The Reciprocity of Home and Identity in V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*: Postcolonial Dilemma of Deracination

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Abstract- Discussions rotating around the controversial topics of displacement and the subsequent identity crisis as inevitable outcomes of deracination under the pressure of colonial power have recently enjoyed much spotlight. Thus, this paper, relying on Homi Bhabha's concept of *homelessness,* presents an analysis of V. S. Naipaul's West Indian epic, *A House for Mr Biswas*, with the main focus being the way protagonist's, Mohun Biswas', painful struggle for accommodation and wholeness in an unwelcoming context, which is the legacy of his deracinated ancestors, has distorted his identity. Living in the disordered, rootless West Indian society in Trinidad with East Indian origin, uprooted from his motherland, Biswas' desperate fight to attain his own house is symbolic of his desire to develop a unique identity to replace his lost cultural heritage. It will be argued that Biswas' struggle to overcome communal and colonial pressures and give meaning to his existence is representative of a whole generation who has been afflicted with deracination and, consequently, a fractured and incomplete identity and selfhood.

Index Terms- postcolonial identity, homelessness, deracination, inauthenticity, selfhood

I. INTRODUCTION

Postcolonial theory, visualized partially in diasporic literary works, is characterized by cultural and historical dislocation. Diasporic literature is the reflection of cultural and historical crises, place, identity, displacement, fragmentation, internalization and marginalization, memory, homeland, house, and self-identity, with which colonial and racial discourses, as well as anti-colonial thought, have been preoccupied. The *othering* of vast numbers of people by European colonial thought depended upon structuring an army of binary oppositions which accoutered Europeans with every power and right to rape and plunder. Such oppositions are crucial, not only for creating images of non-Europeans as *them* or *other*, but also for constructing a Europeans self as *us*. History has made this illusion of dominance an inseparable constituent of the identity of the oppressor; therefore, many anti-colonial and postcolonial critiques are preoccupied with uncovering the way in which they work in colonial representations. The important issue is this: how has colonial deracination distorted the identity formation of the colonized subjects?

In a world that is growing increasingly complicated and challenging, and stripped of meaning and place for the people of the Third World, the quest for relevance, for a meaningful, taken-for-granted existence by which the individual can preserve his grasp on reality is often the spur, as well as the subject matter of all literary endeavors, either creative or critical. This study of Naipaul's comic masterpiece, *A House for Mr Biswas*, has been undertaken to reveal the sufferings of an individual in establishing a meaningful existence impeded with the aftermaths of colonial exploitation in Trinidad.

Acknowledged as one of the most controversial postcolonial writers, V. S. Naipaul has remained open to various critiques, most of which concern his treatments of different post and past colonial issues. Much of Naipaul's work deals with individuals who feel estranged from the societies they are supposedly a part of and who are desperately seeking a way 'to belong.' His work continues to draw mixed reviews. Mehmt TaŞ, in "Alienation, Naipaul, and Mr Biswas", falls back on the ideas of three prominent theoreticians to support his argument about the symbiosis between Mr. Biswas and Naipaul himself, and the autobiographical elements reflected in the novel. Taking Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* into consideration and relying on Homi Bhabba's notion of "unhomeliness" and Melvin Seeman's five-fold classification of the theme of alienation, and considering Hegelian existentialism for further elucidation on alienation, TaŞ argues that, while at the first glance Naipaul is likely to be blamed for having no loyalty to his culture, he is one of those postcolonial writers who has been trying to lead the people of once-colonized cultures to "overcome the problems they have been entangled in by narrating and portraying their situation in an objective manner" (115). His main purpose is to bring a counterargument for Naipaul's alleged disloyalty of which he has been many times accused.

TaŞ believes that the sense of alienation Mohun Biswas experiences, and leaves as a legacy for his son Anand, is the recreation of Naipaul's own sense of homelessness and loneliness. Quoting Naipaul himself, TaŞ creates a parallel line between Mohun's life-long struggle and Naipaul's peripatetic existence: "When I speak about being an exile or 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 so many years, he still does not feel the sense of belonging, as he states again in the same interview: "I still had the nervousness in a new place; the rawness of response, still felt myself to be in other man's country, felt my strangeness, my solitude" (63). The degree of similarity is so much that TaŞ calls the novel autobiographical, representing Naipaul's own experiences and impressions of Trinidad. However, his unique point of argument

is that, Mohun Biswas' lack of identity and its concomitant alienation are the result of existential dilemma and Naipaul's own pessimism rather than any specific colonial experience.

