Identity crisis in the V.S.Naipaul’s novel ‘A house for Mr.Biswas’

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Abstract

Naipaul’s works consist mainly of novels and short stories. *A House for Mr. Biswas* tells the story of its protagonist, Mr. Biswas from birth to death, each section dealing with different phases of Mr. Biswas’s life. Here, Naipaul has a more subjective approach towards the problems of identity crisis than the objective one a reader finds in his travelogues, especially in India. Mr. Biswas seemed fated from his very birth to be a victim of circumstances and harbinger of evil and what is worse to become unwittingly the cause of disintegration of his family when his father gets drowned in trying to rescue him. Poverty and desperation haunted his life throughout. Biswas' inability to truly love Shama stems from his ungrateful attitude towards her whole family. But Mr. Biswas refuses to give up his ambition of owning a house and so builds another during the Portof Spain phase of his life. The failure of less of identity with the loss of the past, the threatening vividness of the future not to speak of the faceless present can only is dissipated by the vision of brightly lit house. All that can be abstracted from Mr. Biswas's experience is contained in the meaning that the house metaphor harvests in the course of the novel.

*Keywords: Protagonist, melodramatic, identity crisis, ungrateful attitude, dollhouse.*
Introduction

Naipaul’s works consist mainly of novels and short stories, but also include some that are documentary. He is to a very high degree a cosmopolitan writer, a fact that he himself considers to stem from his lack of roots: he is unhappy about the cultural and spiritual poverty of Trinidad, he feels alienated from India, and in England he is incapable of relating to and identifying with the traditional values of what was once a colonial power.

In an interview with Roland Bryden in 1973, Naipaul remarked, “all my works are really one. I am really writing one big book. I come to the conclusion that, considering the nature of the society I came from, considering the nature of the world I have stepped into and the world I have to look at, I could not be a professional novelist in the old sense” (367-70).

In his stories and novels, Naipaul transforms actual societies, he has known, their rulers and subjects, into fictional communities that generate narrators and characters more vivid than their models… These protagonists are linked to each other and to their progenitor to pursue truths about themselves and their worlds.

V. S Naipaul’s 1961 classic ‘Mr Biswas Finds a Home in the World on Paper’, looks closely the different varieties of writing – sign painting, journalism and literary attempts – that define the life of Mr Biswas. The diversity and range of reactions this novel garners warrants a collection of contemporary voices

A House for Mr. Biswas is a work of great comic power qualified with firm and unsentimental compassion. While there is humour in 'A House for Mr. Biswas', the dominant tone of the novel is melodramatic, even tragic. Besides focusing on his dark world, the novel introduces brief glimpses of ethnic and social history of the marginalized East Indian community in Trinidad. The novel presents the struggle for identity for an Indian in Trinidad whose agrarian values are challenged by Western cultural influences
when he moves to the city. From the very beginning, Mohun Biswas is depicted as a marginalized individual who is constantly on the move to identify his place in the limited world of Trinidad. A vivid portrait of a man who fights to free himself from the entanglements of family, custom, and religion. A House for Mr. Biswas is also an unforgettable look inside colonial society at the beginnings of great transit.

*A House for Mr. Biswas* portrays the lifelong search of the protagonist, Mohun Biswas, in order to “[…] lay claim to [his] portion of the Earth […]” (Naipaul, 2003) by possessing a house that he could call his own.

**Universality of human emotion**

V.S. Naipaul’s magnum opus, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, can rightly be called a work of art that deals with the problems of isolation, frustration and negation of an individual. (Kumar, 2013) *A House for Mr. Biswas* tells the story of its protagonist, Mr. Biswas from birth to death, each section dealing with different phases of Mr. Biswas’s life. Here, Naipaul has a more subjective approach towards the problems of identity crisis than the objective one a reader finds in his travelogues, especially on India. The protagonist, Mr. Biswas, is rather a tragic figure, with the misfortune of having ambitions without the means of achieving them. This novel is a story that traces his life from his inauspicious birth with an extra finger, to his last days in a house of his own.

Mr. Biswas faces a lot of psychological issues including questioning himself about manhood and his strong rejection of community, which aimed at finding his own private life, far from any people: “Such process is unnecessarily accompanied by violence, for antagonism feeds on violence. Violence is represented as a basic element that characterizes the cohabitation between different groups in Trinidad. Violence is both physical and verbal,” Hedi argues.

