

Alienated Psyche of Mr. Biswas in V. S. Naipaul's

A House for Mr. Biswas

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Abstract

V.S Naipaul's novels are concerned with the individual's quest for identity. In most of his novels he not only chronicles life but also analyses and clarifies the realities confronting human beings. Likewise the most striking quality of *A House for Mr. Biswas* represents the theme of alienation. The vision of V.S Naipaul lies in a sensitive man's rebellion against tyranny and his desperate struggle to achieve independence. Similarly the significant vision in the novel is the interaction of cultures and of the dissolution with its alien culture. Alienation occurs when a person withdraws or becomes isolated from other people or homeland. People who are alienated will often discard loved ones or society, and feel distant and estranged from their own emotions. The central focus of this novel deals with the individual's sense of belongingness. It is a situation where the individual is seen engaged in the phenomena of social and culture identity. Thus loneliness is the feeling of being separated from others. All these elements are present in the life of Mohun Biswas. He is the chief protagonist who strives hard to obtain self-identity and sense of belongingness.

KEY WORDS: Alienation, Belongingness, Loneliness, Self-Identity.

V.S Naipaul, a Trinidad-born novelist of Indian descent has established his reputation as a novelist of colonial experience. His novels are emblematic for the ages of post-colonialism and post-modernity by the variety of the intercultural images, discourses and dialogues that they approach. The endeavour that Naipaul embarks upon is the identification of an ideal space for anchoring the identity of the postcolonial, postmodern spirit. This perpetual and never-ending search is like a dream whose purpose is never completely reached and whose direction is permanently changed in an eternal search. Displacement, the source of this permanent search, is a general human experience that takes different forms in Naipaul's writings: the migration to the metropolis that brings along geographical, historic and cultural dislocation; the experience of the exile that results in alienation from the social and cultural environment. Being a Postcolonial writer of Diaspora, he mainly deals with the themes related to the problems of colonized people and their sense of alienation, their identity crisis, the paradox freedom, sense of dispossession, mimicry, and a restless search for an authentic selfhood.

A House for Mr. Biswas, written in 1961, is a much discussed novel which deals with the theme of a quest for identity in modern materialistic world where man feels all alone and his worth is evaluated through personal achievements and worldly success. This novel delves deeper into the psyche of an individual to reveal the major problems of the dispossessed individual who ceaselessly tries to attain a selfhood.

Alienation refers to “an extraordinary variety of psycho-social disorders, including loss of self, anxiety, Estrangement, despair, depersonalization, rootlessness, apathy, social disorganization, powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, pessimism, and the loss of belief or values” (Townsend 12-13). Hence loneliness is the feeling of being separated from others and alienation is the very process of experiencing the feeling of isolation, it is the tale of relentless struggle of Mr. Mohun Biswas against the heavy odds attains an independent identity. His struggle is a long and traumatic but he is successful in his negotiation for space and ultimately he is able to fulfill his long cherished dream of having a house of his own, which is remarkable achievement for a man of his limited resources and circumstances. A sense of self-respected perseverance of Mr. Biswas enables him to fight against the forces that obstruct to ascertain his individuality.

The novel begins with Mr. Mohun Biswas, a sacked journalist, in the Port of Spain. He feels very much alienated with the society in which he is living. He has no feeling of being a part of that society. His father was a farmer in the sugarcane fields of Trinidad, who had

come from India as a contracted labourer. He is totally against the traditions of his family. He has a wife and four children.

Tulsis, amid the squalor of that large disintegrating and indifferent family; to have left Shama and the children among them, in one room; worse to have lived and as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated. (12)

Mohun Biswas was born in a traditional family. His isolation and sufferings started by his birth. He was born in reverse position and he had six fingers in his hand. Due to these signs, Pundit Sitaram who made his horoscope predicted that he would be a spendthrift and a lecher with an unlucky sneeze. He also predicted that Mohun would be responsible for the death of his parents, that he would “eat up his father and mother”(12), and warned that his father should not see his face until twenty-one days of his birth. Although in his life, he was often reminded of this prediction made by Pundit, and it always increased the bitterness that already pervaded his heart and made him feel more miserable. It further aggravated his sense of loneliness. While he was only a boy, his brothers, Pratap and Prasad used to enjoy themselves by roaming around in the village, swimming into the ponds and rivers while he was compelled to stay at home, where the only option for him was to play with his sister Dehuti. Thus he was alienated during childhood even from his family.

Frequently he desired to see the outside world, to roam freely like others. But for him life was unpleasant because of the Pundit's words. After the death of his father he was admitted in a school but there he was regularly flogged by his teacher Mr. Lal, who once ordered him to write his name as ‘an ass’ on the blackboard .

Thus the constant humiliation and physical and mental abuse casted negative impact on his personality and gradually he developed a kind of animosity towards people and became more isolated and lonely. After studying there for six years, Biswas was sent to Pundit Jairam to learn religious scriptures and to get training for the profession of a Pundit. His sense of self-respect got hurt when he was flogged and ill treated by Pundit Jairam.

