, his inner needs and his history. Writing in the New York Reviews of books about Naipaul, Joan Didion said:

“[. . .] the world Naipaul sees is of course no void at all”: it’s a world dense with physical and social phenomena, brutally alive with the complications and contradictions of actual human endeavours [. . .]. This world of Naipaul is in fact incharged with what can only be described as a romantic view of reality, an almost unbearable tension between the idea and the physical fact. (Handibag 2010:1)

Naipaul deals with shifting identities, roots, homes and changing realities of migrants. In Naipaul, the sense of fragmentation comes across his deep and unshakable sense of loss, of being perpetual outside. Naipaul’s belief in a new form of autonomy for the human is liberating. He is a writer who encourages us continually to question, to write about the world with the freedom of a person with no home, no country, and no affiliations. He describes the people who had to abandon their own countries and found themselves in strange places, without friends with few loyalties and with the feeling that they are trespassing. Worse, their lives have been totally altered, for them there is no going back; they have fled, each to his separate limbo and their existence is like that of souls in a classical underworld. For Naipaul, the West Indies consists of races that have been uprooted from their original societies and have not produced a new culture, to replace, to replace what was lost.

Naipaul has written extensively about different aspects of post colonial society, viewed from post colonial perspective Naipaul’s novels become a fascinating study of the diasporans, “*their sense of loss and gloom leading to unhappiness*” (Mishra 2009:45). But knowingly or unknowingly, whether he is writing a travelogue or novel, he tends to trace a self conscious symptomatic response to the need to discover an appropriate literary form to frame a “psychic and symbolic sense of homelessness” (Ball 2003:90). In Naipaul’s writing there is a longing for certain whole state of being; however this desire is coupled with the knowledge that such authenticity has been ruptured by the history of colonialism and that’s impossible to return to any pure cultural and historical origin or wholeness. (Boxhill 1976:81)

Homi K. Bhaba describes the effect of colonization as a result of mimicry, he continues to argue that mimicry ‘does not merely “rupture” the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixed the colonial subject as a “partial” presence’ (Huddart 2005: 60-61).

[. . .] ‘*mimicry is at once resemblance and menace*’ [. . .]. This means that in a way the colonizer ‘spooks himself’: he fantasizes endless monstrous stereotypes that can only lead to anxiety rather than the desired certainty. (Huddart 2005: 61)

As a result of colonization, reality for the colonized was fragmented (they could not go back to the sources of their realities) thus they were continually in the process of searching for a sense of their own self, of coming to some senses of completion of themselves. But “*arriving is a process which can not come to an end*” (Cooke 1980:140).

Naipaul has unseverable emotional bond with Indian which remains for him an area of pain, an ache for which one has a great tenderness yet from which “fragmentation and rootlessness” are viewed in his works in the form of “anguish and defeat”. The fragmented society “demonstrates a disorder which originates from within” (Freed 2004: 69). Naipaul’s fiction thus acquire a three dimensional significance, historical, social and psychological and understandably Naipaul is at once a chronicler, historian and biographer (Iyer 2005:17).

Cultural and psychological rootlessness are inextricable. In addition the harsh conditions of colonialisms have left the west Indian crippling burdens of physical condition correspond so closely, the unhoused, poverty-stricken. West India is often culturally and spiritually dispossessed as well. (Boxhill 1976:49)

The ingredients such as: dislocation, confusion, disorder, mimicry, despair and utter rootlessness form the content of Naipaul’s fiction. The first three indicate a preliminary state of fragmentation. The second set, building upon the first, leads to an irreversible alienation from all previous ties. The phrase from “fragmentation to rootlessness” can easily be rephrased as “from disorder to rejection of all order” (Deodat 1979: 69).

V. S. Naipaul’s magnum opus, *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) can rightly be called a work of art that deals with the problems of isolation, frustration, anguish, negation of an individual as well as the exploration for identity. *A House for Mr. Biswas* is Naipaul’s unforgettable third novel, often regarded as his masterpiece, which tells the tragic comic story of the search for independence and identity of a Brahmin Indian living in Trinidad. The protagonist Mohun Biswas has been unlucky from his birth but all he wants of his own- it is the solid basis of his existence. Each section deals with different phases of Mr. Biswas’s life, follows his struggle in variety of Jobs, from sign painter to journalist. The story which fuses social comedy and pathos evokes a man’s quest for autonomy “against the backdrop of postcolonial Trinidad” (Gourevitch 1994:27).