The pain and darkness of these lines bring out the pathos of the protagonist, and of Naipaul too, as culturally uprooted with the acute sense of not being able to fall back upon anything beyond a borrowed identity in a land to which his forefathers had arrived.
as labourers. Thus, the ‘house’ in *A House for Mr. Biswas* symbolizes the dislocated, void of native-traditions, displaced postcolonial writer’s deepest desire to create an identity bereft of his destitute past as well as an individual’s ceaseless efforts to put up coherence through a structure of brick, stone and cement (though not unmixed with blood, sweat, dreams and aspirations) in the face of shapelessness; by erecting a structure, a kind of coherence out of the chaos and attempting at ‘building a residence to annihilation’ (Nandan: 65).

In fact, the character of Mr. Biswas is carved out of alienated experience as he tries to find his own roots in the socio-cultural environment around him. In the search of his own identity, Mohun Biswas shifts from village to town and from joint family to nuclear family but fails to find his own roots amidst socio-cultural change. While countless other novelists have depicted identity crises in established societies, Naipaul has depicted a protagonist in a society that is pandemonic and lacking in ideas and creativity.

As Kenneth Ramchand notes, A house for 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)

Mr. Biswas was offered the job of taking the calf of Dhari to water and was paid a penny a week. Mr. Biswas loved the calf and did more than take it to water. He took it for walks near the stream. Though he remembered his danger in the water he used to spit and play with the fishes in the water.

On one such occasion he loses the calf. He searched all over but couldn’t find it. He hides at home. The inmates of the house seem to be forgotten about him. It’s only when Dhari comes in search of the calf do they realize the absence of Mr. Biswas. Quite a number of the villagers had seen the boy and the calf near the river and so decide to search the water. Raghu as a father bears the responsibility to dive in and look for the calf and Mr. Biswas. He successfully comes up with the body of the calf but unfortunately loses his life in the swampland.
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)

Poverty and desperation haunted his life throughout. After his father dies, his family moves in with his mother's sister, Tara. The family is disintegrated and Mr. Biswas was introduced to schooling and successive oddjobs. He was an assistant to Pundit Jayaram whose cruel treatment was without any match. Mr. Biswas was punished for eating two bananas. He was to eat all the remaining bananas. Later, while working in a rum shop, 'he was wrongly accused of stealing one dollar and was mercilessly beaten. He is humiliated and beaten by Tara's brother-in-law Bhandat. Mr. Biswas vows, "I am going to get a job on my own. And I am going to get my own house too. I am finished with this." (Naipaul-66)

The successive hardships encountered at a very early age create a deep sense of depression for the readers. Marriage and his relations with Shama form a major part of the drama. He goes to work as a sign-painter for the Tulsi family, and there he begins a flirtation with Shama. After his love letter is discovered by Mrs. Tulsi, Mr. Biswas is bullied into marrying Shama, thus beginning a long and unhappy marriage that produces four children, a constant struggle for money, and countless bitter quarrels.

When Mr. Biswas is cowed by the Tulsi family into marrying Shama, the narrator reflects, "How often, in the years to come, at Hanuman House or in the house at Short hills or in the house in Port of Spain, living in one room, with some of his children sleeping on the next bed . . . how often did Mr. Biswas regret his weakness, his inarticulateness, that evening," (Naipaul-92)

Biswas' inability to truly love Shama stems from his ungrateful attitude towards her whole family. Because he loathes the Tulsis he cannot appreciate her connection to them. Hence, the shameful lack of respect and verbal abuse towards Shama. And what can we
expect from a relationship that is forced by others into radical commitment and founded on the immature scribbling of a note? It appears that Shama "loved" Biswas more than Biswas "loved" Shama. She managed this feat because she understood forgiveness... Biswas did not.

Mr. Biswas feels severely repressed and cowed down before the matriarchal sway of Mrs. Tulsi and his agent Seth. His predicament in Hanuman House is the microcosm of a slave society. (Nandan, 61).

Mr. Biswas doesn't own anything that has much value. He has enough clothes to hang on a nail. By owning a house Mr. Biswas gains personal lower - something that he never has- which allowed him to feel that he was important. He was able to live by his own rules, support his family, and do things for his benefit and not for the benefit of others. Mr.Biswas is now able to truly live by his motto: "paddle your own canoe" (Naipaul-111). This new Sound personal power allows Mr. Biswas to live a fulfilling life that he can be proud of. He never has to take orders from anyone ever again because he is master of himself. The episode with the dollhouse is a symbolic of Mr. Biswas' feeling of owning his own house. Mr.Biswas' purchase of the dollhouse for his daughter, Savi, manifests his true feelings and aspirations;He wants the best for his family. This dollhouse is the epitome of his dream house. This house represents what he wants to own for himself. By owning this house Mr. Biswas is able to challenge the ideas of this feudal society. He conquers all of the obstacles that are placed in front of him by this rigid society.