Warner argues that, suffocated under strict traditionalism represented by Hanuman House, Naipaul depicts Mohun in harsh conflict with "rigidity, cultural infallibility, ritual, duty, hierarchy, and all communal life" (119). Mr. Biswas barges into Tulsis' monolith of conventions, prejudices, and conservatism against inevitable change; he disapproves of their policies and practices, challenges their religious beliefs, disregards everybody's acceptance of superior and inferior grindings within the household; " Biswas is actually inharmonious with the Tulsis, because he has strong intellectual interests, vague ambition for greatness, and strives for independence" (120). The very incompatibility originates in, according to Warner, Tulsis' insistence on conformity versus Mr. Biswas' adherence to his individual subjectivity; and the two shall never meet.

II.   DILEMMA OF THE CONCEPT OF HOME AND IDENTITY IN POSTCOLONIAL SOCIETY: BHABHA'S UNHOMELINESS

The out-of-placeness that Biswas and the older generation experience in Trinidad can be read in terms of the 'unhomely'. The unhomely is a critique of the locational argument which, in Anindyo Roy's words, "defamiliarizes the space of home as location" (108). Bhabha suggests that it is necessary to problematize the space of home as location as migrants do not experience a continuous and rational relation to the home. This is because the memory of dislocation disrupts the continuity that home normally offers in Western paradigms. The memory of dislocation or the past is renewed through the act of cultural translation "as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living" (Bhabha 7). Home, which is normally seen as providing both the myth of stable being and the quest for wholeness, is disrupted by this discontinuousness of being. (Roy 104)

The diasporic subject crosses territorial and cultural boundaries by living in one home yet imagining another home as he is haunted by repressed histories. The Tulsi family's recreating of India in the space of their home in Trinidad is an example of this unhomeliness. *A House for Mr Biswas* is principally about the "unaccommodated" man who experiences the condition of the unhomely, not homeless but not at home either. The unhomely, according to Bhabha, is about more than finding one's niche.   An unhomed person does not have the feeling of belonging since he is in a psychological limbo which generally ends in some psychological disorders and stems from cultural displacement; however, being unhomed does not mean being homeless. As Tyson states; being unhomed "is to feel not at home even in one's own home because you are not at home at yourself; that is, your cultural identity crisis has transformed you into a psychological refuge". (421)

In colonial societies," the crisis of the identity of the colonized often seems to over-ride all other considerations. The social identity of people is rooted in their culture, while in the individual sphere, personal achievement determines the establishment and solidity of identity. In order to experience *wholeness*, it is necessary to fuse individual and social

consciousness. However, the paradox of the modern predicament lies in the fact that owing to the fragmentation of societies, the affinity that was once felt between the two is now broken; either the society doesn't provide the opportunities for the recognition of individual existences, or the individual cannot conform to social norms by copying of which he/she is believed to come to life; in either case, something lags behind.

If the individual struggles against constraining norms which invariably prevent the flourishment of *self*, then he/she might have to retreat into the cocoon of loneliness and live the life of an exile; this is what happens to Mr. Biswas. *A House for Mr. Biswas* delves deeply into the psyche of an individual to reveal the major problematic of the dispossessed, that is the carving of authentic self. Mohun Biswas, the protagonist of the novel, tries to overcome the limitations imposed on him by putting up a relentless struggle against the forces that try to suppress his individuality. Though his struggle is a long traumatic one, he is successful in his claiming of, and negotiation for, space and finally fulfills his dream of having a house. The greatness of the hero lies in his enduring the inconveniences and making the society a house of his own instead of ultimate rejection, or descent into mental breakdown.

