



## **'MODERN DILEMMA' IN V.S. NAIPAUL'S A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Sir V.S.Naipaul, the recipient of Trinanidian Nobel Prize, is highly appreciated in the field of English literature for his works. He delineates the Indian immigrant's dilemma, their problems and plights in a fast changing world. He provides a new dimensions and new approaches to the reader to study the expatriate literature. The novelist highlights the social injustice and indifferences through this novel. Naipaul has a subjective approach towards the jarring of identity and rootlessness. His writing is solely centered on the theme of the quest of self identity and self belongingness. He reflects his individual experience of chaotic and thwarted world of Trinidad in his works. He skillfully projects the confluence of two cultures- South African and Indian. The bitter experiences of his own life became the source of his writings. The present paper studies Naipaul's A House for Biswas with the view to delineate the struggle of modern man for identity formation. The paper highlights the issues like agony of an exile and the pangs of a man in search of meaning and identity. The present paper investigates the modern dilemma of rootlessness, alienation, the quest for identity.*

**Keywords:** *Modern dilemma, self identity, self belongingness, rootlessness, alienation, struggle for existence, obscurity etc.*

V.S.Naipaul, a freelance writer and the spokesperson of displacement, alienation and modern dilemma, is one of the significant contemporary English novelists. He has dedicated his acclaimed novel, 'A House for Mr. Biswas' (1961) to his wife Patricia Ann Hale. In general sense, the term identity evolves with the time. It is the birth right of all human being. It is rooted in the identification with what one is associated with. In fact, average person still strive and struggle for his existence. His writing is solely centered on the theme of the quest of self identity and self belongingness. A.B. Vajpayee says about the writing of V.S.Naipaul, "Sir Naipaul's literary sensitivity, transcending all barriers has blossomed into an all compassing concern for humanity. His incisive treatment of contemporary realities has never been bereft of humane perspectives." (Hindustan Time, New Delhi, 11th Oct.2001.) Naipaul's fictional works are the projections of the worlds he contained within himself, the memories of Trinidad and its rootless milieu lost between their past and their present.



Naipaul's attempt is to dramatize his own history and disport his fragmented and disintegrated society. The novel aims at presenting the character of the protagonist in tragic aspect and to show how his relentless struggle brings his otherwise strange and comical traits to the dignity and nobility of heroic stature. It is a tragic testimony of life in a rootless, disordered society that the achievement of a single, real victory drains the life blood of the soul. The question of his identity crops up him due to his immigrant background. The orthodox religious atmosphere of the family stimulated him to be an agnostic and unbeliever. He failed in accepting the inherited identity and exploring its alternative in his childhood. He shares his experience in his own words, "I had never wanted to stay in Trinidad. When I was in fourth form, I wrote a vow on the paper of my Keinnedy's revised Latin primer to leave Trinidad within five years. I left after six and for many years afterwards in England, falling asleep in bedsitters with the electric fire on, I had been awakened by the nightmare that I was back in tropical Trinidad." (The Middle Passage, 34)

The novel begins with a glimpse of Mohan Biswas, the protagonist of the novel. He is a sacked journalist dying at the age of forty six in his mortgaged house in Sikkim Street, St. James, Port of Spain. He has extreme poverty. He is penniless. He has been suffering physically and mentally for months. He has a wife and four children. The novel depicts the transformation of his life, a slave to a free man. The house stands as a symbol of Mr. Biswas's life long search for identity and self recognition. He is an alien in an alien land. He fights the odds of the life to achieve stability for himself and his family. He had been dependent on his in laws for a long period. He has lost his individuality among the Tulsis. Later on, he procures a small room of Hanuman House of solicitor's clerk. This was the astonishing achievement by Mr. Biswas. He wants to be a free man. His struggle symbolizes both his freedom from the oppressive world of Tulsis and the West Indians quest for freedom from colonial subjugation.