A House for Mr. Biswas deals with the historical period of colonialism, indenture and the experiences of migration and displacement with respect to Trinidad. However, a rereading of *A House for Mr. Biswas* suggests that it’s an extraordinary narrative which evokes the memory of indenture and the post-indentured “*unaccommodated and unhoused*” man with psychological acuteness and emotional truth (Ramchand 1996:20). By a blind accident of history

they all find themselves “*unnecessary and unaccommodated*” and various painful feelings with futile attempt to save themselves from this.

Partly autobiographical, *A House for Mr. Biswas* delineates the traumas of a tainted and troubled past and the attempts to find a purpose in life, beautifully analyzing the sense of alienation and the pangs of exile experienced by the characters (Parag 2008 :135). Mr. Biswas is fully rounded and exists in the world of solid characters and exhaustive details. The stagnant, decaying Hindu world; the poverty and chaos of the Creole society; and the painful struggle of one man to rise above both, are all rendered with the authenticity that only historical truths will allow, and the artistry that only a truly talented writer can generate (Deodat 1979:53). *A House for Mr. Biswas* is Naipaul’s most profound attempt to dramatise his own integrated society. He admits as much:

“*At first I looked for this release in humour, but as the horizon of my writing expanded I sought to reconstruct my disintegrated society to impose order on the world [. . .] this is what happens when people are strong; this is what happens when people are weak. I had to find that degree of intellectual comfort or I would have gone mad*” (59).

Naipaul’s writing is suffused with a great melancholy and loneliness, and feels about him that he is “*under the volcano, homesick for homesick*” (Meyers 1948: 56). Naipaul himself is split into his characters in whom are manifested subtle shades of his “*emotions and traits*” (Adams 1989:474).

A House for Mr. Biswas is seen to concern with the lives of the poverty-stricken and riddled with the frustration and despair at the possibility of any liberal, radical or nationalist slogans improving the conditions that have caused such hardships in any way (Meyers 1948:27). The under lying theme of the work is the disorder and despair which fragmentation and rootlessness have spawned (Deodat 1979:70).

As Kenneth Ramchand notes, *A House for Mr. Biswas* is the West Indian novel of rootlessness par excellence and part of Naipaul’s re-achievement is that these theme work at a number of levels for various subjects simultaneously (Ramchand 1996:102). Naipaul presents a space in which his characters move and feel a sense of unease, a sense of not belonging at home or in the vocabulary of novel a “*familiar temporariness*” (Naipaul 2003:201). He found them haunted by the indenture syndrome of ancestors of “*unnecessary and unaccommodated*” (Naipaul 2003:8). Similarly, his characters inherit a kind of ‘neurosis’ of the past insecurity, madness, anguish, out of placement, defeat and rootlessness (Clemens 1982: 71).

Naipaul presents this vicious circuit in *A House for Mr. Biswas* as “self disgust led to anger, shouts, tears something to add to the concentrated hubbub of the evening, the nerve torn

helplessness” (Naipaul 2003:463). The condition of Mr. Biswas is too pitiable, who finds himself totally dipped into the ditch of frustration and disgust:

Everything he now saw become sullied by his fear, every field, every house, every tree, every turn in the road [. . .] so that by merely, looking at the world, he was progressively destroying his present and his past (Naipaul 2003: 281).

The house of course is the most powerful symbol in the novel and it represents unobtrusively the need for physical and spiritual “shelter”. The “need of shelter is shared as much by the Hindus and Creole society as by Mr. Biswas himself” (Ramchand 1996:60). Delineated in compassionate tones of Mr. Biswas, the house represents a search for emancipation from dependence. A “house” might well be a metaphor of the existentialist journey through life as well as a symbol of the fatalistic Indian philosophy (Parag 2008:136). Therefore, Mr. Biswas relentless fight to process his own house and steer clear of the grip of the Tulsi’s household is seen to parallel man’s need to develop a way of life which is uniquely his (Cooke 1980:73). Besides focusing on the dark world, the novel introduces brief glimpses of ethnic and social history, while maintaining equilibrium between Mr. Biswas’s innerself and the disinterested outer view. (74).