III.   COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITIES: CRISIS AND FRUSTRATED SUBJECTIVITY

Several critics, most notably Homi Bhabha, have emphasized the failure of colonial powers to produce stable and fixed identities, and suggested that "hybridity of identities and ambivalence of colonial discourse describe the dynamics of colonial encounter" (Bhabha 54). Colonization and its inevitable transculturation disintegrated the cultural zone of the target land, and to a great extent the metropolis centre, in an irreversible way. The establishment of a coherent, stable cultural milieu in a colonial context is constantly hindered because of the impossibility, deferral, and difference of authentic identity creation as a result of juxtaposition of culturally incompatible amalgamations.

Identity is rooted in the identification with what one is associated with. It evolves with the time. It is the birth-right of all human beings. But there are some remote area, caste and creeds where still an average person has to strive and struggle for his existence. These social injustice and differences have been pointed out by Naipaul. His literary works are based on a single motive of the quest of self and identity and belongingness. All his works are the outcome of his own individual experience of chaotic world of Trinidad. There has been confluence of two cultures first from South African from where they came for their better enhancement and second from India, the sugar-cane workers, his own ancestral with their Indian Culture. Even the emerging third generation could not get its identity; so, the third generation was extremely chaotic and thwarted.

West Indian selfhood is constituted ambivalently in *A House for Mr Biswas*. As a result of history's intervention, the West Indian subject is positioned in such a way that his identity cannot be completely separate from that of the colonizer; but; neither can it be the same. This is the postcolonial predicament of difference that *A House for Mr Biswas* traces. The following assessment of Griffith: "Naipaul's satire is neither redemptive nor

didactic; its purpose is not to elicit detestation of vice and wrongdoing, but merely to exist as its own content" (77), misses the point. Naipaul exhibits a certain depth of understanding about the colonial diasporic subject in *A House for Mr Biswas* by suggesting that there are no easy paths of redemption or resolution for expatriates.

IV. POSTCOLONIAL TRAUMAS IN THE NOVEL: VOID, INAUTHENTICITY, AND ROOTLESSNESS

The novel shows an impoverished, disorganized Trinidad and, implicitly, criticizes imperialism for having created such a mess in which those of African and Indian descent are struggling in a rootless, hybrid society without the resources to live or make better lives. Looked at in this way, while Naipaul is one of the many writers from the former colonies who have criticized colonialism and who see their lands and people as victims of the Empire, he is not a simple-minded nationalist who believes that "local and cultural assertions, and cries of victimization will provide a solution to the problems left by history" (King 49). Mohun's Trinidad lacks the resources required for authentic independence as Biswas discovers when he attempts to find employment or build his house, recognition, freedom, and awareness can be dangerous, humiliating, and self-defeating. Biswas' situation is that of the colony; his own attempts at independence are limited by the condition of the society into which he is born. "Frustrated self-assertion turns into self-destructive rage; the tempest that temporarily disorders Biswas' mind". (Husten 49)

The organization of the Tulsi family is a microcosm of a slave society. Biswas rebels against Tulsidom because he realizes that in exchange for its protection, it demands the surrender of his identity. In this context, William Walsh says in his book, *Readings in Commonwealth Literature*, that "Biswas is the first of his family to break with the feudal-capitalist hierarchy and forge an individual identity. His instinctive rebelliousness results in his being identified as a troublemaker, who evidently requires subtler but harsh measures of control" (128-9). However, his efforts bear limited fruit. Apart from giving him a fleeting sense of merely having made a point, in actual concrete terms, it is quite ineffectual. His obsession lies more with his need to declare his individuality, his desire to carve a new, untainted identity; so that "his eccentricities take on the dimensions of a rebellion, however pathetically shored up that individualism is with the fragments of modern materialism" (Walsh 131). But finally as the narrator states, it is freedom which recalls Biswas "Thank God I'm not free any more than a rooted tree is free". (487)

Hanuman House is a microcosm of the authoritarian state where power is all important and inescapable. Naipaul seems to suggest that traditional institutions, like extended family, are equally responsible for perpetuating dependence and passivity by suppressing individuality, and are more deterrents to the developments of personality. It is significant that the process of Biswas' development into an integral, authentic, independent individual is directly proportional to the process of disintegration of Hindu social order, and the Hanuman House as its most immediate manifestation and representative. As the inherited order passed away, the self evolves into a new entity which is more viable to the new environment. "Biswas must be shorn of his cultural identity and completely depersonalized before he can become a truly reliable wholeness; he must reach the zero state of his cultural identity". (Mohan 73)