Mr. Biswas narrates his story from birth to death. His life is a chain of minor disasters. It can be perceived as his resentful denial of an unpleasant society. The unexpected death of protagonist's father dashes him in the position of homeless and emotionally bewildered. He lives with his mother who hesitates to bestow her affection on him in the presence of strangers. However, Mr. Biswas is lucky to find a mother-substitute in his issueless aunt, Tara who treats him very kindly and helps him in every way. When he goes to paint signs at the store of the Tulsi family of Arwacas in Hanuman House, he gets entrapped while passing a love-note to one of the daughters of Mrs. Tulsi called Shama. Consequently, he is trapped into the bond of marriage with Shama by her Mother, Mrs. Tulsi and her uncle. "The world was too small, the Tulsi family too large. He felt trapped." (The Tulsis, 92) Mr. Biswas enjoys the physical security provided by his marriage into the Tulsi family but refuses to submit to his orthodox and authoritarian arrangement. But he manages to establish independent area for himself, though in the circumstances of unemployment and illness, he and his family remain tied to the Tulsi household for shelter and sustenance. Therefore the idea of a house of his own becomes an obsession or a symbol of true identity for Mr. Biswas.

He purchases a house for himself at Sikkim Street in Port of Spain, and finally contends to live independently with his family. He dies from heart attack at the age of forty-six, but he has left his family the independence and with a house to live in: "Mr. Biswas had no money or position. He was expected to become a Tulsis. At once he rebelled." (The Tulsis, 99) Mohan's sense of impotence and deprivation of male identity must be seen in the context of the world he inhabits. He is the descendant of indentured laborers, people little better than slaves, subjected to centuries of dispossession, crushing poverty and the trauma of displacement. If manliness is about power and affirmative action, the world that he inhabits is a sterilized one, crowded by meaningless and unnecessary beings. It is a world that moves between the poles of futile emasculation and vicious, ruthless, aggression that is only a parody of true heroic masculinity.

Lillian Feder's comments about Naipaul's fiction, "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." A deep study of *A House for Mr. Biswas* unfolds the various threads of multi-cultural interactions that toss the characters to and fro to finally end up confused and bruised. The urge to calibrate their identity motivates them to try various alternatives traditionally associated with fixity. Mr. Biswas symbolizes the typically lower middle class Indian who has the ambition to have a house of one's own to die peacefully under one's own roofs. Naipaul focuses on his protagonist's endless efforts to fulfill his long cherished dream. As a strategist, Biswas is willing to compromise even with his intensely personal concerns if their sacrifice could help him realizing his dream. The novel showcases the gradual attenuation of the native culture and enlists the protagonist's cultural agony and bewilderment in quest. The novel reveals the angst of the protagonist in search of his sustenance for he finds himself misfit in either of the camps - oriental and western. The post birth rituals of Mr. Biswas present the orthodoxy of Hinduism to defy its fluidity even in a foreign land. Mr. Biswas is fully rounded and exists in a world of solid characters and exhaustive details. Naipaul authentically reveals the aspects like the stagnant, decaying Hindu world; the poverty and chaos of the Creole society; and the painful struggle of one man.

In an interview with Adrian Rowe-Evans, Naipaul states: "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 world, to seek patterns, to tell myself 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." (Adrian Rowe-Evans, 59). Mr. Biswas's consistent striving is for a house of his own, it is the quest for a name and identity independent of others' charity. The story line operates on two levels—at one level, there is a deep desire for habitation one's own and at another level, an intense yearning for a well defined self. His dependence is only matched by his homelessness as he moves from the back trace at Pagotes to Pundit Jairam, then to Bhandat's rum shop and once more back to Pagotes,