'The place when right at the end-despite the debt and Anand's absence-he can rejoice in Shama's attention in Savi's cleverness, in the butterfly orchard, and the sweet scented shade tree'.(Naipaul-622).

The novel significantly enough opens in the house that Mr. Mohan Biswas- dying, penniless, sacked, journalist-has managed to build-a house that symbolizes his emancipation since."How terrible.........unnecessary and accommodated." (Naipaul 7-8).
Indeed this house though irretrievable mortgaged signals the fulfilment of his aspiration, however futile it might seem in retrospect, but serves as a revealing metaphor for his hopeless engagement with life - an engagement that has been kept up through despair and illness and every conceivable deliberate circumstance. It is therefore no surprise that he just cannot believe that he is in a house which he can call his own and which literally and metaphorically presents his journey's end; and ironically enough a gaining of a hold on life itself first when he is to lose it.

It is in Port of Spain that Mr. Biswas comes closest to happiness, working a journalist for the tabloid Sentinel, writing outlandish stories, and achieving a degree of local fame. Here, too, his son Anand excels in school and shows signs of talent as a writer. But Mr. Biswas's fortunes suffer several reversals, and it is not until the very end of his life that he is finally able to buy house—only to find the experience much different than he had imagined. Mr. Biswas’s quest for integrity and his ardent struggle to attain “accommodation necessity” are the central movements of the novel. (Deodat, 1979)

"The darkness, the silence the absence of the world enveloped and comforted him." (Naipaul-312). This might suggest a kind of symbolic death or Mr. Biswas but it presaged a rebirth also, since Mr. Biswas soon trying to live on his own as a reporter. But as is to be expected, he once again allows himself to be trapped when he comes to live in a house belonging to the Tulsi's at reduced rent. It is only later that he manages to extricate himself from the clutches of the Tulsi's when he settles into his own house—the third one in fact. It should be recalled that earlier Mr. Biswas acquired a shoddy framed house which could not be completed because of his poverty but which nevertheless served him as a haven of refuge from the barracks. It is at this house he suffered a mental breakdown during a storm. But Mr. Biswas refuses to give up his ambition of owning a house and so builds another during the Port of Spain phase of his life. Significantly enough both these houses which have come to be abandoned, have been built of tulsi materials on Tulsi land, which is the reason why they couldn't have harbored his tortured rebellious ego. The third one which has nothing to do with Tulsi is undoubtedly equally flamed but it symbolizes what
he has been striving after throughout his life- a release and his resistance to total absorption into Tulsis, his will to keep open a gap between him and the clan, takes a variety of forms. What is established is the sheer incompetence of Mr. Biswas who is swindled and despised by his customers and often deserted by his wife who would then return to her parental, house, Hanuman house. Moreover he had many bad debts which made the shop an uneconomic proposition which necessitated the intervention of the Tulsis.

Mr. Biswas career through life - an attempt to escape from the constructing- the old world into a new one, a journey from a world where he is a creature of Fate to a world in which he becomes a victim of circumstance, from an order which seems irrelevant to a disorder in which he is a nonentity- is a voyage from darkness to darkness and it is his house rather the vision of it for the most part, that serves as a centre of light that rescues him. Indeed all that darkness connotes; the failure of less of identity with the loss of the past, the threatening vividness of the future- not to speak of the faceless present- can only be dissipated by the vision of brightly lit house. All that can be abstracted from Mr. Biswas's experience is contained in the meaning that the house metaphor harvests in the course of the novel. The house first appears in the prologue before it gathers a host of meanings that compulsively turn into a symbol - a focus for Mr. Biswas's aspiration. It is no wonder that the climax of his struggle through life is his coming to live. (Just ten weeks before the death) 'In his own house, on his own half-let of land, although the house itself is an image of a paradox (at once a triumphant achievement and an ironic failure since it opened the way for him to be cheated)

Mohun 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 as King, if not Herculean process (Deodat, 1979)
A House for Mr Biswas, metaphorically, is a miniature world which symbolizes the colonial world. Mr. Biswas's personal battle with the stronghold of the Tulsi household (the symbol of the colonial world) is a quest for existential freedom and the struggle for personality. (Tas, 2011)

Conclusion

The story and plot is hardly very striking. There is no major twist and turns in this straightforward narrative, and neither are there any surprises that you can anticipate. But therein lays the strength of this book. Naipaul tells the story of a simple man from a simple background, but within his characters is the universality of human emotion. Mr. is the classic loser, with nothing going for him, but within is the human character the strongest. It has been a long time since the novel was first published, but it still gathers attention in the academic corridor.
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