It is only a matter of time before Hanuman House collapses under dual forces of decadence and modernity. The House which Biswas finds as impregnable and overwhelming disintegrates and is deserted before he is forty. The attempt to regroup at *Shorthills* is a final but futile try to stave off a greater chaos and a more permanent dislocation. Predictably, *Shorthills* also collapses, and then everyone becomes aware of a new and frightening disorder: "The widows were now almost frantic to have their children educated. There was no longer a Hanuman House to protect them; everyone had to fight for himself in a new world, the world Owad and Shekhar had entered, where education was the only protection (436). They are all suddenly exposed and vulnerable. Significantly, the breakdown of family organization "is marked by an almost exodus to the city of Port of Spain" (Deodat 56). The abandonment of the familiar, rural setting is a final surrender to the Creole world of Trinidad. The young must now be trained to survive and succeed in this new world.

V. IMPLANTING ROOTS IN AN UNWELCOMING EARTH: NOT A HOUSE BUT A HOME FOR MR BISWAS

With the disintegration of the Tulsis comes Mohun's gradual, bit by bit integration and approach to solidarity. The breakdown of the coherence and harmony of Hanuman House provides Biswas with the opportunities which he always considered as prerequisite to a simple, integral life. In *Shorthills*, with no Seth to supervise over the affairs, the split-up is complete; the family fails to maintain the façade of unity and organization. Each man is to himself and everyone tries to exploit the resources to his own advantage. Cooperation is replaced by competition, abnegation with survival, and sisterhood with rivalry. The center gone, the family breaks into pieces constituting a new unit longing to establish its place outside the secure walls of Hanuman House. Govind and Tuttle, the son-in-laws, are foremost in plundering:

Then the news of the ravages of Tuttle and Govind was whispered through the house. Tuttle had been selling whole cedar trees; Govind had been selling lorry loads, of orange, and papaws, and avocado pears and limes and grape and cocoa. Even children do not remain secure from the debris of emerging chaos; disunity sets among them; they fought in pure hate. (407-8)

The novel is not about bondage; it is about liberation of Mohun Biswas. At the *Shorthills*, finally he is able to build a house of his own. The house is not a literal objective accommodation, but a symbolic place in the world of placelessness. It is a mark of identity in the world of alienation. It is a symbolic zone of a liberated psyche. "Mohun Biswas moves from the imprisoned zone of Tulsi dome and makes a departure into a new paradise characterizing ontological transmutation" (Raosaheb 63). Mohan feels liberated before the final liberation, his death, which occurs at the age of forty-six. Biswas, as Naipaul suggests, is not an individual but the metaphor of the West Indian culture. Historylessness, pastlessness, fragmentation, colonialism, slavery, cultural dislocations are common to both. Liberation of the West India from the British Empire is like the liberation of Mohun Biswas himself. The West

Indies find a place in the Caribbean milieu. This island gains autonomy politically, socially, and economically through the disintegration of British Empire. Biswas ultimately gets a liberation which was constantly deferred by Tulsi domination and exploitation. The old order passes away, new minds are liberated and happy are born. Rebirth of a culture, rejuvenation of the self is established once again. Hence, the novel is called the West Indian epic, telling the story not of an individual but of the entire West Indian society.

Biswas' first attempt at winning his independence is *The Chase* section. The dilapidated old shop parallels Biswas' current psychological state; indeed, all the houses in which he lives symbolically reveal the nature of his development or despair. At *The Chase*, he is afraid to assume, for the first time, the full responsibility of his life. He observes, "how lonely the shop was, and how frightening" (145). Yet, it is he who feels alone and deserted. A nomadic past, characterized by perpetual dependence, makes his first try at independence futile. His six years at *The Chase* produce three children and nothing more, because these were "years so squashed by their own boredom and futility that at the end they could be comprehended in one glance" (182). In comparison, he sees Hanuman House as a "world more real than *The Chase*, and less exposed" (188). He now finds him former prison a sanctuary. This sad but open admission of his continued inadequacy is a necessary step towards integrity and independence.