before he even sees Shama and the Tulsis: For the next thirty five years he was to be a wanderer with no place he could call his own, with no family except that which he was to attempt to create out of the engulfing world of the Tulsis. For with his mother's parents dead, his father dead, his brothers on the estate at felicity, Dehuti as a servant in Tara's house, and himself rapidly growing away from Bipti who broken, became increasingly useless and impenetrable, it seemed to him that he was really quite alone. (Pastoral, 38). His quest for a home becomes first of all a personal search for identity and secondly, a need to reinstate himself within the warm, integrated form of a family. The house symbolically accommodates both these needs. "In marrying Shama on Mrs. Tulsi's terms, Biswas renders to the deep Hindu humiliation of assuming the ritualistic female role by living with his wife's family. He joins the faceless group of "the husbands, Under Seth's supervision, worked on the Tulsi land, looked after the Tulsi animals, and served in the store. In return they were given food, shelter and a little money; their children were looked after; and they were treated with respect by people outside because they were connected with the Tulsi family. Their names were forgotten; they became Tulsis. There were daughters who had, in the Tulsi marriage lottery, drawn husbands with money and position." (The Tulsis, 98) It is against this type of psychic emasculation that Mr. Biswas too is expected to merge and assimilate his identity with the Tulsis. However, his self-respect comes in the way and he starts rebelling against the authority of Mrs. Tulsi and Mr. Seth, her brother in-law, who virtually runs the household. Initially, his rebellion lacks purpose and thought. It is manifested in silly pranks as he makes up names for various members of the household or parades his flour sack shorts in defiance of taunts from the Tulsi children. His triumphs are useless and puerile and soon he realizes how utterly worthless he continues to be: Aggrieved and aggressive stares, he received in the hall reminded him of his morning triumph. All his joy at that had turned into disgust at this condition. The campaign against the Tulsis, which he had been conducting with such pleasure, now seemed pointless and degrading. "Suppose, Mr. Biswas thought in the long room, suppose that at one word I could just disappear from this room, what would remain to speak of me? A few clothes, A few books. The shouts and thumps in the hall would continue; the puja would be done; in the morning the Tulsi store would open its doors. He had lived in many houses. And how easy it was to think of those houses without him." (The Tulsis, 135) At forty six, his battles are over. This orphan has achieved all the success what his limited talent and sterile environment has allowed. He must now give way to his children and await their successes: "Anand's letters grew rare again. 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. Wait for death!" (Epilogue, 620). Biswas dies enjoying the company of his daughter, Savi, and admiring the mystery and romance of life which he was never destined to share: "He had got a Butterfly orchid. The shade was flowering again; wasn't it strange that a tree which grew so quickly could produce flowers with such a sweet scent?" (Epilogue, 622) We find Mr. Biswas a reluctant victim of unfortunate circumstances. He shares his tragic vision with his children towards the final stage of his life: Now he began to speak to his children of his childhood. He told them of the hut, the men digging in the garden at night; he told them of the oil that was later found on the land. What fortune might have been theirs, if only his

father had not died, if only he had stuck to the land like his brother, if he had not gone to Pagotes, not become a sign –writer, not gone to Hanuman House, not married !If only so many things had not happened! (Epilogue, 622) Finally through the character of Mr.Biswas, we get “glimpses of ordinary people who exemplify extraordinary reality.”(L. Sachs William V.S.Naipaul and the plight of the Dispossessed: id13543) Throughout the book, his search for a house of his own is an attempt to find both independence and a meaning for his life, and the often hilarious account of petty island life is underpinned with a deeper sense of the essential loneliness of the human state. In final scene, Mr. Biswas has his own house and the Tulsi family is in disintegrating state.

In the end, Naipaul presents the vision of Trinidad as a place without rules and disintegrated Hindu community within it. Mr. Biswas tried to escape the obscurity and anonymity of the society. He seems to rise above the disconnected but potent forces always pulling him down. The readers realize that Mohun Biswas is born as a alien, he lives and struggles like one. Even in his death, he has not fully succeeded in establishing his identity. He carries in his heart the memories of the land of his ancestors. His son Anand’s refusal to return to the land of dilemma clearly shows that the problems of identity have not been resolved by Mr. Biswas. He finds some solace in Savi but the search of Anand remains alive with a greater sense of alienation and anxiety.

In all these situations the protagonist Mr. Biswas is alienated and becomes an exile. In his writings Naipaul has explored the vast potentialities and dimensions of modern dilemma, exile and alienation. The quest for identity, search for a home appears to be within reach. But it remains an illusion. The pathos of exile and futility of the search for identity appear as irreconcilable existential problems of the modern world.

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