

Cry of an Exile: A Study of Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*

Joylal Das

Assistant Professor

Alipurduar College

Abstract

V. S. Naipaul's magnum opus, *A House for Mr Biswas*, presents communities being moulded and transferred by larger Socio-cultural forces. The life of its protagonist Mohun Biswas, is the story of the Indian Immigrant's dilemma. It is the tale of an exile's desire to strike roots and attain an authentic selfhood. Side by side the portraying of the personal life of the protagonist, the novel also tells the ethnic and social history of a community, its acculturation to an alien society and acquisition of a social identity. Though V. S. Naipaul has been seen by most of his critics as an occupant of 'No Man's land', Mohan Biswas, his hero of *A House for Mr Biswas*, shows a fervent desire – a desire which is paradoxically associated with diasporic journeys – to settle down in a foreign land which, in spite of being his birth place, appears, at least initially, strange and hostile to him. In fact the house, which has been interpreted in various ways by different critics, could well be seen as an objectification of this desire of Mr. Biswas. The story of Mr. Biswas – his incessant search for identity and the desire to own a house of his own- actually represents the story of all Trinidad-born Indians in the first half of twentieth century which saw the birth of a new nation.

Keywords: Exile, Rebel, Diasporas, Identity, Rootlessness

“What are the roots that clutch?

-*The Waste Land* (19)

In Graham Green's, *The Comedians* the protagonist Brown, a youth without country or friend or relatives, reflects: “There are those who belong by their birth inextricably to a country, who even when they leave feel a tie. And there are those who belong to a province a country village, but I could feel no link at all...., transience was my pigmentation, my roots would never go deep enough anywhere to make me a home or make me secure with love.” (*The Comedians*, 1966:223) Brown is here giving expression to the angst of the perpetual exile who is ever engaged in the frustrating search for ‘roots that clutch’ which elude him perpetually.

The theme of giving voice to the alliance experience by writers banished from their home land for all sorts of reason may be traced back to history. For instance, Ovid's poems

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written during his exile in Tome at Black Sea are overshadowed by the feeling of isolation and existential anguish. Luminaries like Dante, Swift, and Heine had produced works of art out of their experience of life in exile.

The experience of exile and loneliness is a common theme of lecture today. The homeless wanderer, an archetypal literary phenomenon as it has acquired a special significance in our times. To cite Edward Said's observations: "... all nationalism have... their rhetoric of belonging, their historical and geographical landmarks, their official enemies and heroes.... In time, successful nationalism consigns truth exclusively to them and relegates falsehood and inferiority to outsiders. And just beyond the frontier between 'us' and 'outsider' is the perilous territory of not belonging: this is where in a primitive time people were banished and where in modern era immense aggregates of humanity loiter as refugees and displaced persons." (Said, E.2001:173)

Some interesting psychological dimensions of this empirical phenomenon may be tracked back much earlier in the colonial situation of the indentured labourers, who were perhaps the worst victim of white imperialism. After the horrible history of The Caribbean islands in the previous centuries- the genocide of the Awaks and Caribbs, the sugar plantations and slave came into being. There came the indentured labourers from Asia and North Africa, the so called immigrants. By the 1930s and 40s it was an archipelago of many people, all unwilling settlers; they all longed for the other lands and pathetically reached out to other cultural imperatives and parties. This was their identity in the 'story less ness' and 'history less ness' of the place. It was a challenge for the writers to create in this vacuum and find out some adequate frame of reference in order to salvage or construct the people in exile. The Nobel laureate of 2001 is a glorious case in this point. He is Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul.

To continue this discussion we should be known to family background and biographical sketch of Naipaul. He was born on 17th August, 1932 in Chaguanas, Trinidad. His grandfather had immigrated to Trinidad from Benares in Uttar Pradesh as an indentured labour. His father Seeparsad Naipaul and mother Dropatia Capildes Naipaul were of Indian extraction. After doing his graduation from Oxford, he settled in London. He married Patricia Hale in 1955 and decided to live as writer. Having been born and brought up in the slaver society of colonial Trinidad, he felt lonely in metropolitan London. He lived in London bed setters and wrote that all mythical lands faded and in the big city he was confined to a smaller world than he had ever known. He became his flat, his desk, his name. Often nodding off with the electric heater on, he would wake to a nightmare that he was in tropical Trinidad. Though mainly living in London, he has travelled frequently in the West Indies, North and South America, India and Africa. However, he has found every country to be nightmare for an uprooted man like himself. On being awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 2001, Naipaul is reported to have said: "I am utterly delighted. This is an unexpected accolade. This

is great tribute to England my home and to India home of my ancestors.”(The Telegraph 12-10-01).