Having learned from the tenure at *The Chase* how unprepared and vulnerable he is on his own, Biswas opts for a limited independence within Tulsidom, but away from Hanuman House. He accepts the position as a driver on one of Tulsis' states, *Green Vale*. Here, his vision of the house reappears to motivate and strengthen his life. It is necessary to view his total vision of the house before one can deduce the deep urge and the compiling necessity which give it birth:

He had thought deeply about this house, and knew exactly what he wanted. He wanted, in the first place, a real house made of real materials. He didn't want mud for walls, earth for floor, tree branches for rafters, and grass for roof. He wanted wooden walls, all tongue-and-groove. He wanted a galvanized iron roof and a wooden ceiling. He would walk up concrete steps into a small veranda; through doors with colored panes into a small drawing room; from there into a small bedroom, then another small bedroom, and then back into the small veranda. The house would stand on tall concrete pillars so that he would get two floors instead of one, and the way would be left open for future development. (210)

His house must be sensibly ordered, colorful and strong, with scope for future development. In short, it must have all the qualities he so consciously lacks in his real life; however, Biswas does not take into consideration local conditions which would definitely show antagonism to such a declaration of achievement. As his second attempt to rise above circumstance, the *Green Vale* adventure, and jelly-built house, suffers the same abject failure of *The Chase*. The house is far from what Biswas has constantly been daydreaming about; at this point, "Naipaul deliberately correlates the frightening, incomplete house to Biswas' psychological state" (Deodat 78). Biswas feels himself naked, inadequate, exposed, as displaced and lost as "the boy leaning against an earth house that had no reason for being there, under

the dark falling sky, a boy who didn't know where the road went" (190). The full impact of this man's fragmented self and disordered life overshadows all his being. Animate as well as inanimate objects threaten and terrify his days and nights, and all he sees of his future is a frightening void; a complete nervous breakdown is imminent. Husten discreetly observes that: "Naipaul achieves a brilliant climax when the storm in Biswas' mind erupts in unison with thunder, lightning and an actual deluge which crack both the incomplete house and man" (156). As John Thieme states, in Jungian theory, the house functions as a symbol of wholeness, of the integrated self. Significantly, Biswas' first two attempts at constructing his own house end in failure, symbolizing a person that is not whole yet.

When Biswas finally possesses his own house, ironically it is heavily mortgaged, he is dying, he is estranged from his son but it is still a deep triumph. His ownership of a portion of land is significant because his partial independence breaks the colonial pattern in which his ancestors were dispossessed. Owning a house is important because its material reality gives Biswas presence in the world. Also, the increase in Biswas' material prosperity suggests the novel's concern with the issue of the colonial subject's independence. Biswas does not fully achieve independence; he still remains economically dependent, unable to completely shed his humble origins.

Biswas' houses symbolize personal independence and, thus, an affirmation of human dignity. His struggle and determination to own his own house reflects the need to establish identity and rights as a human being. White indicates that the house becomes "the creative side of Biswas' rebellion, the concrete proof that he is not anonymous, a positive achievement founding on, and justifying, the refusal to capitulate" (116). Rohlehr asserts that the house is Biswas' "personality literalized and symbolized, the private individual whom he must build and maintain against the rest of the world" (191). Everything that Biswas' experiences signify is contained in the various meanings the metaphor of the house accumulates as the novel progresses; for instance, the symbiosis between the condition of the half-built houses and his psychological state.

At last, his battles are over. This cultural orphan, this historyless man has achieved all the success his limited talent and sterile environment will allow. He must now give way to their children and wait their successes: "There was nothing Mr Biswas could do but wait. Wait for Anand. Wait for Savi. Wait for the five years to come an end. Wait. Wait. Wait for death" (586-7). It is a tragic, stunning testimony of life in a rootless, disordered society that "the achievement of a single, real victory drains the blood of the soul" (Deodat 77).

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