Naipaul concentrates on the struggle between the individual will or desire for a separate identity and the compelling will of the milieu, its anonymity of stifling corporate identity (74). In a “house” the West Indies takes the form of a spiritual desert in which major attempts at creativity and progress are meaningless. Socialization within this milieu involves forcing people to insignificant and robbing them of their free will.

Naipaul investigates this making of a new culture in a dominant feature of characters that are failures by their basic inability to express. He also realizes that their full creative potential is highly indicative of the colonial retardation with which the writer’s environment seems to afflicted, and which in Naipaulian formula reads: “*Ought oughts are ought, ought twos are ought*” (Naipaul 2003:43). Naipaul addresses the problem of alienation, exile and displacement with a positive approach. He presents Mr. Biswas relentless struggle against the forces that he tries to subdue his individuality.

Naipaul describes *A House for Mr. Biswas* in his non-fiction book, *Finding the Centre*, saying that it was very much my father’s book (Parag 2008: 136). Similarly, in his Nobel Award Ceremony acceptance speech, Naipaul alludes to *A House for Mr. Biswas*, saying that “intuition led me to a large book about our family life” (136).

From the very beginning, Mohun Biswas is depicted as marginalized individual in the limited world of Trinidad. Biswas flawed and inauspicious birth renders his childhood a travesty of the title, this phase of his life bears “*Pastoral*”.

His entrance has been described in the world as “*six fingered, and born in the wrong way*” (Naipaul II). He is fated to have an unlucky sneeze; he is warned never to go near water etc. Pundit also characterizes Biswas:

“First of all, the features of this unfortunate boy. He will have good teeth but that will be rather wide, and there will be spaces between them. I suppose you know what that means” (Naipaul 2003:12).

These inclinations towards being different are consistently shown not to derive from any laudable qualities. Biswas is acutely aware of his lack of physical endowment and attempts to pre-empt the ridicule of other people by poking fun at himself. Mr. Biswas is not sufficiently secure psychologically to survive without a support and identity offered by a family group, yet he constantly reels against the Tulsis household. He becomes a lonely individual who is trying to get a new social role but fails to find it. Aware of his loneliness and dilemma, Mr. Biswas tells his son, “I am just somebody. Nobody at all” (Naipaul 2003:284). Unlike, his father and brothers who have inherited the social identity of labourers, this can not be claimed by Mr. Biswas.

He looks after his uncle’s shop while his brothers work as labourers. After leaving his uncle’s shop, he takes up a job as sign painter, where he meets Shama, a daughter of the Tulsis, whom he later marries. His marriage makes him realize that life is not romance, but an act of responsibility. Without money and without dowry, Mr. Biswas has no choice, but to move in at Hanuman House. Hanuman House provides shelter to Mr. Biswas but wants total dilution of his identity in return. In a novel dominated by the Hinduism, “Hanuman House” is actually described in military terms:

[. . .] Hanuman House stood like an alien white fortress. The walls looked as thick as they were and when the narrow doors of the Tulsis store on the ground floor were closed the House became bulky, impregnable and blank. The side walls were window less and on the upper floor the window were more slits in the facades. (Naipaul 2003:81)

. While the “fortress” offers some protection to its older members who are incapable of dealing with the “new world” (Clemens 1982: 54), but Mr. Biswas finds out that he is unwanted in Hanuman House, where he is treated with indifference rather than hostility. As a hero, Mr. Biswas is never truly free of the Tulsis and whenever he seeks his freedom has to be bailed by members of the Tulsis clan, intensifying his subservience and sense of gratitude to them.

In the section entitled 'The Chase', Mr. Biswas begins his independent life with Shama. From the beginning, however, Mr. Biswas has the feeling that in Chase, he is unnecessary and unwanted. But he also thinks that life in Chase will help him discover his own identity, but it's the sense of isolation that looms large and he fails to find his authentic selfhood. Mr. Biswas now feels that despite hostility, he is recognized as a mimic man in Hanuman House. At Chase, he feels 'alienated' (Parag 2008:138).