Naipaul remains a citizen of the world, his novels being a telling testimony of the universal predicament of disorder that governs the Third World post colonial society today. In this context we may quote: ‘Naipaul’s present identity is not so much that of an exile which would presume a home to be exiled from, as a permanent alien.’ (Hassan Zulakha, 1989; 68)

Naipaul’s indictment of the moral, social, cultural and political corruption that existed in these post-colonial islands in the absence of any viable alternative forms of governance, earned him the epithet of ‘a prophet doom and gloom’ in Trinidad. A new identity based on order and creative regeneration can emerge only if these existent facts are acknowledged and remedied. Place and displacement are recurrent themes of post colonial literature. The crisis of identity one can conclude, is related more to placelessness: “A valid and active sense of self may have been eroded by dislocation resulted from migration, the experience of enslavement, transportation or voluntary removal for indentured labour, it may have been destroyed by cultural denigration, the conscious or un conscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly racial or cultural mode.”(Bill Ashcrot, 1990:269)

Though it is really difficult to historicise the evolution of a diasporic community in a linear way, Uma Parameswaram in her writing *The Diaspora* has identified four phases of immigrant settlement both at the individual and the community levels.

The first is one of nostalgia for the homeland left behind mingled with fear in a strange land. The second is a phase in which one is so busy adjusting to the new environment that there is little creative output. The third phase is when immigrants taking part in the shaping of the Diaspora existence by involving themselves in ethno culture issues. The fourth is when have arrived and start participating in the larger world of politics and national issues.

The novel traces individual’s search for order and identity amidst socio-cultural changes. The protagonist’s historical experiences of slavery and his psychic encounter with the people who constitute a forlorn culture are the fountain source of his identity crisis. His is the fate of despairing and excruciating lot who: “carries about them the mark, in their attitudes, sensibilities and convictions, of slave, the unnecessary man.”(Walsh William, 1970:71)

Naipaul Deals with a society that is chaotic and centre less, a society of customs, rituals and superstitions that drive the individual away from his roots. Mr. Biswas becomes the lonely expatriate seeking a new social role in a world of cross cultural connections and encounters. Aware of his ambivalent position, he tells his son, “I am just somebody. Nobody at all. I am just a man you know.”(*A House for Mr. Biswas*, 1992:279).

In search of job, Mohun joins Tulsi store as a painter of signs. There he meets Shama, Tulsi’s daughter whom he marries in course of time. The newly married couple live at

Hanuman House with the other Tulsi's sons and daughters and their families. The unwanted and unnecessary man, Mohun becomes an alien inside in the Tulsi family and its establishment. Honuman House symbolises the traditional and conventional Hindu world abounding in all sorts of ritualistic vagaries and superstitious hypocrisy. It is an abode of sham and pretension and abandoned white fortress: "Among tumbledown timber-and-corrugated iron building in the High Streets at Arwacas, Honuman House stood like an alien white fortress at Arwacas" (A House for Mr. Biswas, 1992:80-81).

To Mohun, the Honuman House was a world "more real...and less exposed" where he was treated with indifference rather than hostility. Within the Honuman House and even outside it Mohun Biswas is a stranger, "everything beyond its gate was foreign and unimportant."

Mohan's crisis of identity manifests itself, in self-assertion and self-affirmation- the yearning to carve out a personality of his own, to own a house. The house represents not only a recognizable location and identity for the displaced second generation colonial out of sympathy with his roots and unable to identify with his new surroundings. It also stands for the acceptance of the roles of husband, father and bread winner which both circumstances and temperament invite Mr. Biswas to resist for so long.

His quest for identity is an indication of his unease and his need for assurance. He is unable to find a viable strategy to cope with the destabilizing sense of the lack of an adequate identity. Frustrated, he shies away from the notion of giving up sign-painting. He says to Tulsi's son-in-law, "Give up sign painting? And my independence? No boy my motto is: paddle your own canoe." (A House for Mr Biswas, 1992:107).

Biswas' conflict with the Tulsi symbolises the thematic conflict of the novel between desire and necessity. Mohun lives in world of fantasy and dream. He dreams to be somebody in the Tulsi household but his desires and expectations only lead to his utter humiliation at the hands of Tulsies. His is double life – a life of what he is and a life of what he would like to be; reality and illusion. Biswas tries to escape from the harrowing world of the Tulsi by taking recourse to the romances of Hall Caine Marie Corelli and Samuel Smiles whose exotic tales nourish his fantasy and make him 'despair of finding romance in his own dull green land.' These telling romantic tales provide a contrast to the dull and dreary milieu at Hanuman House where 'there can be no romance' and no hope of a new life and a new identity.