Mohun happens to become a sign board painter to Hanuman's House at Arwacas to paint signs for ‘Tulsi Store’, owned by Mrs.Tulsi. But Biswas knows little about the family. He heard that Tulsi's Hanuman House is known for religious celebrations.

Mohan happens to see Shama, a girl of sixteen. He had a chance to marry Shama. This made him a son-in-law of Tulsis. It was a very large joint family. There he was expected to merge his personal identity with Tulsis in exchange of food and shelter that he

receives. But this was not an easy task for him. The joint family of Tulsis consists of two hundred members whom used to live under one roof. By the virtue of his marriage with Shama, Biswas involuntarily became a member of this family. Soon after his marriage he realised that his marriage life would not give him any happiness. Under the influence of this belief, he could not develop healthy marital relationship with his wife Shama, even when he was a newly married groom, “following his policy of caution, he had not attempted to establish any relation with her” (92).

As he had no other option, he returned to Hanuman House but there everybody except Shama was a stranger to him. Hanuman House is not just the abode of the Tulsi, he compares that house to zoo. So often he would feel depressed as “it was a strain, living in a house full of people and talking to one person alone” (107). In *The God of Small Things*, it is seen that the same attitude in the big ‘Ayemenam House’ where the main female character performs the role like Biswas. “The world was too small, the Tulsi family too large. He felt trapped” (91).

Thus all these incidents made Biswas feel more and more lonely. While all other Tulsi son-in-laws have accepted this situation, throughout his life Biswas made serious efforts to revolt against them. It created a wide gap between Biswas and them so he used to feel himself alone in that large family, even Shama, his wife, would not share his problems. The indifference of Shama intensified his alienation. “Mr.Biswas had no money or position. He was expected to become a Tulsi. At once he rebelled”(27).

Once, when he was brutally beaten up by Govind, in the presence of Shama, she never tried to console him. She also hates him for his appearance and gestures that made her to feel guilty. Because of his wife’s activity he feels more isolated. So he wants to merge his identity into the Tulsidom. Mr.Biswas wants to become a self-dependent and he is restrained mercilessly by the family members. When he reveals his heart to Govind, another son-in-law of that family that he would like to earn for himself. Immediately Govind reveals it to Seth and it antagonizes everybody in the family against Biwas.

Seth rebuked him in the presence of all, and he said somebody to work on the estate. Biswas was criticized and humiliated publicly but nobody tried to support him. Biswas was then, compelled to work at the estate at Green Vale. Away from his family it was a kind of exile for Mohun Biswas who had to stay there in the company of labourers. There he remained in such a pitiable condition that times he was in a strange

mindset. And once at that time, when his wife Shama sent a message that she would bring the children there for a few days,

“He was going into the world, to test it for its power to frighten. The past was counterfeit, a series of cheating accidents, real life, and its especial sweetness, awaited; he was still beginning”. (305)

He immediately indulged in all kinds of negative thoughts. Naipaul describes it in a heartrending manner. Mr. Biswas waited for them with anxiety. On the day they were to arrive he began to wish for some accident that would prevent their coming. But he knew there would be no accident. If anything was to happen he had to act. He decided that he had to get rid of Anand and Savi and himself, in such a way that the children would never know who had killed them. All morning he was possessed of visions in which he tangled, poisoned, strangled, burned Anand and Savi; so that even before they came, his relationship with them had been perverted. About Myna and Shama he didn't care; he did not wish to kill them (284-85). Later, during his stay with Anand he tells him “I am not your father. God is your father. I am just somebody. Nobody at all. I am just a man you know.” (291) it explains the painful mental condition of Biswas. He found himself totally incapable to establish any emotional bond with his family members and that further intensified his alienation.

This gradually separated him from others even from Shama. Biswas stayed in the Tulsi house for quite a long period yet he felt himself all alone, in one room. There he remained alienated throughout his stay, often his wife Shama found his incapability to confide on anybody, his inability to establish relation with other members of the family made him more isolated.

He remained a stranger till the end. It was his sense of alienation that motivated him to search for a house. House was a great need in his life, as it becomes a symbol of personal identity, comfort, self-respect and independence-the elements he was deprived throughout his life. Ultimately when he purchased a house at Sikkim Street, it brought an end to his constant struggle. That house, though heavily loaned, yet there he was not at the mercy of anybody, rather he was his own master. He experienced the sense of belongingness for the first time in his life. It evoked sense of security in him and strengthened his decaying relationship with the family. There he “found himself in his own house, on his own half lot of land, his own portion of earth”(2). It was an end of his alienation, then he was perfectly at peace and at last died gracefully in his own house.

Thus Naipaul empathies with the alienated self of Mr. Biswas. The protagonist is alienated and becomes isolated and exiled. Biswas is longing for identity till his death hence his character was painstaking. Naipaul depicts the theme of homelessness, estrangement, and search for identity of an alienated self in an appealing manner.

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