Naipaul seeks to convey that a person's social identity depends on the society to which he belongs and that the family is sustaining and stabilizing experiences for marginalized individuals like Mr. Biswas. For Mr. Biswas, life is meaningless without Shama, his children, and even the Tulsis. So Mr. Biswas visits to Hanuman House more frequently.

Life at Green Vale is more distressing experience. Although Green Vale gives him a sense of freedom and importance, his actions in Green Vale are motivated by excessive insecurity both physically and mentally:

He waved the stick. He moved to the window and, looking at her, waving the stick, began to draw the bolt. 'Don't touch me, he bawled, and there were sobs mixed with his words [. . .]. He began screaming and crying. He pressed his palms on the window sill and tried to hoist himself up [. . .].
(Naipaul 2003: 288)

His dream to build a house begins to shape into reality somehow, he starts building his house in Green Vale but it's nowhere near the house of his dream. So the intensity of alienation and displacement continues and here too, he fails to gain acceptance as an individual.

The second part of the novel focuses on Port of Spain, a place that opens new avenues for Mr. Biswas. The city provides him with opportunities to establish him professionally, something he has long searched for. He becomes a reporter for the 'Trinidad Sentinel', with a salary of fifteen dollars a month, a job that helps him to earn some respect from the Tulsis too. His relations with Mrs. Tulsi gradually improve. There is no hostility from either side. For the time being, he forgets his wish to have space of his own and enjoys his success and family life. His happiness however; is short lived. The takeover of the Trinidad Sentinel by new authorities, Seth's break up with Tulsis and Mrs. Tulsi's decision to live in Shorthills; all come as a blow upsetting the family hierarchy upon which the Tulsi family has used to run. Domestic situation after the return of Owad also changes, who slaps Anand for answering him back; in humiliation, Anand argues his father that "they must move. He can not bear to live here another day" (Naipaul 2003:551). Mr. Biswas, who has himself faced such humiliation innumerable times during his childhood, is deeply moved by his son's appeal.

The vivid correlation between his own lack of accommodation and that of the Hindu and Creole world of Trinidad becomes powerfully apparent during this period of his life. It's against the poverty-stricken, unhoused, unnecessary world that Mr. Biswas's final achievement of his own house in Sikkim Street must be viewed (Adams 1989:84).

Mr. Biswas manages to get loan from Ajodha and buys a house in Port of Spain. He describes his house thus: "The sun came through the open window work and frosted glass was hot to touch. The inside brick wall was warm. The sun went through the home and laid dazzling strips on the exposed staircase" (Naipaul 2003:572). Naipaul uses words like "sun" and "dazzling" in his description of the house, words that clearly reveal Mr. Biswas's happiness and sense of fulfillment (Deodat 1979:140).

At forty six his battles are over, this cultural orphan, this historyless man has achieved all the success which his limited talent and sterile environment will allow. He must now give way to his children and await their successes: "there was nothing Mr. Biswas could do but wait. Wait for Anand, wait for Savi; wait for the five years to come to an end, wait, wait" (Naipaul 2003:76).

Wait for death; it's a tragic, stunning testimony of life in a rootless, disordered society that the achievement of a single, real victory drains the life blood of the soul. Biswas dies enjoying the company of his daughter, Savi and admiring the mystery and romance of life, he was never destined to share: "the shade was flowering again; was not it strange that a tree which grew so quickly could produce flowers with such a sweet scent?"(77).

As Kumar Parag also underlines "a house is not just a matter getting a shelter from heat, cold or rain. In fact, it is both an imposition of order and a carving-out of authentic selfhood within the heterogeneous and fragmented society of Trinidad" (Parag 2008: 139). The novel portrays not only Mr. Biswas as a man who stays put struggling against the hostile environment but also another characters such as Shekhar, Owad and even the children.