As a reporter –journalist of Trinidad Sentinel, Biswas not only acquires a professional identity, but also finds an outlet for his creativity. It is during this phase of his life he attempts to build a house at Short Hills which catches fire and he has to go back to Port of Spain to live once again in Tulsi house. Eventually after a furious quarrel with Mrs. Tulsi he takes a loan from his uncle Ajoda and manages to buy a house of his own in Sikkim Street in Port of Spain. Mr. Biswas' ambition to own house is at last fulfilled. Even, though he does not live

long enough to enjoy its blessing. He dies a free man, with self-respect and individuality intact.

In Biswas' life, house is the meeting ground for the clash between dreams and reality. The very idea of having a house of his own functions as a container of desires. As a boy, he abandons his home after his father's drowning and the family's property is taken. His dream of a house of his own is among other things, a longing for the lost father and lost security of his infancy. Save for a brief period of residency in house he builds in Green Vale and Short Hills and in the house he buys on Sikkim Street, Biswas lives his life in other houses which signify his other identity- a life of humiliation, migrancy and not-belonging in the context of the planning and construction of Biswas' house at Green Vale. He does not have enough money to build the kind of house he envisions. The result is that it turns into an embarrassment and a target, when in Mr. Biswas' absence, disgruntled workers burn it down.

In his search for identity Mohun became a rebel. Though Biswas rebels against the rank abnegation of individuality and freedom as he internalise the negative view of the Tulsis about individual freedom, his rebellion never assumes its copy book character. It is channelled into expressions of anger and at worst, abuse of behaviour and language. He launches his rebellion at the hostile level, wants to elevate it to the formic by seeking the support of Govind whom he thinks as fellow sufferer but reverts to the former when he realise that Govind is a willing bondman. His rebellion has at best the paradigmatic approximation of the bravura of the Tagorean solitary traveller who has to go his way if none else came as his companion:

*Yadi tor dak shune keo na ase tabe ekla cholare
Ekla cholo, ekla cholo, ekla cholo, ekla cholo re.*

.....
*Yadi sabai phire jay, ore ore o obhaga
Yadi gahan pathe yabarkale kei phire na chay,
Tabe pather kanta
O tui raktamakha charan tale ekla dalo re.*

What he wishes to convey to us is that true independence does not immediately follow rebellion. The achievement of one's true individuality does not immediately follow the attainment of freedom but must be constructed through a life –time of painful struggle.

Mohun Biswas symbolises the expatriate experience of a minority culture adapting to cosmopolitan society and the shifting scenario of socio-moral values. The quest for identity amidst social transition is what Naipaul sets out to explore in the novel. Naipaul views change as positive since it is through change that Mohun breaks out of his inherited identity as the son of a labour and the suffocating hierarchy of the traditionalist Tulsi family. Through socio-economic changes Mr. Biswas' steps out of his caste identity and tenuously joins the middle class. Like an exile, Mr. Biswas is a stranger to himself, a fragmented self, almost

nomadic: “as a boy he had moved from one house of strangers to another and since his marriage he felt he had lived nowhere.”(A House for Mr. Biswas, 1992:8)

In *A House for Mr. Biswas* and *The Mimic Men*, there is precisely, this personal quest for meaning in a world that is perverse and alien. Self- knowledge is the individual himself. Mr. Biswas through his unique individual experiences arrives at the mean by which he discovers his individuality and dignity. Mr. Biswas has shown that cultural displacement and dispossession not necessarily lead to a pathological state of negation. Banishment can be creative as in the case of Shakespeare’s Caliban in *The Tempest*. *The Tempest* has perhaps, been the most powerful text to establish a paradigm for post-colonial readings of a canonical work. In one such reading George Lamming dismantles the hierarchy of Prospero, Ariel and Caliban. Caliban is no longer seen as a creature outside civilization but as a human being whose human status is derived by the European claims to an exclusive human condition. *The Tempest* is also read as a political allegory where the injustice of Prospero’s dispossession of Caliban’s inheritance the island bequeathed to him by his mother, Sycorax, is emphasised. (Ashcoft, Bill, 1990:89)

But Prospero justifies his stance claiming that he had given Caliban the gift of language, his language, in return. But Prospero’s gift is rightly, though ironically, rejected by the enslaved Caliban. Caliban’s response is “and my profit on this, I know how to curse.” Subversion is psychological trait that exists in the unconscious of the colonized. When Caliban spurns the gift of language, he is, in effect spurning that powerful weapon which reduced him from a free unlettered savage to a colonized prisoner. But paradoxically it is through this very language that he articulates his anguish and bitterness at his changed plight. Through this creative expression, Caliban is rescued from being a total nonentity. He retains his individuality and his weapon to protect it becomes his language a language that is potentially, critical, subversive and radical. In Mr. Biswas this aspect of creativity is exemplified.

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