Naipaul presents the "Youngs and Children" struggle to survive in this alien "new world" pathetically. The "childish multitude" of "readers and learners" feel the immediate results of their new state. They are housed and feed like cattle. Many have been separated from their parents and are now merely anonymous units under Bandai's frenzied supervision and exhortations, "Read; Learn; Learn; Read" (Clemens 1982: 56).

Mr. Tulsi's two sons are seen as proof of the success and security education can provide. But Owad and Shekhar are not as content and complete as their little emulators are led to believe. After his marriage into a rich family, Shekhar does not bring his wife in his home, but leaves his own home to live with his wife's family. So Shekhar now finds himself in the same emasculated role as Biswas and the other poor husbands who married into the Tulsi's clan.

Marriage and money are poor substitutes for a thwarted ambition. Materially Shekhar has gained much; culturally and psychologically, he has lost just as much. On other hand, a clearer demonstration of Owad's petty, self-centered mind, his heartless and cruel belittling of Anand before the entire family; his agony condemnation of what he terms Anand's conceited "selfishness and egocentricity" is pure irony. It takes him very little time to find his "right place" in society. He becomes part of the new elite" released from both the Hindu and Creole world of Trinidad.

Naipaul's cool, cumulative ironies make clear, success bought at the expenses of spirit and through an evasion that means fraudulence and betrayal must count paradoxically [. . .] as the grandest of failures [. . .] isolation is far more damaging than the insulation of those who fail.(Cooke 1980:59)

Yet the "readers and learners", Owad and Shekhar, and even Anand are caught in a wretched dilemma to remain within the traditional fold is to stagnate and decay; to succeed in the "new world" is to betray one's origin and deny the very basis one's personality. But Mr. Biswas is away from the Tulsis, yet within the bounds of an authentic self and his native Trinidad society. Mr Biswas's quest for integrity and his ardent struggle to attain "accommodation and necessity" are the central movements of the novel. (Deodat 1979)

Ramchand argues that Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* gives life to the vision of "the broken individual in the west Indies" (5), who suffer from deprivation, longing and rootlessness (6). Even when the material conditions have changed, real integrity still evades the rootless East Indian, West Indian. In Anand's character are the seeds for Naipaul's exploration of the West Indian who has achieved educational and financial success but who is still psychologically burdened by his broken, inglorious heritage. (Greenberg 2000:78)

In a Way in the World, Naipaul presents the homelessness of Trinidadian Indians Post-Indenture: "these people were without money, job, without anything like a family, without the English language; without any kind of representation. They were utterly destitute (Parag 2008: 135). So Naipaul's language is characterized by the decadence of the milieu, he articulates because of this belief that the West Indian consists of races that have been uprooted from their original society (Ball 2003: 54). There is the recurrence of images of destruction and disintegrated like "empty houses", "chaotic dining room", "offending brick wall", "sinking floor amidst the squalor" of disintegration, all serving to reemphasize futility and hopelessness.(Clemens 1982:17).

To conclude, for alienated and displaced people of the colonized countries, Naipaul seems to suggest that searching for creativity (as Mr Biswas does and never gives up) relying on their own originality is one of the basic means to find their lost and alienated identity (TAS

2011:4). Naipaul accepted the colonial culture when he was a little, but he had no access to transcend the regional barrier in the course of literature creation. By mean of memory and re-experience, he reproduced the true life of Trinidad: the hopeless struggle of marginalized people; person with multicultural in limbo, the disorder democracy and freedom. Through the search for himself by rejecting a readymade household, Naipaul seeks to both renounce a second-hand tradition thrust upon the likes of him by the receding colonial tide, as well as recreate for himself an identity, a house to house the cultural uniqueness and identity of the Trinidadian Indian exiled, dispossessed, emigrant diaspora. In the study of *A House for Mr. Biswas*, “processing a house” is rather symbolic of having an identity of one’s own in the society (Chandrapradhan 2005: 28). Mohan Biswas’s love for natural human liberty and individuality inspire him to fight against the lifeless rotten rituals, myths and customs of degenerated Brahmin cultural systems represented by the Tulsis in the novel. Owning a house may be the symbol of rehabilitation, as in the case of Mr. Biswas, but it seems tasking, if not Herculean process (Deodat 1979: 96).

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